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TELEVISION



TV PROGRAMMES: DARA BIRNBAUM

Timeline

1922 - Charles Francis Jenkins gives first public demonstration of television principles, followed in 1925 by John Logie Baird's successful demonstration of television at Selfridges London department store in London.

1930 - Baird installs a television in 10 Downing Street so that Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald can watch the first TV drama *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*.

1939 - BBC suspends its television service due to the onset of the war.

1948 - Ed Sullivan Show first broadcast.

1954 - TV series *Father Knows Best* and the Marlboro Man advertisement first broadcast. The NTSC video standard for colour television is introduced.

1963 - Nam June Paik first major exhibition 'Exposition of Music-Electronic Television' shows at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal.

1955-75 - The Vietnam War is considered the first truly televised war.

1970s - Videotape becomes affordable and video art as an artistic genre is accelerated.

1976 - *Wonder Woman* first broadcast starring Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman/Diana Prince.

1981 - MTV launches.

Key Works

Bruce Nauman, *Bouncing In the Corner*, 1968.

Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978.

Bill Viola, *Nantes Triptych*, 1992.

Dara Birnbaum, *Hostage*, 1994.

Dara Birnbaum was one of the first artists to use television against itself. She took the passive nature of twentieth-century media consumption and used it to tell a meta story about our lives as viewers. Before new media, we might change the channel or turn the set off, but our relationship with media was that of subject under their discursive domination. Notably, in Orwell's 1984, society's captives are unable to turn the television off, only mute it. In reality, nobody wants to do either.

Arguably, to this day, mass media is the social language of everyday life, a communal reference point that solidified society by creating a commonality of strangers. The power of television is to create meta-social phenomena from 'Who shot [R?]' to 'Who killed Laura Palmer?' to 'Who killed Nicole Brown Smith?' to 'The Death of Princess Diana'. The weight of attention creates what Émile Durkheim would call a "social fact". That is, non-corporeal assumptions such as values, cultural norms and social networks that: "consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him" (Durkheim 1982).

Television gives us the archetypes and strategies through which we can achieve our ends. Reality TV is particularly normative in that within a set context we are shown what values and assumptions are successfully paid out in terms of salacious sexual conquests or cash prizes for the winner, as 'decided' by the public. Little wonder then that a public so trained is changing how politics works; after all, the *modus operandi* is the same. We are presented with charismatic appeals to objectivity and reason, given a method of allegiance and choice which concludes with the reification of power as being 'what we wanted (all along)'. One wonders whether, cyclically, people will start voting for who they assume will win in order to be 'right', rather than voting for policies that match their interests. The idea being that one should align with the strategies of 'optimal reality/winners' regardless of the moral or political outcomes. The rather insidious assumption being you don't win chess playing the rules of draughts or more simply, *get with the programme*.

TV programmes us. Which isn't to say that we aren't able to answer back but by being the vehicle for our imaginations it dictates where we can go. Artists like Dara Birnbaum are so effective because they bring us closer to the nuts and bolts of television as a social mechanism.

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"Video is not something I came upon immediately. I first did architecture and then I got into painting—I kind of slid into painting and art school. I read from Manfredo Tafuri, who was a great architectural critic and historian who thought that television actually was the architecture of the day (1970s). It interested me very much that television was such a dominant force. When I started, according to the Nielsen ratings the average American family was watching over six hours of TV a day. Therefore, I thought it was the most common language in the United States. I wasn't very pleased with a lot of the imagery coming across on television. So I felt like pushing back against it. But it was very difficult because the medium was coming one way at us—it was very hard to penetrate the system. Being younger and being more angry, I learned how to meet people in the industry who would help me sneak out the footage from production studios, as there was no cable TV or anything similar.

Television was the dominant medium coming into American homes. The question was how do you disrupt that pattern? Or how do you capture those images? The very first work I did in 1977 was *Lesson Plans: To Keep the Revolution Alive*, which was when I started to show my work for the first time. The piece was meant to break down the language of television.

After that, I thought the medium should be turned on itself. Remember, this was the time of the Pictures Generation that I was part of, a group of artists in New York during the 1970s who were changing the medium, concentrating on mass media, taking it and appropriating it, deconstructing it by putting it into other forms. But I thought the most important thing was to use this medium on itself, not to translate or transfer it.

One direct example would be a piece like *Hostage*, which was about the kidnapping of Hanns Martin Schleyer. Screens were lined up very purposely with shooting targets. To view the imagery, you would have to align yourself within this system of screens. Different aspects of these events, regarding the Baader-Meinhof Gang and Hanns Martin Schleyer, are related in each of the monitors. At the very end of this train of monitors, on two opposing walls, a laser shoots across the space connecting both images of Hanns Martin Schleyer forced to give a speech on television and US coverage of the event. Now, if you choose to take a path to enter into this viewing arena, you get targeted. You break the laser relay and all images freeze; you become a target.

