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Oral history interview with Dara Birnbaum, 2017 May 30-31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Dara Birnbaum on May 30 and 31, 2017. The interview took place at Birnbaum's studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by Linda Yablonsky for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been reviewed by Linda Yablonsky and Dara Birnbaum, and lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is Linda Yablonsky interviewing the artist Dara Birnbaum in her home studio in New York City—it is May 30, 2017—for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Hi, Dara.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Hi.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Thank you for doing this. I've always been interested in your work, and this is quite a great opportunity for me. You were born in 1946, so that makes you 71 now?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I'm 70.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Seventy?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so we are more or less the same age. So we have something of a shared history, but you grew up in New York City, is that right?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In what kind of family? I mean, did you have siblings?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I have one sibling. I have a brother.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Older or younger?

DARA BIRNBAUM: He is younger, but he acts older. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: What does that mean? [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's what I always say about him. He is six and a half years younger, and he acts as if he's the older one.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because he bossed you around when you were kids?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, because he is very controlled, in a way, and acts the adult all the time. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about your parents?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, my father—the heritage is that his parents came from Austria. Either Vienna, he always said, directly, or that vicinity, and they came over rather young.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So before the war?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, yeah, before the war. And my father was one of [00:02:00] the first to be born here in New York, in the Bronx. The family seemed to be dirt poor, and I think that had a great effect on my father. And my mother's family seemingly came from Russia, around Leningrad, and she was born here in New Jersey. They seemed to do a little bit better than the kind of utter poverty of my father and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did your father do for work?

DARA BIRNBAUM: My father was an architect.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you—

DARA BIRNBAUM: And I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —began to follow in his footsteps.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did. Well, what I did is, I was so young when I graduated high school—relatively young, let's say 16, and he—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is that because you're super smart?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I wanted to get through as fast as I could [they laugh], so I skipped two different grades along the way. My father was kind of against it, because he thought I won't mature in a certain way and be ready, you know, to go away. And we were a very protective family.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Of each other you mean?

DARA BIRNBAUM: They were of me, let's say. You know, growing up rather strict rather than loose. Like, be good; don't kiss boys [laughs].

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did you do for fun? You grew up in New York City. The world is at your feet.

DARA BIRNBAUM: We grew up in Queens. I went to the same high school as the Ramones and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But earlier?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Earlier, and [00:04:00] Garfunkel, Simon and Garfunkel. Maybe—God knows when. And for fun we—I don't know, I think I was a little bit of a tomboy maybe.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you watch TV?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did watch TV. I did. I never thought I would be doing work about TV, but I did watch TV.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What TV? TV was mostly live when we were children, so different than now.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. Not all of it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not all of it, but mostly, in the beginning. I mean, people called it the Golden Age of Television, although now they call this the Golden Age of Television, but whatever. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: We wouldn't have gotten to now without then. So did you have favorite shows?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, while you're talking, I'm remembering that—I did, I did. When I was about four, I did like *Howdy Doody*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And actually, when you're talking about live television, there were only a few shows like that, and in the neighborhood—let's say that we were around five, seven years old—we would watch and realize it was almost like a window onto something, because one time we had a neighbor go onto the show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Onto *Howdy Doody*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Onto *Howdy Doody,* in the Peanut Gallery, and we were ecstatic and jealous, our little group, you know, and asked our parents if we could get on, and actually I made it onto the Peanut Gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You did?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm so jealous! [Laughs.] I used to watch that show religiously.

DARA BIRNBAUM: So I think that was a real breakthrough, you know, of watching—and actually now I'm

thinking, I loved *Winky Dink*, [00:06:00] I think.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yeah, *Winky Dink*. You had to draw on the screen.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Is that the one where you draw? I loved that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: I really loved that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was brilliant, actually.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And then my father loved Martin—who would be Dean Martin, not Steve Martin—who drank a lot, Dean Martin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And I didn't like that he liked that. That, I didn't like, but he would watch it. And I loved watching—with my parents—they'd let me stay up to watch Alfred Hitchcock. And I'd drive them nuts—my father nuts—because I'd always say, "What's going to happen? What's going to happen? What's going to happen?" And so he taught me—like he said, "Relax, it's going to be solved. There's only 10 minutes to go, so they're going to resolve it." So I remember that. I did like cowboy programs a lot, like—

LINDA YABLONSKY: *The Lone Ranger*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: —*The Long Ranger* and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Long John Silver*, *Lone Ranger*.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Thank you. [They laugh.] *Lone Ranger*. I feel like a lone ranger. And Rogers—Dale Evans and —

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yeah, Roy Rogers.

