I FOUGHT LIKE FUCKING HELL TO GET OUT OF THE BLACK BOX

The following conversation between Dara Birnbaum and Hito Steyerl, moderated by Stuart Comer, took place in March 2015 in conjunction with the exhibition *Cut to Swipe* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Birnbaum and Steyerl have both deconstructed the mass distribution of images and their meanings, in parallel with the increased availability of production technologies. Bringing together two artists from different generations, the discussion—here published for the first time—surveyed the impact of changing technologies, production methods, and systems of distribution on how artists relate to and repurpose images; the nature of broadcasting, visibility, and invisibility; how much agency and integrity images must possess to remain lasting references for generations to come; and the museum and the web as spaces of permanence.
I don't think appropriation can be the medium. I come from what was known as the Pictures Generation. It's a completely different technological framework and a completely different methodology. It's no longer only the producer who touches the image, but the consumer as well. This is a radical change, and the rate of change has itself accelerated so quickly. How did you both arrive at the strategy of appropriation in your earlier work, and how do you think that's shifted as the available technological tools have changed how we behave?

HITO STEYERL (1966) is a German filmmaker and writer living in Berlin.

In my earlier work, appropriation was, in a way, a strategy to deal with scarcity, with images that didn't belong to you, that you had no control over, and that you were trying to somehow re-maneuver. Now, of course, the whole situation has completely changed and it feels like not only that the images produce all the time but people themselves are being appropriated. Their attention, energy, affect, activities, and all their data. I used to be known as a fast editor, so I can't wait to see what people are going to be doing with it. I thought of the images that I was taking as very corporate images and not images made by other artists or independent makers, so for me they didn't have much authenticity. I saw them as almost like you can't step from painting my own landscape, and that such television imagery was the most common vocabulary in America at that time. I grew up on Pop Art, where a lot of the techniques involved serial repetition, arresting an image without translating the medium. I come from when I turned on your Google Docs or Drive, it belongs to Google. This is how appropriation works. It automatically becomes the property of the company. Appropriation is the default now, but it is mainly performed by you wanting to use this medium on itself. That was important: the ability to get at something that was in a flow and that didn't allow you to get at it. Right now there's almost more imagery than we can handle, which prompts me to ask: How do people still have a stance of visibility? I'm trying to put into circulation images that were set aside either because they were dismissed as worthless or heralded as the 60s, where I refused to own a TV. I thought that participating, by viewing television, was going to affect me and politicize me in a way I did not want. Then one day there was a demonstration, and on the podium a TV was delivering news of the expansion of the war in Vietnam into Cambodia and Laos. One of the speakers for the New Left said, “Now that you're watching this! No!” and took a mallet and smashed the TV. At that moment, I went out and got a TV.

The images that are being jammed at us as political propaganda are being re-owned by young artists: they take their own montages out of them and trying to deflate what that imagery is. That's another way as well to purposely grab it and alter it. I don't know if that's an answer, but I'm not sure that turning away from the deliverance of this imagery is the answer either. I want to read one line that Dara wrote in 1995 in an essay titled "Finding Any Place in Cyberspace: A Solitary Adventure." It is from the conference "How artists do that right now in the 1970s, when one had to one day there was a demonstration, and on the podium a TV was delivering news of the expansion of the war in Vietnam into Cambodia and Laos. One of the speakers for the New Left said, “Now that you're watching this! No!” and took a mallet and smashed the TV. At that moment, I went out and got a TV.

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humans once it’s translated onto a screen, and most images today are not accessible to human perception anymore. They’re coded by machines, for machines, who have a conversation among one another, and human perception is not included in that.

STUART

If the twentieth century was about the grid to some extent, by the end of the century we had become concerned with Gilles Deleuze, rhizomes, and things that were morphing and shape-shifting. When you walk into Dara’s Rio VideoWall [1989], that space and the grid are dissolved, and your presence becomes visible within this new network of broadcast images. That blurring of the interface was very prescient. The differences between analog and digital editing are making things blurrier. There is a liquid quality to the digital image that is changing the game quite radically. Hito can introduce this by talking a bit about her work LiquidInc. [2014].

HITO

That work is about different forms of fluidity, the fluidity of capital, of imagery. It takes water—as a physical element—and extreme weather as metaphors for the fluidity of financial assets and digital information, and for a collective sense of instability. Coming back to the relation of physics and the image, what’s noteworthy is that the material substance of the image is now light because almost every image passes through fiber-optic cables. We live in a period in which every human activity, emotion, affect is bound at a certain time to transform into light. That sounds very nice, but it’s a completely dystopian vision in which people are being captured as beings consisting of light. I was thinking of that also in Dara’s Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang [1980], where you have these particle effects.

DARA

The Wang computer, one of the most successful and prominent computers at the time, offered this new image of a role for women, existing these secretaries at their computers, and ideally only beautiful light enters in and only beautiful lights leave—but I grew up in the 1960s and I don’t believe in New Age anymore. Actually, one reason I liked video at the beginning was because I didn’t want to touch anything. I wanted everything to disappear. Only in my mind it would come together, and it felt like playing chess. I didn’t perceive all that much change, actually, from analog to digital in that way. But we’re going into a time when everything is speeded up, almost to the point of disappearance, and that’s really strange because we’re also using speed to try to see things we’ve never seen before. With the giant accelerator at CERN in Switzerland, the idea is of speeding things up to the point that they come in burst in a certain way to release new images, like the Higgs boson.

STUART

That’s interesting, because we’re about to see a major shift in platforms like YouTube and the interpretation in general as a mode of broadcast. Hito has written quite a lot about it, and Dara, you’ve worked with it extensively.

