

Artists

AN INTERVIEW WITH DARA BIRNBAUM

Robert Beck



Video artist Dara Birnbaum (photo by Paula Court)

As an influential practitioner of media and video art for more than a decade, Dara Birnbaum has produced uncompromising critiques of mass media in the form of innovative videotapes and installations. With degrees in both painting and architecture, Birnbaum began in video by "tearing up television visuals" in rigorous examinations of popular TV that, through deconstructive editing, arrested its meaning by accelerating its flow. Ten years later, in her most recent project — a 25 monitor tele-wall in Atlanta's Rio Shopping Plaza — Birnbaum furthers her investigation of the media by allowing the viewer to physically participate as the "edit" in a phenomenological transformation of the visual field. Viewed from the perspective of ten years, the similarities of certain conceptual and formal devices that run throughout the individual works — gesture, moments of transformation, closures that "disclose" — and the dissimilarities of the many contexts in which her works have appeared — MTV, public spaces, publications — comprise a unique political and artistic project. The artist is currently at work on *Canon: Taking to the Streets*, a single-channel videotape that focuses on the recent Chinese uprisings to ask "through what movement and gesture can the voice of the individual make itself seen and heard in our highly technocratic society?"

The following interview is an edited transcript of three conversations I had with Dara Birnbaum.

Robert Beck (RB): You've just completed a public video art project for the Rio Shopping Center in Atlanta, which was the result of your having won an international video competition sponsored by Image Film/Video in Atlanta. I understand this project is a "first" for video art in many ways. Can you describe your inspiration in conceiving the project?

Dara Birnbaum (DB): I wanted to bring outside and to the public the type of tele-wall that New York City's Palladium had previously used inside as a kind of spectacle. I was impressed by the impact that these relatively new video walls and matrixes had, and I was interested in the dynamics of the size and scale in relation to the public. Rather than display the various video wallpapers that the Palladium had created, I wanted to reintroduce the idea of content, in this case the "news of the moment" and the specific site that the development is built upon. The wall has two sets of imagery. The first is a live receivership of the news during the time the mall is open. This was formulated because of Ted Turner and the CNN complex, which was like a star on Atlanta's map. What Ted Turner did with CNN and the Headline News was a breakthrough in the telecommunications industry in terms of format and production. In doing a project for Atlanta in relation to video, it seemed obvious to express

this concern. I felt a certain responsibility in a public space to present images that you may not necessarily see, but which are all around — "the news of the moment." It was necessary for me to involve imagery that wasn't just a beautification of the Plaza. The tele-wall provides a type of open kiosk or large, grand bulletin board situation. It is the key focal point of the Plaza.

RB: What comprises the second set of imagery?

DB: The B-set of imagery is the landscape that was on the site originally — natural, indigenous trees and rolling hills. The tele-wall provides an electronic memory of the actual, specific site that was there before the development. Rather than choosing something that would be pure aestheticization — beautiful video flowers, video fountain — I thought it was important to bring a critical edge to it. If we couldn't have the Real, I thought we should have the electric memory of it. That memory is up there all the time.

Through the use of two live cameras, the wall becomes interactive — as people cut across certain pathways in the plaza, their figures provide "keyholes" through which the second set of imagery appears. The people themselves would not be seen, only these amorphous openings through which "the news of the moment" is seen, fracturing and fragmenting the landscape. Like a plaque that says what was there before, the landscape is interrupted by the public, coming to shop, bringing with them the news. I worked with John Maybey out of Crawford Communications in Atlanta and with Rick Feist in New York to produce the dual discs of landscape imagery. The wall was customized to mix the feeds from the discs and the live cameras, as well as to integrate the "keyhole" effect. This outdoor wall with its use of new technologies together on the same site might be groundbreaking as well.

RB: As this installation project may serve as a kind of culmination of your work over the last decade in media, I am interested in discussing your early career as a New York artist addressing video. Perhaps a clear evolution of the concerns evident in the Rio tele-wall may be traced back to similar ones in the initial installations and videotapes. The works dating from the late 1970s are striking investigations of the sound-image relationship particular to video.

DB: *Lesson Plans: To Keep the Revolution Alive* was one of the first works I did, which I presented at Artists' Space in 1977. Considering the relationship of video to music, it's interesting that this first work in 1977 didn't, in fact, have sound, only images; pictures shot off a television from a series of prime-time, crime drama TV programs, basically concentrating on reverse-angle shots. At the Kitchen in 1978, I presented a work called *(A)Drift of Politics*, which was videotape material from *Laverne and Shirley*. I placed sound in one room and image in another. This was a very purposeful

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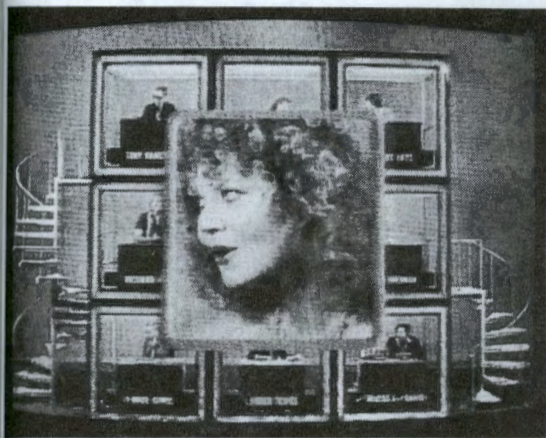
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Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry by Dara Birnbaum (photo by Robert Beck/courtesy E.A.I.)