DARA BIRNBAUM: —Roy Rogers. And then, to be very open and honest, my parents had trouble over the years. There was a lot of fighting in our home.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And so if you want me to be openly honest, around the age of four was a kind of pivotal spot of trouble, I guess. I was too young to really know, but what I do know is my mother asked, "If you wanted another father, who would he be?"

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow.

DARA BIRNBAUM: "Who would he be?" and I said, "Roy Rogers, but I prefer he not bring Dale." [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did they [00:08:00] divorce?

DARA BIRNBAUM: They went through divorce about six times and then got back together again.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you did watch TV as a family, so it—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —was somewhat a shared experience. Not the kids' shows, I'd imagine.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I think that was—but like the babysitter, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And it was very effective.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Effective?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In the way of *Winky Dink* or something; I thought that was a great show, is what you are saying.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was something to learn from and to interact with early on.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was kind of an Etch-a-Sketch thing.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On some kind of piece of celluloid or something. Plastic that attaches. You could draw and erase.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, and I remember one time they had you draw, like, the steering wheel of a car, and they'd show you how you're going down the street. You'd have the steering wheel. It was a very good show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go to museums, or did you have any art education when you were a kid?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. I loved going to—basically, I would say the Met. I grew up in Forest Hills and Rego Park, and a little in Manhattan, and one of my favorite things would be to try to finally get to the public library. That was a big thing for me. And the other thing was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —the Manhattan public library?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, the Manhattan one. That was a big deal. And the Metropolitan Museum, and MoMA; that I loved. Really loved.

LINDA YABLONSKY: At what age did you start going to museums?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think pretty young.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On your own or with your—

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, [00:10:00] like for example, my mother would take me to the Met.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, and I remember once—just to talk about age, because I don't know what age I was, but I was young enough to get lost and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I get lost now. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, I could get lost right now. [They laugh.] But I remember it was closing—I would beg my mother to take me to the medieval armor. That was actually my favorite—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's my favorite one.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, really? I loved it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There's never anyone in there. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: I loved it. And I'm, you know, kind of a pacifist. So I don't quite get it, but, boy, did I love that room. And I would run to try to go see it. And then one time when we left—my mother was a fast walker—and she got out, and I remember being on the big balcony before the huge stairway up and I could see her downstairs, but I couldn't figure out the stairway. And so I started to cry or ask a guard, and he had to get me down. So that's about the age [laughs] I was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: She left you up there?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, she left me up there. And the Museum of Modern Art. I never got over its changes. I loved the original museum and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The original museum, the one on 53rd street?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, on 53rd. And I remember going there alone or with classes—sometimes with classes—and I remember going up, and I can't remember who painted the painting of men in the clouds playing cards. It used to be on the stairway going up. So it was such an almost erotic feeling of entering this and seeing the clouds with them playing cards. And my favorite thing was to go to the Malevich, *White on White*, [00:12:00] because there would always be a little crowd around it where everyone would be putting it down. And it was one of my favorite paintings. I loved it, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, it was a period—like on TV talk shows, they would have monkeys on, and they would say, "Even a monkey can do that kind of art." That was the kind of period.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yeah. I remember that. But—so your mother had an interest in art? Your father, you said, was an architect, but your mother, did she work?

DARA BIRNBAUM: She stopped working to raise us. She had been in medicine. She was a [laughs]—it's right on the tip of my tongue, someone who examines cells and looks at it for diseases.

LINDA YABLONSKY: She was in research. She was a scientist.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Not science, biology, but—she wasn't a doctor, but she had a license in this; I'll have to remember—but it meant a lot to her.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you said that your father—did he try to discourage you from going into architecture? Or he just didn't want you to go through school so quickly?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, he didn't want me to go to school so quickly, and he had good reasons, in a way, but I just—I was good in school, but I wanted to get out of school. And this is sad for me, so you want me to talk about the sadness as well as the good, [laughs] whatever I want to.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Life is all about all of it.