HITO

Broadcast is an active catalyst of events, not just a record or a document of those events. It more and more signifies something that’s going on, not merely going through and thus stops the images—they all freeze. Then once you pull away from being in a direct alignment of the images, they start to flow again. Going back to broadcasting, I don’t find that most television broadcasts are live. They’re mostly repeats. You can never tell the live from the dead anymore, or the resurrected. Online, you have more of that feeling that you’re getting a jolt of live information. HITO

The changed nature of broadcast almost makes it seem as if the image precedes the event, or creates it. But if the image precedes to be these secretary roles elsewhere, namely the kidnapping of Hans-Martin Schleyer in Germany, in 1977, and show selections from documentary imagery, and I don’t believe in each video channel in a total of six represented a different aspect of the kidnapping, and that eventual no-win situation Schleyer was forced by the RAF to go on television and say, “I’m an enemy of the state.” Jean Baudrillard said that once this image appeared, Schleyer was worth nothing. It was all in that simulacrum of that image. I did all I could to get the actual images of Schleyer when he was forced to appear on television. It may not have been the best thing, because what I did was against the feed, who’d see things and suppress these scenes so that they wouldn’t be seen. I went to ten different countries across Europe trying to find news services that had had the footage, that exact moment when his value deteriorated to nothing, and repeat that image endlessly. I finally achieved getting the imagery through a news gathering service in Great Britain. That’s one aspect of Hostage.

The other is with the viewer: when you enter into trying to align yourself to the images, a laser beam shines across the estos shown on the screen. I recently came to think that this is the last universal image, being projected all over the world. Speaking of chroma key, of course we think of Yves Klein, whose blue monochrome was actually a riff on the blue background, where these blue monochromes that have almost come to constitute the default of digital imagery.

STUART

Dara, in the original iteration of PM Magazine [1982] you also used a red wall, and you talked about red at the time as a color that interacted with video signals.
STUART

I was struck earlier by your comment about trying to find a weight and a heft to images, because images have become so intangible and degraded that they perform the ruins of our time in some ways, which a lot of artists have exploited. But people are still acclimating to the digital image, and the video image in particular, and many people claim that they’re ugly, or that they don’t have the physical presence of a painting.

DARA

I’m still an idealist, and I still believe that the most important thing is the intention of the artist. All images right now undergo vast translation and transmutation, but as much as images are absorbed throughout a society, they don’t disappear—they just might carry with them a different reference. My question to myself is always: How much integrity might carry with them a different reference? My question to myself is always: How much integrity might carry with them a different reference? My question to myself is always: How much integrity?
2012 * Dara Birnbaum: Wonder Woman
2012 * Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation
2012 * Links to the World: Dara Birnbaum
2012 * Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to today
2012 * Bound New Art and Commodity in the 1980s
2012 * Broadcasting: E.A.I at ICA
2012 * Michael Jackson: On the Wall
2017 * Dara Birnbaum: Psalm 29(30)
2017 * Digital Art: At the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980
2017 * Into the Unknown: A Journey through Science Fiction
2017 * Truth: 24 Frames Per Second
2016 * Dara Birnbaum: Psalm 29(30)
2016 * New Media Series: Dara Birnbaum
2015 * Dara Birnbaum: From NSCAD
2015 * Greater New York
2014 * Art and Internet
2014 * Cut to Statue
2014 * The Last Bruenneral
2014 * Take It or Leave It
2013 * Mum, am I Barbarian
2013 * Title: Not a Love Song
2013 * The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside
2012 * Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman
2012 * Remote Control
2012 * The Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s
2011 * Dara Birnbaum
2011 * Dara Birnbaum: Arabesque
2010 * MACBA: Are You Ready for TV?
2010 * Off the Wall: Part I–Thirty Performative Actions
2009 * Dara Birnbaum: The Dark Master of Media Light
2009 * Dara Birnbaum: First Statements and Then Some...
2009 * Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman

DARA

For me, there continues to be value, maybe in a naive way, in being able to walk into a few places in New York and still see the authentic works that I grew up with, which are very different from mine. I felt I had to fight back against the media. My work was no way to grab those images—had before.

more questions than I've ever...
1982 * Documents '7
1982 * A Fatal Attraction: Art and the Media
1982 Return/Jump
1981 Dara Birnbaum
1981 * Pictures and Promises
1981 * Video Viewpoints
1980 * [Title unknown]
1980 Dara Birnbaum
1980 Local TV News: Analysis for Cable Television (with Dan Graham)
1979 Multidisciplinary Program
1979 * Deconstruction/Reconstruction
1979 * Erotic Events/Time: Square Show
1979 * Re-Raus
1979 * Tapes from the Museum of Modern Art
1979 * Television/Video
1978 Dara Birnbaum
1978 Dara Birnbaum
1977 Dara Birnbaum
1977 * Notebooks, Workbooks, Scripts, Scores

* Selected group exhibitions

Kassel
Renaissance Society, University of Chicago
The Kitchen, New York
Anthology Film Archives, New York
The Kitchen, New York
Museum of Modern Art, New York
AIR Gallery, London
Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax
The Kitchen, New York
Television by Artists, A SPACE, Toronto
Institute for Art and Urban Resources, PSI, New York
New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
The Kitchen, New York
American Center, Paris
Princeton University Art Museum
Franklin Furnace, New York
Franklin Furnace, New York

1–6 Attia Pia (still), 1975. Courtesy: the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery; Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
7–12 Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry (still), 1979. Courtesy: the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery; Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
16 Installation rendering for Will-o'-the-Wisp, 1985. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery
19–22 PM Magazine (stills), 1982. Courtesy: the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery; Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
30–33 Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission (stills), 1990. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery