

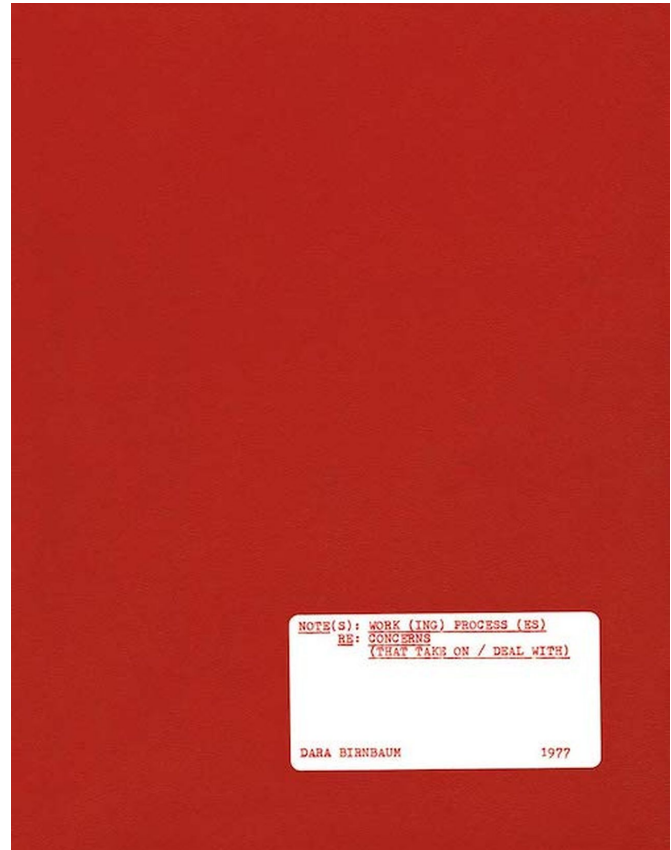
# The Melancholy of Embodiment: Dara Birnbaum's Mass Media Investigations

 iareviewofbooks.org/article/the-melancholy-of-embodiment-dara-birnbaums-mass-media-investigations

January 13, 2022

Note(s): Work(ing) Process(es) Re:  
Concerns (That Take On / Deal With)

Dara Birnbaum



DURING THE HEIGHT of online programming, Zooming, livestreaming, and webinars, I logged on to watch Dara Birnbaum screen a couple of her films and give a talk. After some initial technical difficulties, a group of us watched *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–'79), perhaps Birnbaum's most famous work, composed of appropriated footage from the 1970s TV show *Wonder Woman*. The video contains subjects and themes that appear throughout Birnbaum's work: technology, pop culture, representations of women, mirroring, and repetition. The video builds upon itself by isolating and repeating moments of Wonder Woman's transition from civilian into superhero: she spins around and disappears in a puff of explosions, again and again.

After the video finished and the conversation between Birnbaum and a moderator from the gallery began, there was a sudden eruption of loud music, cursing, and graphic images from one square of the Zoom display. People began leaving the "room," their faces confused, alarmed, and horrified. The squares went black one by one as the chat flared with profanities.

The event had devolved into chaos. I'd heard rumors of things like this happening — “Zoom bombs” as people began to call them, with internet trolls raiding streaming events as a prank. I logged off and was unable to get back to the talk afterward.

The disruption was unsettling but also ridiculous and absurd. It drew attention to the precarity of the platform, the futile notion of online privacy, the strangeness of Zoom as a social space. Though it threw a wrench into the conversation, I couldn't help but feel that it was somehow perversely appropriate, given the topic. The use of a new media platform should never go smoothly whenever Birnbaum is present, since her work is always probing, disrupting, and questioning the ways media affects our relationships to one another and our bodies.

Dara Birnbaum began making her films and video installation in the early '70s, performances that linked new media with the body and psychoanalytic concepts of gestalt, regression, identification, and memory. *Note(s): Work(ing) Process(es) Re: Concerns (That Take On / Deal With)*, recently published by the Brooklyn-based arts press Primary Information, is a facsimile of Birnbaum's notebook from this period, with detailed drawings, installation plans, and notes for projects. The publication has even recreated creases in the paper and notes in the margins that appear in the artist's original text. Including these idiosyncratic details gives the reader insight into what Alex Kitnick refers to in his introduction as “an artist in formation, attempting to process a new technology.” But rather than investigating this technology on its own terms, Birnbaum's early work puts it in conversation with what she knows best, what she begins with: the body, focusing on the physical experience of spectatorship in video and television.

In 1975, the artist presented *Back Piece*, an installation of simultaneous projections. One wall projects a series of images of the gallery space in which the installation is taking place. As soon as it is viewed, it dissolves into a thrown projection of the same space but now with other images, culled from the artist's recent travels in Europe, blocking a clear view. The pictures are of ambiguous or transitional places: doorways, bridges, rivers. For the viewer to see both the past and present images, she must be in constant motion, never able to focus on both at once. In her notes for *Back Piece*, Birnbaum writes, “He could never view both things at the same time while he sees one thing of interest he must miss the other but be aware of its presence (always).” Birnbaum illustrates the processes of memory, of thought and association, of duration and interruption, and the tenuous loss of the present moment.

In another work, *Liberty: A Dozen or So Views* (1976), Birnbaum solicits the participation of tourists on a boat viewing at the Statue of Liberty. She hands a camera fixed with a telephoto lens to each of them, then intercuts footage of the individuals using the camera with the photos they take. Acutely aware of the power of these tools, their ability to manipulate their subject, to warp reality, Birnbaum writes in her notes, “The artist gains control over the referential viewpoint of the other through manipulation of the mechanistic qualities of the media.” The object being captured is fixed, as is the tool being used to capture it; only the viewer changes.

To encounter Birnbaum's work today is to be reminded of the effects of the media's acceleration, from broadcast television to videotape to the internet, and the experiences we take for granted now: being in a digital room with 40 people from around the world. Birnbaum says of live events on broadcast TV: "You also know with video that you can watch events anywhere in the world as they're happening. With the image quality and the immediacy, you can be convinced you're seeing the reality of the moment." Again, Birnbaum returns to this sense of loss in the present and the illusion that this can be remedied through image-based media.

Much of Birnbaum's work tapped into qualities of new media that are embedded in the fabric of our social lives today. So much of today's technology seems to put us in two places at once, declaring that one can do anything from anywhere using digital media. We have access to an immediate live connection to another place, constantly receiving dispatches of peers' and strangers' lives through social media. This fractured nature of contemporary life can only lead to the kind of loss and apathy Birnbaum anticipates in her early work. While the circumstances of media have changed, the feeling of loss, the melancholy of embodiment, has not. If you're looking at your phone, chances are you're missing something behind you.

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