DARA BIRNBAUM: All of it. During those years of the high school that I went to, there was a big, as we know, baby boom population, and it was a public school. [00:14:00] I had wanted to go to private school. My father said, "Absolutely not." So he would not send me to a private school. I had thought I would do better and get into a better college and things like that, and he was very prejudiced against that.

Our high school had a graduating class of about 1,200 or 1,400 people—Forest Hills High—and we were allowed to only apply to three colleges, which, if I had been a parent, I would have just not allowed for that, you know? But they went along. That was what was agreed, that you could only do three, and the two I wanted turned me down, and that marked me, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You felt rejected?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were rejected.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was rejected. [They laugh.] So at least I was normally feeling rejected. I thought that I wanted to go to—a friend and I from my high school, we both applied to [Mount] Holyoke. And I thought that I had a very good chance of getting in. We were both very bright; we had good service records and all this stuff. And they had a quota on Jews, and she—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I knew there was a catch.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. And she got in. She wasn't Jewish. One of the only non-Jewish people, I think, in our high school [laughs]. And I'm not going to say that was the only reason, but they had a 10-percent-and-under quota. I didn't get in, and I felt very bad and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even though that wasn't your prejudice that caused that.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, exactly. And my father was glad, actually. He let me apply, but he said, "I never wanted a child of mine to go to a school that had 10 churches on its campus." Years later I was showing at the ICA in Boston [00:16:00], many years later, and the woman, my friend, the girl who got into Holyoke, we hadn't seen each other in many years, and she wrote me a note and left it at the museum for me—I had a solo show there—and she said, "Just please feel very good that you never went to Holyoke. You would have hated it," you know. [Laughs.] So that was kind of a reparation in a way.

And together my father and I picked the third school, which was Carnegie Mellon, and that's the one I got into. I started in pre-med, like my mother more, and I'm still trying to remember the word that she was. [Laughs.] Anyway, I lasted all of three weeks in pre-med. I just—we got up to fetal pigs and I couldn't take it, and I didn't know that. And I ran out of the classroom and I tried to think, What can I do?

I was so young. I didn't realize what architecture really was, even though my dad was one. I knew he built all these buildings, you know, but there were these two women on my floor in the dorm—because it was a women's dorm at that time—and they were in architectural school, and I started to do all their homework for them. And I really loved it, and it didn't occur to me until then.

I walked out and I had left the class, and I looked at these buildings and I thought, Look, you love art, but you didn't want to touch it. I thought, You need a profession—the way I grew up—and that art was something that if you loved, no one should touch it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What do you mean "touch it"?

DARA BIRNBAUM: My father worked for some really hard-ass developers, and I thought, You have to be kind of professional. And my parents never led me in a way to say, You could be president of the United States [00:18:00] if you want to. It was more, You have good handwriting; you could design envelopes for people, and right, you know, like cards for wedding announcements or things like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, the opportunities open to women.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, exactly. And it was no imagination; it was nothing in that way, and—or you could teach. You probably could teach art, but that's not what—and I ended up teaching art, but it's not what I wanted to do. And I love drawing, and I just thought, It's what I love and I won't touch to make it into a career. Somehow that idea of career, where you go and you work very hard and—it was broken in me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, also, in those days, unlike now, being an artist was not a profession.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Quote, unquote, profession. It was what you did so you didn't have to do a profession. I mean, it was outside the bounds of profession.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You know, like doctors, lawyers, teachers—

DARA BIRNBAUM: My brother became a doctor.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you very quickly changed your program at Carnegie Mellon?

DARA BIRNBAUM: So I started to look at buildings around me, and it all of a sudden clicked. I was 16, and it clicked, like, Wait a minute, if I enjoy doing their homework, and I see these buildings—I loved math. I loved science. I was really good at it, but I was also good at art. I thought, But there it is. They were all combined together and you can do that.