Technology Transformation: Wonder Woman by Dara Birnbaum (photo by Robert Beck/courtesy E.A.I.)



(A)Drift of Politics (Laverne and Shirley) by Dara Birnbaum (photo by Robert Beck/courtesy E.A.I.)



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separating out of image and sound to see what each was doing, rather than the immediacy of an inter-relationship. When the soundtrack was separated away from the image, the image started to say its own things. I started at the beginning to simply "look" at TV, and I felt that image and sound were conjoined in there; that there was this small box that issued "large" sound, "large" in the sense that sound was as inflated as the image: the hysteria of certain laughs, "gongs" on *The Gong Show*, "...Come On Down!" To have all this coming from — united in — this little box, I thought, "How do I stop this flow, this current? How can we look at this?" In trying to deal more with time and space and sound-image relationships, *(A)Drift of Politics* had to separate out those elements.

RB: Your separation of sound and image was concurrent with your wanting to "stop the visual flow" through repetition in editing, and towards the same end, it was a deconstructive device.

DB: Yes, exactly. When you had to read these words, in the still shots at Artists' Space or in *(A)Drift of Politics*, deprived of their natural sound, you had to read what the characters were going through. These issues started to become sound-oriented at a point when television was not. The *Pop-Pop-Video* (1980) tapes directly declared themselves as collaborations with musicians involved in their own work, such as Rhys Chatam. It was music that related to the works I was doing, the way I was editing and approaching visuals from television.

RB: Editing is used as a deconstructive device in *Wonder Woman* (1978), a manipulation of the signs in order to demonstrate how we are manipulated by them. From the perspective of today, I'm curious if you see that editing approach as having changed.

DB: There is an extreme difference between the process of making these tapes in 1977 and now. At the beginning it was a reaction, when I talk about "stopping the flow" or arresting moments of time for the viewer to look at. With *Wonder Woman* I felt an almost violent need to react in relation to this imagery that was coming into my home space. I had no access, no immediate access, to the imagery at that time. There were no Betamax or VHS decks in the home at all, and to me that was the real difference. There was no way to touch that image, there was no way to get at it. The image wasn't accessible in the way that it is today, with the proliferation of machines and over-abundance of commodity items that make imagery very accessible. The statement I've always made is that in 1978 it was almost impossible to have access to the imagery, but today it's almost impossible *not* to have access.

RB: In some way, then, it came down to the technologies that were available to you; the repetitive editing of the early deconstructive

works is replaced by the image-processing you developed with state-of-the-art equipment. Editing becomes effect in the later works, parallel to the changes in the emergent technologies.

DB: The editing in *Wonder Woman* was the result of the access I had, which was the bottom of low-budget, industrial technology. I think repetition was a device at that time and I wanted to use it in a way that afforded me the ability not to have to translate images. My peer group in the mid-70s in New York was trying to approach the idea of media-generated images. There was a need to look at mass media and the effect it was having on popular language and culture. Robert Longo — or Jack Goldstein earlier — was looking at the dynamics and new spatial determinants of the image as defined by the movie screen and the television screen. This new image in painting dislocated its characters into an empty space similar to a movie screen. Some images were actually taken from the movies, as Longo did from Fassbinder. I wanted this access to television imagery and didn't want to translate it into a different medium. I wanted to use the medium on itself.

RB: There is a radical break from earlier strategies with the production of the *Damnation of Faust* (1983-1987) series. No longer are you restructuring appropriated broadcast television footage, but you go outside with a camera to record real events in the street. I'm interested in the shift in your means of production; from a form of production that uses appropriated images to a direct documentation of daily life.