All images courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Pg 118: Six-channel video, 216 channels: stereo audio, inter-activable laser beam sensor and receiver, four attached prints on Plexiglas panels, custom metal support system. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 2019/2020. Photo: Thierry Ball. Pg 119: Single-channel color video monitor in store-front window with stereo sound out to the street, 5:50 min. Installation view, Salon de Coiffure, Paris, 1990. Courtesy: Dara Birnbaum. Photo: Arië Hamink. (UK) New York © Dara Birnbaum





First, Above & Next: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, 1978/79* (Still).
Previous: *Hostage, 1994*. Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, London, 2018/2019.

**"FOR ME THERE WAS A
RESONANCE OF THAT IN *HOSTAGE*,
THAT TERRORISM WAS COMING TO
THE UNITED STATES"**

As in *Hostage* many of my works have frequently tried to utilise historical touchstones and key markers of specific turning points or events. I incorporated such key elements to save them from the waves of culture, so that they could be resurrected when exhibited and thus allowed to speak for this history. I didn't want these moments to get lost. The kidnapping and murder was in 1977 and I made the work in 1994. I don't do 'close-up' well—it is hard for me to deal with events when they're happening... my mind was in a different place in '77. But in 1994, the event took on new meaning. Bear in mind, the first bombing of the World Trade Center was in 1993. For me there was a resonance of that in *Hostage*, that terrorism was coming to the United States. We were a seemingly isolated country—not that there weren't other incidents but the idea of an external force being able to penetrate the US was important. Whereas, for example, the kidnapping of Hanns Martin Schleyer, amongst other events, signified an important development in the rise of terrorism in Europe. A lot of people who are a little younger than me seemed to really enjoy the 90s here, but I found it a terrible period, politically, which eventually led up to 9/11.

I would never have gone with that Hanns Martin Schleyer idea if I hadn't experienced that first bombing in the garage of the World Trade Center. Many artists portrayed the second bombing of the World Trade Center in various ways. And I could not do that. I have always seemingly needed some distance."

Television is a distancing mechanism. It allows us to view events as being a simulation (or Baudrillard's simulacra) of reality where reality is no longer present. Birnbaum's work, while it plays on deconstructive notions of media and perception, often forces the viewer to confront the social reality of their world. This is perhaps to be understood as a reality amongst others but part of the dominant milieu which places the viewer simultaneously as the agent of change and the subject of processes leading to the retreating present. Television is an ordering frame that simplifies complex networks of ideas into a bounded experience. Perhaps its most pervasive illusion isn't its many glib conclusions but that the idea of a conclusion is itself easily graspable. In Birnbaum's work we are brought sharply to bear on the plasticity of meaning and its actual effects.

"I think when you first confront something that's systematised as a dominant institution, such as television, the impulse of an artist may be a questioning,

or a wish to fight back against it. For example, with *Wonder Woman*, I grew up with that portrayal and I did not like the stereotyping of women in that way. In that phantasmagorical sense of, either you're an average secretary, or you turn around three times and through a special effect become a Wonder/Superwoman. I resented that because it set up an idealised version of a representation of woman that I could never be. Watching this formulation become number one on TV, I was struck by [the fact that] that's not exactly how life is. However, many people still enjoy the idea, that idealisation, of projecting themselves onto a super being.

I love some of the Guerrilla Girls posters. In one poster, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, it stated: 'Being reassured that whatever kind of work you make it will be labelled feminine,' which is a problem I still face.

[Which feeds a] desire, same as I had by the time of *Wonder Woman*, it was a recognition of fighting back against stereotyping of women. I've also tried to take on the stereotyping of men, because it exists as well, such as in my work *Kojak/Wang*. Art, good art, great art comes from the heart. I can only speak through my own voice and for what I think is relevant. Being a woman is who I am, but I think any good work of art shouldn't be purely reflective of who I am, or am not—especially when that identity is then presented for an art market. Rather, if one has the talent to do art, no matter what medium, the work should be coming from a place where your talent services a community or a culture in a way that will eventually contribute to an understanding of how we're living."

Dara Birnbaum. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

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 Durkheim, Émile, 1982, 1st pub. 1895. In *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, edited by Steven Lukes, translated by W D Halls.
 New York: Free Press
 Interview here are excerpts from a longer interview available at Trebuchet online

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