So I reapplied when I was in school—I had to reapply and take different tests, and ended up that I passed, and I got into architecture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How was it that you were doing other people's homework? [00:20:00] They must have really felt fortunate to be in that dorm with you. [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: I just liked doing it. I used to take notes for money, you know. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's enterprising. [They laugh.] All right, so you graduated with an architecture degree.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I was the only woman in my class.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The only woman?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yep.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Didn't you say that the other two were in architecture?

DARA BIRNBAUM: They were, but one of them married a professor, I think, actually, [laughs] and one might have gotten out ahead of me. [. . . –DB] We had about 12 women over six years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did that seem strange to you? Was it isolating to be the only woman graduating from the architecture department? [20:58]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, you feel a little special, you know. But I had a tough road, because it was all men

[laughs], and I didn't have one woman teacher, one woman professor. I felt prejudiced against. I felt like, you know, when we were doing charrette, that the guys would say, "Dara, you order the pizza," kind of things. I was allowed what was called—finally allowed—a 10:15 "late night," whereas guys could stay all night and work. My department fought for me, that I could be the first woman that the "late night" [rule] wouldn't apply, so that I would get an equal right to work in the studio, and my parents rejected it. They didn't want me out like that, so I couldn't get that. It was a tough road.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, when you graduated, did you come back to New York then?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, I came back to New York.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you went to [00:22:00] work for an architecture firm?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did go for an architectural firm. I went for Emery Roth & Sons, because I knew them and had worked summers there. We were sharing work with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill—we had the bigger reputation—and I was a kid in the design department. So I helped, mainly, render, but I got to see a lot of the design work being done. We worked on the World Trade Center, so I knew the [Twin Towers] wouldn't stand up and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Tell me about that. You knew they wouldn't stand up under stress?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In the way that they were hit, and the way that the fire went off.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Are you saying that you knew that after the plane hit, or you knew it at the time it was being built?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, no, when the plane hit. I saw it live, and I just saw the way the fire was spreading and remembered how—I had flashbacks to how the columns were in that building, and it was the first building with a certain kind of sheer—it's a curtain wall, in a certain way, but it went three stories at a time, and columns were placed back from that and where the core units were, you know, facilities. And that was the first kind of building of its type to get to that height. So you're dealing with the structure—sometimes, at that time, buildings had columns more fronted. This was pushed back and allowing the skin curtain wall to take some of the stress patterns.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's right.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: We could use that as a metaphor for our current political situation in some ways. [00:24:00] Like inevitable, that what has happened would happen.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I'm glad it pancaked. If there's one thing I actually wasn't sure—I thought it would have pancaked down. Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think it was designed to do that, as well.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think they didn't know that. I think this was so out—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, they did know that because it was a Japanese architect—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and that's the way they built buildings for earthquakes.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, that's interesting. Thank you. Thanks.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so you worked there for how long?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think only about a year. I wasn't in love with building. Many of the guys that I went to school with really had developed a career-line plan, and I was a little bit more, Wow, what can I do with this now? And I started to look up architects, and the person who appealed to me the most was Lawrence Halprin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Halprin is spelled H-A-L-P-R-I-N? Okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: He had offices in New York and San Francisco. He was a landscape architect, but he started to do more of what was called—one the of the first environmental design firms in the country. And that really appealed to me. Also, as a personal note, I had been given a gift by my father, a graduation gift, and that was a

trip to Europe, and I met someone there and I fell in love with him and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: That was 1969.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Funny, that was my first trip to Europe, the summer [00:26:00] of 1969.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, really? We may have crossed.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where did you go?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, the thing with my father—I told you he was a little controlling and a little strict—is that he wouldn't allow me to go alone. He would give me money if I went on a tour, so he really, actually, bless him, came home with tons of brochures of kinds of tours, and I go, No, no, no, no, no, no, no. And finally there was one where everyone spoke English, but nobody came from America, and he got me on it. So people could come from Australia, for example, or South Africa, and we went on typical tours, like if-it-was-Tuesday-it-must-be-Belgium type thing, and got to see a lot of countries in Europe—quickly. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you fell in love with someone who lived in Europe, or was on the tour?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Who wasn't. It was just one of those silly stories that you can't believe it, like how-I-met-your-father type story, you know? Where I was in a hotel, and with, like, three of us in a room that were on the tour, three women, and we ran out of water in our room. There was no water, and we had to go find the tour guide to find water. And I walked down the hall, and I looked in this room whose door was open, and there were some very attractive men in there—young men—and I said, "Well, you can go look for water with Ugo," our tour guide. "I'm going in there and asking them for water." And I asked them, and one of them said, "Would you like me to walk you around the city and show you the city?" And I said, "Yeah, that sounds great."