DB: I can reconstruct the timeline of that period, which is the only way I can approach it. I was presenting works, all of which were about appropriation, as part of the *60' 80' Attitudes/ Concepts/Images* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in 1982, and decided to go next door to the Van Gogh Museum, which has an incredible collection of Japanese prints that Van Gogh had collected from the Ukiyo-e period of Japanese art. It was through viewing these Japanese prints that I was inspired to see what formal devices and structures could now be created with the new technology of video in 1983. I could see frame-within-frame references in the 1850 Japanese prints. I thought if we stopped action on a frame of the new television technology, there would be a strong surface similarity, but without the content or meaning that seemed imbedded in these 19th century works. In television, ABC Sports for example, the image-plane picture breakdown, or multiple fracturing of the image, seemed to be highly aestheticized without the imbedded content or meaning that it could potentially carry. I wanted to use the hardware in a way that in 1983 was being used by ABC Sports, or just coming up in video music, but in a way that obviously considered content. And for the content, rather than appropriating images already out there, I wanted to search for those

images that could relate to the development of this formal procedure and still have meaning for me. The independent camera of the independent maker became very important. I had seen certain ritualized behavior as portrayed in the playground scenes in *Evocation* (1983), for example. I felt that I had to begin from the most common gesture or look in order to find out what the basic language was, the basic units of communication; a way of perceiving gesture as an opening towards communication. I wanted to use that content in relation to a very strict format of the hardware of the technology: soft and hard.

RB: There is also a change in your approach to editing with the *Damnation of Faust* series, where sophisticated video effects, which you developed, replace the repeat edit — the fan-wipe in *Evocation*, or the rain-wipe in *Will-O-the-Wisp* (1985). I think this transition can be seen in the three intervening works: *Remy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Planes* (1980), *Fire!* (1982) and *PM Magazine/Acid Rock* (1982). *PM Magazine/Acid Rock* acts as a kind of conclusion to the earlier works, ending as it does in a literal and graphic abstraction, while the other two act as an introduction to the *Damnation of Faust* series, with their use of original footage.

DB: In *PM Magazine/Acid Rock*, one of the main abstractions is the girl eating ice cream. By that point anything could be done to the image: it could be cropped in any way. This wasn't done on 1" broadcast equipment, this was still low-industrial end, but there was a greater proliferation of the equipment along with what it could do. *PM Magazine/Acid Rock* does end in an abstraction — it was the culmination of that style of editing, of working with that strategy.

RB: Also introduced in the same period, specifically in *PM Magazine/Acid Rock* and *Fire!*, is the window device or inset. The installation *PM Magazine* contrasts the videotape-loop of the inset with the static photographic print of the Wang commercial image.

DB: I know that the box or insert or wipe pattern has been there since *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979), where the "reveal" is actually supplied by TV. In one case, the tic-tac-toe board has a window where the image of the woman breaks through, and she is allowed to occupy more of the screen as the "character," rather than within this set of living, animated images and sounds, lights and bells. In the final abstraction of *PM Magazine/Acid Rock*, everything is animated imagery from the television program, except the image of a "real woman" that pokes through twice in the end, so quickly that if you blink, it's gone. That was a window too; even in the abstraction, the real is allowed to poke through, but almost without a moment's notice. In *Damnation of Faust*,

different wipes and mats, which John Ziemann, Rick Fiest and I developed, come into play, like "reveals," that open or wipe away the image. I know that Norman Klein, in writing about my work (*"Audience Culture and the Video Screen"*; Dara Birnbaum, *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video, Works 1977-1980*), has noted that characters in the early appropriated works are trapped; there was a certain kind of entrapment. With *Wonder Woman*, in the burst of supposed freedom, where one becomes a super woman, TV supplies not only a window — i.e. *Hollywood Squares* — but an effect. There is a concentration on effect, like the burst of blinding light inserted as a new woman emerges. With the *Wonder Woman* tape, my intention was to entrap her. So with her constant spinning, unable to break out of her transformation whether she is a secretary or *Wonder Woman*, she can't escape that role. She cuts through her own image to get out of the enclosed room; she cuts her own throat through the mirror image to get out. Maybe there is a trying-to-get-out-of, a trying-to-break-through, in the works up to and through *Damnation of Faust*. In *Evocation*, a woman crawls across the screen to look out, just as the edge of the frame begins to slide in on her with a wipe that holds mid-screen. This divided frame acts as a window as she looks out onto a younger girl who could almost be looking at her but isn't. Throughout the series there is a questioning of inner psychological space as a projected space within the space of present reality, their conjunction. In his essay *The Hidden Side of the Moon* written for the Stedelijk Museum's *Luminous Image* exhibition, Jean-Paul Fargier said that *Damnation of Faust* breaks certain codes of traditional cinema, where space is occupied on-screen in relation to what's off-screen, with what's on-screen calling to what remains off-screen, thus bringing it into the frame. For video, he thought it was a first in breaking the image into a multiple-picture frame, presenting what was on and off-screen at the same time. There is a conjoining of the one who looks and the one who is looked at. Both are shown to us, and where does that place the viewer?

RB: There is no longer the necessity for the reverse shot, which is where you started in *(A)Drift of Politics* (*Laverne and Shirley*).

DB: That's interesting, because that work questioned where one is positioned, too.

