

# Whitney Museum of American Art 14

## The New American Filmmakers Series

EXHIBITIONS OF INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO

### Dara Birnbaum

February 4–March 4, 1984

*PM Magazine*, 1982. Video installation  
On view continuously 12:00–6:00, Tuesdays until 8:00

Gallery Talk, Thursday, February 9, at 2:00  
Dara Birnbaum will be present

#### Credits:

Video post-production: CMX editors—Mark Bement, Steven Robinson, California Institute of the Arts; Matt Danowski, Electronic Arts Intermix; Joseph Leonardi, the Annex, Long Beach Museum of Art. Music collaboration: Dara Birnbaum, Simeon Soffer. Post-production sound editor/mixer: Simeon Soffer. Musical assistance: vocals—Shauna D'Larson; drums/rhythm—James Dougherty, Jon Norton (*L.A. Woman*); guitar—David Dowse (*L.A. Woman*), Mark Norris; synthesizer—Simeon Soffer. Design consultation and execution: Dan Hill, John Salmen.

The artist wishes to thank Nancy Hoyt, who made the original installation of *PM Magazine* possible at The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York, and Coosje Van Bruggen, who made the installation possible at "Documenta 7," Kassel, West Germany.

The art of Dara Birnbaum has established an aesthetic discourse predicated on both a formal and ideological investigation of commercial broadcast television. In her videotapes she refashions television's popular images through a variety of editing and image-processing strategies that expose the hidden meanings within narrative and commercial programs.

In a series of short videotapes Birnbaum began to examine the dichotomies within the broadcast medium. She deconstructed pop culture images and their content through the interplay of image and sound, a process that revealed latent agendas within the narrative. In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978), selected actions of Wonder Woman, appropriated from the television show, are repeated on the screen so that they take on a rhetorical form, a ritualized gesture performed against a popular record, "Wonder Woman in Discoland." Here television's caricature of the heroic female is contradicted by the lines of the song, which describe her as a sexual object. This strategy lays bare what is in fact encoded in the television presentation.

*PM Magazine* (1982), Birnbaum's latest video installation, focuses on the self-promotional and commercial aspects of television. The videotapes, with music and spoken words, show computer and word-processing systems set up in an imaginary electronic office of the future in which the work space is a hyper-efficient field of exciting and slick images. This commercial message is combined on the monitors with the introduction to *P.M. Magazine*, the news and entertainment program that shows families and children as happy consumers. The commercial message in both programs is opened up as the artist probes hidden attitudes toward



*PM Magazine*, 1982. Video installation at The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York. Photograph by Dara Birnbaum.

women and the sexual roles of the office worker and consumer by replaying them on monitors that are placed within three enlarged photographic panels.

The three panels, arranged on the wall of the Film and Video Gallery, offer a static image which, together with the moving video image, constitute a layered text of meanings. Each panel presents a photographic blow-up of a moment from the videotapes playing on the monitors. The pulsating action of the commercial and program introduction shifts the point of view as the illusory two-dimensional space of the photographs is contrasted with that of the videotape. The kaleidoscopic content and juxtaposition of sound and words to image, both frozen and moving, not only create a complex visual surface, but expose the dark side of broadcast television. *PM Magazine* thus engages the issues of power and sexuality through a critical joining of television's ideology of representation in narrative and advertising.

John G. Hanhardt  
Curator, Film and Video

#### **PM Magazine**

*PM Magazine* represents the culmination of a series of works, dating from 1978 to 1982, which deal directly with television imagery and ideology. Made from TV fragments and the reconstructed conventions of television, the work can be seen as new "ready-mades" for the late twentieth century. Images are cut from their original narrative and

interwoven with layers of musical text in order to plunge the viewer into the experience of TV, rather than simply the watching of it. TV conventions are used, exploited, and turned on themselves to reveal the underside of a seemingly rational technology. Through formal devices such as repetition, "matte" effects—new framing for the original television material—and altered syntax, television is manipulated before it manipulates us: visual rap, scratch, and breaking tracks for the 1980s. Twentieth-century speed is suspended for the viewer's examination and interpretation.

Generally in the 1960s and early 1970s, artists' video was defined as the extended vocabulary of the traditional arts (painting, sculpture, and performance). This usually meant a necessary denial of the origin and nature of video itself, television. It is my intention to give the medium back its institutional and historical base so that new forms of artistic expression can be developed. The installation *PM Magazine* derives its material from the introduction to a nightly national broadcast of the same name as well as a televised commercial for the Wang Corporation. From within suspended renderings—enlarged freeze-frames from each of the sources—the newly indelible image of a girl at a home computer exchanges glances with an innocent girl eating ice cream. Through the use of highly edited and computerized visuals and sound, a split second in each of the stereotypical characters' existence is captured and played with. From the tableaux (both sign and stage-prop) emanates a continuous flow of *PM Magazine's* postwar imagery signifying the American Dream—an ice skater, baton twirler, cheerleader, and the constant repetition of the youth licking ice cream. The viewer is caught in the experience of TV's stereotyped gestures of power and submission, of self-preservation and concealment, of male and female ego. Gesture is seen not as an opening to communication, rather as a form of constraint.