LINDA YABLONSKY: What city were you in?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Florence.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, and he was Italian, I take it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, he was American.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, American.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And he was in architecture, from Berkeley.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But not on this tour?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Not on the tour. It was just some [00:28:00] fated incident.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Serendipity.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, like that. And after we went out, the day and night, and talked and everything, and then the next morning he jumped over the rail of this thing and came in our room, and I said, "I have to leave now." I was packing, and while I was packing, I guess he found my book, my tour book, and he wrote down where we were going, and he wrote down my home [hotel] address. And when I came into Rome, he was there waiting at the hotel for me. So that was kind of romantic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, very. So he was in Berkeley and you were—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —in New York.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Still in New York.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not in San Francisco.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And so I wanted to get out of here, and he wanted to get out of San Francisco and come to New York, but I won. So [they laugh] I won, and Halprin had offices in both places, and I made my way to Halprin's office in San Francisco.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's a great story. So how long did you stay there? You worked?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In San Francisco? I only worked for about two years with Halprin. I still got fed up. Also, it was getting very, very slow in architecture, in the building industry, so all the guys—there were very few women in the firm—so all the guys were taking off, like for a sabbatical, or going back to Europe, and I asked if I could take off.

I was doing a lot of presentational work, special presentational work for Halprin, and illustrating his books. Plus I wasn't designing. I was still pretty young—or I would be on a design team, like, in charge of getting together—we did a lot of workshops that were like—Anna Halprin [00:30:00] was his wife.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Anna Halprin was his wife? I was wondering.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, and we did workshops together, so that exposed me to [San Francisco] Dancers' Workshop and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: How fabulous.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. And the Ford Foundation gave money where—we did, I remember one time, like seven people from our office got together to do workshops with Anna and Larry. And so I took off and I was doing a lot of the presentational work, because they thought I was very good at it, and I still didn't think about art, you know, in that way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But after becoming acquainted with Anna Halprin, did you have any other relationship to the artistic community that was in San Francisco then, the poets or the artists or—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Not really, no.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No. Okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, not really. We worked pretty hard. But it was like being able to peek through an open door at something that was very exciting at the time, and very inventive, and so I was exposed to that. And then, since I had wanted to take art courses in college, and in architecture it wasn't allowed because we had 51 class hours a week, there was no time left—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. That sounds impossible.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It is nearly impossible. Then I said, when everything was slow, "All the guys are taking off; I'd like to take off and go to the San Francisco Art Institute, get some [00:32:00] art courses under my belt, come back, and do better presentational work for what we're doing." And when I went there, they said, "You're very good," and then they offered a scholarship. And when I went back to Halprin, they said, "Well, we hardly have a job for you, because we're very slow right now," and so I drifted over into the arts, is the way it happened.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you were given a scholarship in painting?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In drawing/painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you get a degree?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That would be a master's?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I got a regular degree.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another degree.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, another degree. In painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And then what happened?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did that degree in two and a half years, and I was still with Bill, and he wanted to leave the States. He wanted to go to London and take graduate courses in architecture there—he had finished Berkeley. And I thought, Maybe that's not a bad idea to leave the States, but I didn't want to go to London. So again I got my way [laughs], and we went back to where we had met.

We went back to Florence, and I was supposed to take courses at the Academy of Art, and he in the School of Architecture, that we would both try to get our masters' in that way. And the Academy and I didn't get along so well, because I was seen as too expressionistic and too—I don't know, it was very, you know, academic. It was

very academic. And also, all these Americans were coming in, and I didn't really speak Italian, so I understand from their perspective—

I ran into a gallery in Florence [00:34:00] that kind of befriended me, and that's—I dropped out and started to hang around the gallery. And that gallery was doing video. And that's how I found video.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And that gallery was called the—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —Centro Diffusione—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Centro Diffusione—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —Grafica.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now this was what year?