RB: The literal reference to the frame, through re-framing within a larger frame, is introduced in the installation of *PM Magazine*. *Fire!*, which does not use appropriated footage, but was completed at about the same time as *PM Magazine/Acid Rock*, introduces a second element that recurs in *Damnation of Faust*: the documentation of the street, in this case a parking lot, in verite style. And, like the later series' *Will-O-the-Wisp*, it positions its female character at a higher perspective than the street she is placed in relation to, and foregrounded against.

DB: The woman in *Fire!* looks down upon the quick-food exchange of MacDonalds, Burger King, Jack-in-the-Box. You see her in the end, her frustrated position. She is separated from, but adjoining to, all that consumption, all that fast-food consumption, as she's consuming liquid, which is the female. Fire is the male. But the position of the woman in these two tapes is the same.

RB: Apart from her being adjacent to the fast-food consumption, the metaphor is made literal when the alcohol she's been drinking is consumed by fire. In these "middle" works — *Remy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Planes, Fire!* and *PM Magazine/Acid Rock* — the women are presented consuming: ice cream in one, alcohol in the other two. A narrative action that calls attention to a woman's relationship to the image; consuming as they are consumed.

DB: Yes, I think that's true.

RB: The first works cause us to look at not only the confinement of the women represented, but also at the violence enacted upon the female body. While in the later series there seems to be a desire to undo the constraints, undo the violence that is imposed by literary myth, even by spectatorship.

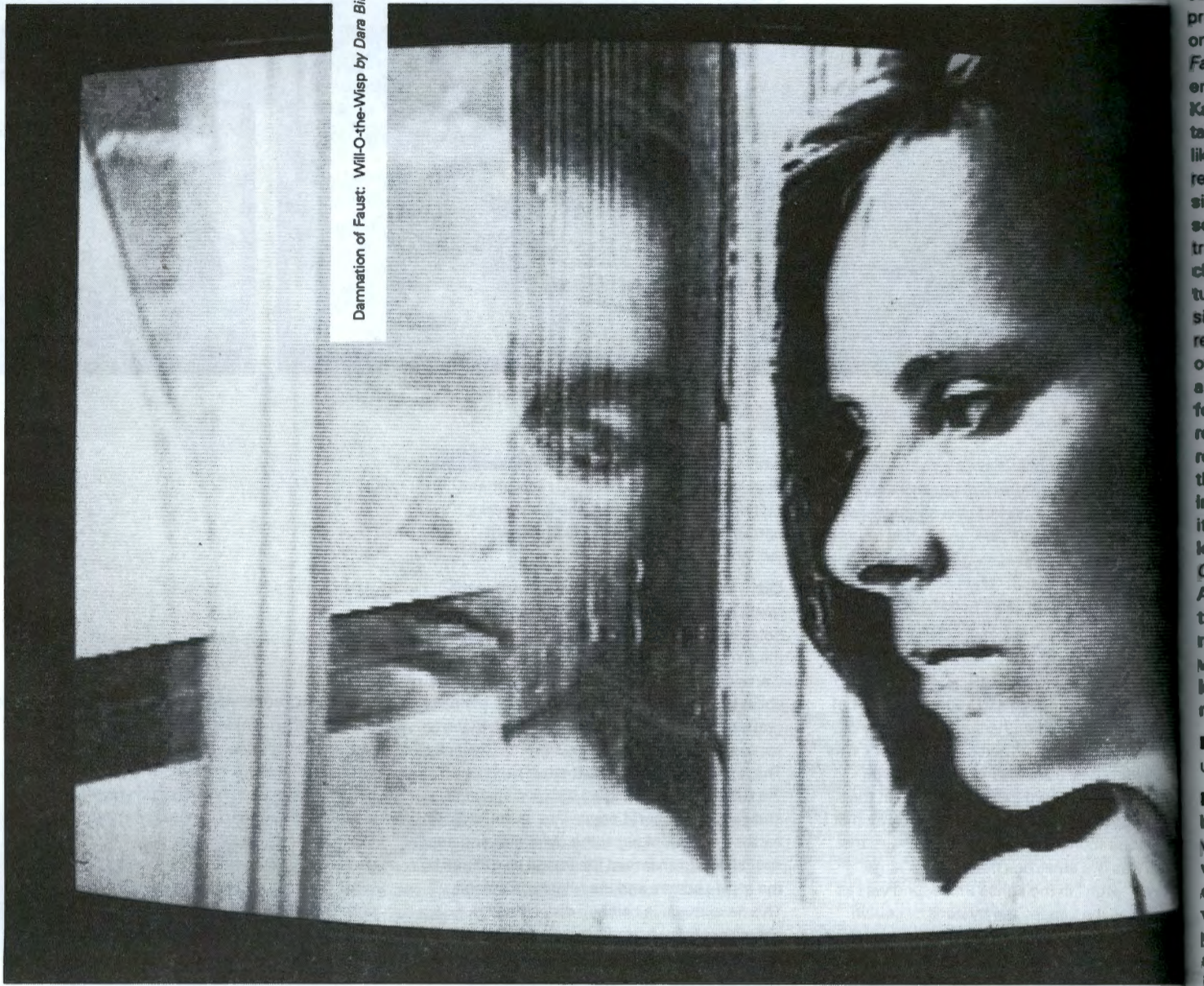
DB: I think the majority of the works from 1978 to 1982 carry strains of violence, meaning the ones that deal with the woman's body. *Pop-Pop-Video: Kojak/Wang* (1980) is also a violent tape, but for the male.