"Video is dead; that is, in its defined role as video art and its relation to the defined art gallery system. But video is alive in its indefinable relation to the industry and rate of conversion which exchanges the currency of TV for the currency of art." (Dara Birnbaum, *ZG*, 3 (London, 1981)

Dara Birnbaum

#### Biography

Born in New York, Dara Birnbaum came to video in 1978 with degrees in both architecture (Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1969) and painting (San Francisco Art Institute, 1973). Her video works have achieved international recognition and have been shown at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Kunsthau, Zurich, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and elsewhere. Her work has taken her to such varied venues as the markets and streets of Bologna, Grand Central Station, film festivals, rock clubs, and broadcast and cable TV. Birnbaum received a Creative Artists Public Service grant in 1981. A grant from the New York State Council on the Arts in 1983 enabled her to create *Damnation of Faust: Evocation*, a single-channel videotape showing the life of a New York City playground and bringing the conventions of nineteenth-century Japanese painting to state-of-the-art video technology. Birnbaum has taught at numerous institutions, including the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax. Currently she teaches at the School of Visual Arts, New York. A book on her work, *Dara Birnbaum: Rough Edits: Popular Image Video*, is due for publication in 1984 by The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

#### Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

The Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance, New York, 1978; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Video Viewpoints," 1981; Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, California, 1981; The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York, "Art and Technology: Approaches to Video," 1982; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1982; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, Belgium, 1982; RTBF, Liège, Belgium, "Video? vous avez dit Video?" 1982; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, "60'80 Attitudes/Concepts/Images," 1982; Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, 1983; Pittsburgh Film-Makers, Pennsylvania, "Video in Person," 1983.

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

Kunsthau, Zurich, "New York Video," 1980; San Francisco International Video Festival (and traveling exhibition), 1981; The Art Institute of Chicago, "74th American Exhibition," 1982; Kassel, West Germany, "Documenta 7," 1982; Ile Festival International du Nouveau Cinéma, Montreal, 1982; USA Cable Network, "Nightflight," 1982; American Film Institute, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., "National Video Festival," 1983; Antenne 2 (French television), "Juste une Image," 1983; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Video: A History," 1983; San Sebastian Film Festival, San Sebastian, Spain, 1983.

#### Selected Videography

(A) *Drift of Politics (Laverne & Shirley)*, 1978. Color, sound; 3-minute loop; installation.  
*Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978. Color, stereo sound; 7 minutes.  
*Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979. Color, stereo sound; 7 minutes.  
*Local TV News Analysis*, 1980. With Dan Graham. Color, stereo sound; 60 minutes.  
*Pop-Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*, 1980. Color, stereo sound; 6 minutes.  
*Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang*, 1980. Color, stereo sound; 4 minutes.  
*Remy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Planes*, 1980. Commissioned by Remy Martin for Grand Central Station, New York. Color, stereo sound; 4 minutes.  
*New Music Shorts*, 1981. Color, stereo sound; 5 minutes.  
*Fire!*, 1982. Commissioned by VideoGram International Ltd. Color, stereo sound; 3 minutes.  
*PM Magazine/Acid Rock*, 1982. Color, stereo sound; 4 minutes.  
*Damnation of Faust: Evocation*, 1983. Color, stereo sound; 10 minutes.  
 Dara Birnbaum's videotapes are distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix and The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance and Film, New York; Art Metropole, Toronto; and Video Data Bank, Chicago.

#### Selected Bibliography

Birnbaum, Dara. "Populism Report from the Field: Up Against the Wall," *Art Com*, no. 20 (1983), pp. 25-26.  
 ———. "Video/Video-Television: Notions On and Offerings To." In *60'80 Attitudes/Concepts/Images* (exhibition catalogue supplement). Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1982, pp. 13, 34-37.  
 Brooks, Rosetta. "TV Transformations: An Examination of the Videotapes of New York Artist Dara Birnbaum," *ZG*, 1 (London, 1981), unpaginated.  
 Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum*, 21 (September 1982), pp. 43-56.  
 Coopman, Johan. "Dara Birnbaum," *Andere Sinema*, December 1982, pp. 12-14.  
 Hoberman, J. "Three Women," *The Village Voice*, May 5, 1980, p. 42.  
 Owens, Craig. "Phantasmagoria of the Media," *Art in America*, 70 (May 1982), pp. 98-100.

**Whitney Museum of American Art**  
 945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021

#### Hours:

Tuesday 11:00-8:00  
 Wednesday-Saturday 11:00-6:00  
 Sunday 12:00-6:00

Film and video information: (212) 570-0537