RB: The violence there too is carried out across a female body; the Wang secretary is placed within the police shoot-out, as shots audibly traverse her office space.

DB: She's in a very passive position; it's as if it doesn't matter whether she's receiving or sending messages. It's an emptied position of a repetitive gesture that doesn't carry the potency of the male gunfire. With the *Damnation of Faust* series, the idea was to deal with a very large myth, as large as Wonder Woman, a literary myth that I could change. In my mind, the Faustian representation is or has been very dominantly male, while the woman inside the mythology of Faust has been a very hysterical voice. In most of the versions, certainly in Goethe or Berlioz, the woman is very imposed upon: a woman who was seduced, abandoned, kills her mother, causes her brother's death, kills her own child, and ends up imprisoned for the child's murder. In the end — and there's a questioning of whether or not this is damnation — she is brought up to heaven, but only because a man has given up his soul for her salvation. I don't see that action as hers in any way either. I wanted to put a woman into the leading role, whether it be Faust, as in *Evocation*, or Gretchen/Marguerite, as in *Will-O-the-Wisp*. At each step the woman's voice was changed, whether it was by aggressively placing it in the male role, or establishing one that had not existed previously for the woman in Faust.

RB: Throughout, your work has been concerned with gesture. If the first works draw attention to the constraints of enforced stereotypical gestures, *Damnation of Faust* seems to present gesture as communicative and affirming, a potential for political change and deeper understanding. I'm interested in the ways in which gesture is carried forth throughout your work, the changes in its representation.

DB: I was concentrating on gesture from the beginning with the installation of *Laveme and Shirley*, which exaggerated it through slow-motion film. With *Wonder Woman*, which is also about gesture, I was going after the most ridiculous, the idea that TV could enhance the myth of woman. That in television, it only took a half turn and a burst of blinding light, an early special effect, and a new woman would emerge. By exaggerating that and using the formal device of repetition, I hoped to reveal that it wasn't that easy. With her continuous spinning, the sign starts to strip away at itself, and left in its place is a kind of teeter-totter toy or jewelbox woman, or an actress, very dizzy from turning and spinning. In the manipulation of the image, its repetition, you can almost sense what the actress might have been going through: "Now spin, now change." This is not just her becoming "Wonderful," but also her getting caught or trapped in the Real, as well as the Wonder. For me, *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* is the tape that really points out the incredible array of mannerisms. Actresses who have to say "Hello" to an audience of several million, each actress taking on characteristics that one can easily see — the dizzy blonde, a



Damnation of Faust: Will-O-the-Wisp by Dara Birnbaum (photo by Robert Beck/courtesy E.A.I.)

"guffawing" redhead, the paranoid eye-shifts of the little girl. They're quite exaggerated anyway, but taken out of the flow and re-represented several times in a row, I think there's a ghastly appearance.

RB: They become poignant. It's an extremely effective tape because of its anger and cynicism. And there's that prolonged interruption of black leader, where we're watching a black screen and listening to disco music — Ashford and Simpson's *Found a Cure* — and are at once exhilarated and distressed, caught between anticipation and dread.

DB: The tape was never intended to take advantage of those actresses who submitted themselves to that position, but to show the entrapment of that position. In *Damnation of Faust*, I tried to work with children by slowly introducing myself to them, and by allowing them to look at themselves as they were being seen through the camera: to build a responsive relationship with them that didn't place them onstage, but rather on a stage they created for themselves. I had someone come in to do second camera, a "camera-man" in the way the industry would define it, and within fifteen minutes of his being there and "directing," the social netting of the group broke apart. I tried to diminish performance, rather than build it for the camera.

RB: Talking further about the *Damnation of Faust* series, I'm interested in your strategy of consciously recalling an earlier art historical moment, Romanticism, in a project concerned with memory and nostalgia. In relation to the way memory operates within the works, this artistic "memory" becomes an effective strategy.

DB: *Damnation of Faust* was a Berlioz title. He wrote it at what is described as the end of the Napoleonic wars, just at the beginning of the rise in Romanticism in Europe. It is a title that acts as a touchstone to that specific period, and it was also during this period that the Ukiyo-e period of art ended in Japan. My hope in

pointing to the period of Romanticism was not simply to recreate it, but to allow for references. It was important to have quotations, but also to push beyond that point. The woman in *Will-O-the-Wisp* tries to get beyond the point that a woman's voice was perhaps capable of at that period in time. She states immediately at the beginning that "we sometimes deform the past to fit our own needs." There was a real consciousness in trying to pull elements of the past forward, which I think is an essential process. Here, though we see what she sees, one does not know if it is of the Real or a psychological need to re-examine the past. There is an acknowledgement that we "deform the past," and there is also the acknowledgment that "there never was any reflection on the state of things," yet her very action is a reflection on the state of things.

RB: Consistent to the construction of each tape in the series, as a device and a strategy, is the back-and-forth movement. It is introduced in *Evocation* as the actual, physical to/fro movement of the swings, which the fan-wipe device duplicates, and, as the here/there placement of the character in relation to the children. And, since the viewer is able to observe at once who is looking and what is looked at, it is also present in the activity of the viewing experience. I think this applies especially to the installations, where the viewer is placed in relation to two or three monitors. Though *Will-O-the-Wisp* is similar in composition, it is a back-and-forth movement in time that is foregrounded in its themes of memory and nostalgia — now/then. This dialectical construction becomes the movement of history in *Charming Landscape*, from 1968 to 1988.

DB: It is very basic. When one looks at something, one looks away from something else. As we look to Kaatje, the protagonist in *Will-O-the-Wisp*, for reference, she looks to the children for reference, and it's only through her that we can join them before they are visually wiped away. *Evocation* joined these spaces to confront the viewer with both of them at once.

In that way it is very purposeful, and perhaps that forms the basis for the dialectic. It became important to deal with the spectator of the installations differently than the spectator of the television screen. In the installation of *Evocation*, I opened up the playground sequence to separate out the Faust character as the one who is looking, apart from the children as the ones being looked at, and co-presented them temporally. The viewer, left with the choice to either look at the one who is looking, or what's being looked at, forms the third part of that triangle. This became a very physical activity in one of the recent installations of *Faust*, in Rome at the Galleria Pieroni exhibition *Non in Codice*, which used two photographic elements in two different rooms.

RB: I want to talk further about the window insert as a formal and conceptual device that runs through the work. It was first introduced very effectively in *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, and then more strategically in *PM Magazine/Acid Rock and Fire!*. It is then re-introduced in *Will-O-the-Wisp* and *Charming Landscape* (1987). Do you see its application as consistent or differing throughout?

DB: There are box-like effects in *Evocation* also. Before I did *Damnation of Faust*, in *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, I was drawing the insert from TV, using the box inside TV's *Hollywood Squares* tic-tac-toe boxes of performers. In 1979, I remember watching TV sports, the Superbowl for example, looking at those inserts that carry different meanings —

the instant replays of the Olympics, which are "formed" in the shown inside the performance. So you see emotion in a single performance. I've seen these kinds of single multiple-picture so abundant, or proficiency. I've seen ones as I've gone through the *Faust* series, different reasons. In *Kaatje Cusse*, which take up only part like very small reference, of the size: when, for scarf in a very traditional picture children are with, is she looking simultaneously representation of the mind? I and the children focus of a corner realize that the really down the the larger rain image away, it may not be: logical project *Charming Landscape* Anne and Pan them — "Why really affected where I stand insert, but with rubble.

RB: I wanted use of the box.

DB: There is been created viewing, or fill with us to each dominant one, which may be viewer, as a actual event. is diminutive. the very grand overturning a potency.

RB: During the within a box, later in the tape an officer against moments, take Fassbinder as seems that v the potential as the formal

DB: Pointing aren't directly is there in the questioning take on in the authority to tape, I was t that line is. it? I wanted placed and r step were to the action, c they were a the potency comes from to stand with playground: smallest of boy's gesture the authority here."

RB: The landscape station sequence opens up in identify with media has b

the instant replay, the key-featured player. Or, the Olympics, where the child-athlete "performed" in the larger screen as the parent was shown inside the little box reacting to the performance. So you get a real, live-action of emotion in a simultaneous reality with the performance. I've always been interested in these kinds of simultaneous realities, or multiple-picture images, that TV seems to make so abundant, or does with such ease and proficiency. I've tried to accentuate different ones as I've gone along. In the *Damnation of Faust* series, different boxes are there for different reasons. In *Will-O-the-Wisp*, the boxes of Kaatje Cusse, who plays the Marguerite figure, take up only part of the screen, and to me, are like very small cameos. The dominance, or reference, of the image is diminished with its size: when, for example, Kaatje takes off her scarf in a very small box as in a "picture," a traditional picture of "Woman." Or, when the children are within the box, as in a framed picture, is she looking at them as a picture, as a simultaneous reality, or as a recall? Is the representation of the children an instant replay of the mind? In the end, the images of Kaatje and the children are re-conjoined in the slip focus of a continuous camera-take, and you realize that there is the Real, that someone is really down there in the street. But, because the larger rain-wipe comes in and floats that image away, with yet another recall of the boys, it may not be a reality, it still may be a psychological projection. Or, in the beginning of *Charming Landscape*, when the girls George-Anne and Pam talk about what is a reality for them — "When you look back, you realize 'this really affected me,'" "I'm trying to find out where I stand," as a little girl jumps in a box-insert, but which is encased in the image of rubble.

RB: I wanted to ask you specifically about the use of the box inserts in *Charming Landscape*.

DB: There is a very complex memory that's been created by television viewing or film viewing, or film-on-TV viewing, which we bring with us to each event: when an event is dominant on a screen it has a certain meaning, which may be a non-articulated meaning for the viewer, as a contained or smaller version of the actual event. I don't mean smaller in a way that is diminutive. For example, I wanted to contain the very grand gesture of the students overturning a burning truck to increase its potency.

RB: During the playground sequence, contained within a box, a boy points down at a girl, while later in the tape, that same gesture is made by an officer against a crowd. These two moments, taken together, remind me of the Fassbinder adage "fascism begins at home." It seems that within the group you recognize both the potential for communicative action, as well as the formation of hierarchies and dominance.

DB: Pointing at a girl and the fascist salute aren't directly related, but the potential for that is there in the most innocent gesture. I'm questioning the signification that a sign may take on in the smallest gesture. What gives authority to a hand gesture? Throughout the tape, I was trying to find that line, to ask where that line is. Or, is there a line? What crosses it? I wanted the audience to be continuously placed and replaced into a position, where, if a step were taken forward they were a part of the action, or, if a step were taken backwards they were a spectator or witness to it. For me, the potency of the lunchcounter sequence comes from an almost non-belief in the ability to stand witness to that kind of violence. In the playground sequence, we're witnessing the smallest of gestures, but you could look at the boy's gesture and say that it carried a power, the authority to say to the girl, "Now look here."

RB: The landscape you depict in *Charming Landscape* is a political one. With the demonstration sequence of the second half, the tape opens up in a way that forces the viewer to identify with a crowd. It's as if the term mass-media has been re-interpreted.

DB: All my work has ultimately been about the individual voice, the capabilities of the voice of the individual. With *Charming Landscape*, I try to examine the social being, the social crowd, at a time when I again felt the importance of, the need for, the individual voice. What becomes so important is how that individual voice will find its political voice as well. The tape, very purposefully, presents a whole timeline of demonstrations that are in the street and of the mass. I've started to look at how the individual voice can be heard in relationship to technologies that now have speed and concentration. Given the immediacy of communication and news, which are able to reach across the world instantaneously, how can anyone effectively break through those channels of distribution? In the 1960s, there was the idea of "taking it to the streets" to be seen and heard, with immediate situations — the war in Vietnam, the 1968 Democratic Convention — becoming focal points, very precise instances that were tremendous pivotal points of function and change. I remember watching the '68 Democratic Convention on television and being exposed to the inside of the hall, the idea of TV and media taking you inside. Yet, by nightfall, the street demonstrations had gotten so out of hand that the news media realized that the real story, or at least part of it, was outside. "The whole world is watching." There was a pivot in our position in relation to the media. You can see this intensively expressed around that period; for example, in the Yippies going after their own prime-time TV to gain a voice, or the component of the Parisian demonstrations that was for the restructuring of the film and television systems.

RB: That can be seen in *Charming Landscape* with the literal escalation of the media — photograph, film and video cameras — across the picture frame. This ends in the last shot with a small-format video camera held high above the heads of the crowd by a guard recording randomly. You could read the tape as the antithesis of Nam June Paik's *Global Groove*: what we see in the timeline of demonstrations, from civil rights through Paris to contemporary China, is anything but a "global groove." Paik's tape was made at the beginning of the media's escalation and celebrates its potential, while *Charming Landscape*, produced fifteen years later, traces its pervasion as something different.

DB: When a gesture or sign is adopted in a cross-cultural situation and still has power, such as the peace sign appearing in China twenty years later, what is the exact significance? What is the exact power? Within the demonstration sequence, the peace sign is seen in 1968 Chicago and in the student demonstrations of China, 1986, and its reading seems to be almost the same, but that's a surface reading. I'd now like to question how a sign translates cross-culturally and transfers across time. I want to see what meaning can still be carried by the sign; is it stripped of all signification? What meanings and re-interpretations does it undergo?

RB: Earlier, there's a dissolve that juxtaposes the three horizontal stripes of a student's glove, shaking his fist in the air, with three similar on the sleeve of a Chinese officer's jacket, his hand also raised. And the questions you wanted to initiate with the tape have to be asked: Are these movements of protest or restraint? What exactly is the meaning of the gesture? Who is making it?

DB: Yes, exactly... The history of TV, of video, is not that old, but the reading of it, now, has become a very complex issue, with this "global groove" in operation with an intensified amount of stimulus, interpretation, and re-interpretation. In your example, it is a French student who is waving his fist, and it is a designer detail on the glove, the chevron, that becomes the insignia of the military in the next shot.

RB: I'm interested in the conclusion of *Charming Landscape*, as it closes the tape as well as the series with a conclusive device that is consistent throughout — the obstruction. Kit Alderdice in *Evocation* is liberated from her urban surroundings but is finally enclosed, blocked from view by the beach reeds; in *Will-O-the-Wisp*, Kaatje Cusse turns away from the viewer to look out onto the street below just as a rain-wipe covers it over and slides it away; and *Charming Landscape* ends with the camera lens, and our view, being covered over by the hand of a Chinese guard. It's as if each conclusion is brought forward and together in that final conclusion of the inability to look further.

DB: With the blocked view, perhaps, the viewer achieves a certain level of understanding of the series, that ultimately there is no resolution. There was an attempt to constantly shift the viewer from projecting onto any one character in a significant way, or any one character from identifying with the others, which is a blocking in itself. For me, the fan, as a device, was stimulating in the sense that as much as it reveals in its opening, it conceals as well. At the end of *Evocation* we have a kind of fan-wipe, which isn't one that reveals Kit or the children, but is the simple reeds that become like a device, which closes one off from seeing. So, the reeds are not a solution or an escape for her in the least, but a fan-like device that closes her off from seeing us, and us from her. In *Evocation*, the "point of view" or "the look" is not made available. And, in *Will-O-the-Wisp*, as her gesture of looking out onto the street takes place, the rain-wipe comes across and hides the Real with another illusion or another reality. With the ending of *Charming Landscape* as the culmination of the triptych, the viewer, having been witness to so many things before the censor comes in and covers the lens, has to ask "what can we perceive in this action?"

RB: This last sequence strongly supports your wanting the spectator to question their position in relation to the images they're seeing. Prior to this scene, the viewer has had a fixed position, either along a line or up above, while now it's random. During this chaotic conclusion, the viewer is left to find a position, and to re-view what images have come before.

DB: It's the camera's position you're now seeing. It's more noticeable because it's direct. A still camera is there in the beginning when the students are being trained, but it's a bit more innocent. There are three or four different scenes in which someone enters the frame with a camera in order to document, as "news"; an activity of forcefully getting something and going away with it to reveal it. Well, to whom? In the end it's defined as the oppressor, the military over the people. The closing gesture is less naive than in *Evocation*, where the reeds, blowing, blocked our view for a moment. This is much more. The end of *Charming Landscape* isn't the blocking off of sight, but the subtle twist of the finger. It's almost like an arbitrary gesture, but I don't think it is. It's a gesture that's very difficult to imitate. That small circle of closing off with the finger is the final statement, almost like "Enough."

RB: Do you see any similarities between the Rio project and your recent work?

DB: My commitment is to bring about more of an awareness of current politics — of what is happening at the moment. I think we hide from these things in our society. In *Damnation of Faust*, I attempt to deal with the idea of memory during this conservative time when I feel a destruction of memory is going on. With the Rio project, I felt that this non-acknowledgment of the large events in relation to the everyday event of shopping should be there, like a large kiosk. I was originally stimulated, in part, while working on *Charming Landscape*

and seeing footage of student demonstrations from China in 1986/87. Students brought tape recorders to their rallies to record the speeches, which they would then transcribe to paper and poster the walls with the day's events — what decisions were made, what was talked about. It seemed to be an overnight process, and I felt an aspect of the same should be here at the Rio mall. I thought it was most important to confront the images of the news and the original site, and not to reduce the news — as it is at home on the television, or handable as newspaper — but to have a big wall of ongoing events. I also thought it should be of the "moment," thus dealing with the longevity and permanence of the installation. I wanted every aspect of video to be represented in the work — live receivership of TV news, video imagery presented through the newest form of disc and digital technology, and interactivity — to be evidenced in one project.

RB: Given the content, the idea of presenting television as "public," rather than private, in a public space is a potent one.

DB: Television is the message that reaches everyone, audiences of eight million in one shot. In the last decade or so, you can see everything breaking out and away from the original history of private receivership being of the home. All the early statements from the '70s about video — projection onto the self and the other, the head of the performer as equal to the size of the TV, real-time experiments — were broken apart with the advent of video on planes, VHS movies on home sets, compact disc, etc. That's why the dynamic of the tele-wall interested me, because it was a different presentation of space. It's just been in the last few years that the industry has been capable of making technology like the tele-wall, in which all of a sudden one monster image could be represented on 25 screens, an image that could cut across even the seams of the TV and be multi-fractional, representing a grotesque large form. It's amazing to think that, in relationship to the very short-term history of video and all the precedents of video art and performance art and body art, the image within the box has grown and fractured so much that even the box can't stand in the way. In that way, I felt it was incredible to confront the image inside the box with one that simply explodes it. ■

The videotapes of Dara Birnbaum are distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, and the Video Data Bank, Chicago.

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