DARA BIRNBAUM: 1973 or ['7]4.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So video was fairly primitive still at that time, at least as far as artists using video.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what was going on there? There was a whole gallery devoted to video at this time?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, not at all. Should I tell you the story quickly?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Sure.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Okay. I was very lonely in Florence. I was missing home. I didn't speak Italian very well, but Bill did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were there with him though?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, but we spoke English to each other.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Bill. What is his full name? You don't have to say if you don't want to.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Okay. I'm not sure yet. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: To cheer me up—there was a poster and it said, "Opera." And we were going to go to it—he was going to help me go to it, so I would cheer up. And "opera" turned out to be "*opera*" [it.: work]. And what it ended up being was the reading of the budget of the public works for the year. [They laugh.] So they came out all in regalia on the stage, like, trumpets playing—and I said to Bill, "I don't know this opera at all," you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's very funny. [00:36:00] [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: On the way there, we had looked in this little art gallery. It was very near Piazza Signoria, a very small storefront art gallery, and there were lithographs that I thought were like posters—I really didn't know much—of Acconci and Oppenheim in the window. And the Acconci was something like *Touchstone*, or one of the bite [etching] ones; I think that's like *Touchstone*, biting and putting the body onto the flat lithographic plate—and the Oppenheim was the open book, that he tanned his chest that way and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Burned, I believe, not just tanned.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Burned. And I had never seen art like that before, actually, because the San Francisco Art Institute was very different. And I started to cry a little in the opera, and I just said, "I can't take this," and I left. I was young, very emotional, and ran out and said, "I'm going back to see what that was." And when I looked in the storefront, it was closed. It was night, but in the back were some people, with the lights on, and they were the owner of the gallery and some of the people who worked there or something, and they said, "Come in; you can come in." So I went back there, and they were looking at a TV, and that was the first video I ever saw. They were looking at that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: One of Dennis [Oppenheim] or Vito Acconci's?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it was an artist I'm really fond of, who passed away, from California, and I'm forgetting the name right now. And later—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you remember what was in it? [00:38:00] What you saw in that video?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Ice in [. . . –DB] the mouth, kind of, and melting. [Laughs.] This was very, very, you know, off my map, in a way. She had an unusual grouping of artists, many of whom came from Sonnabend, who were with Sonnabend, and she would work with them in Florence along with the gallery—Schema was the other gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Can you spell that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: S-C-H-E-M-A. Schema was a little bit more known, I think. A little bit bigger. Maria Gloria [of Centro Diffusione Grafica] had a very small gallery, but with exceptional people in it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Her name was what?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Maria Gloria Bicocchi. I think it's B-I-C-O-C-C-H-I, but I could look it up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And Maria Gloria would ask the artists who would come through to do shows—and maybe she and Schema would sometimes take the same artists—that they could do a video. She really liked video. And she had a group of young boys, pretty much, around her from architecture school, and they had like a Portapak and this and that, and they would encourage the artists to do video.

So in the year I was there, people like Acconci came by, Dan Graham, whom I never met when we were there, but met later. Dick Landry came by, Charlemagne Palestine, [00:40:00] Joan Jonas, and others like Chiari, from Italy, and I'd have to think about the others.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's quite an essential group.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And then I got to see firsthand, and because I was young and I was attractive at that point and I had a lot of energy,I think these mainly guy artists loved talking to me. And I got the ability to talk to these people—who I think in New York would not have given me the time of day, to be honest with you. And people like Vito and Dick Landry encouraged me: "Come back to New York; it's very, very active right now."

So at the end of a year in Florence I had to think, Could I do this? This is really interesting to me, but there were no women who were—it was controlled, basically, by the men who were helping her, and I just thought, Maybe I should go back to New York. And I was getting homesick, and then Bill decided maybe for him, too, the school wasn't working out as well as he thought, that we'd come back here. So we came back in around '75.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you still have your job with the Lawrence Halprin firm?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I had left. When I took the courses at the San Francisco Art Institute, there was a decision to be made after the first months: Am I coming back, or am I going to the art school?

LINDA YABLONSKY: So when you came back, where did you live?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I lived here on East 10th Street.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You and Bill got an apartment together?

DARA BIRNBAUM: We got an apartment together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And so did you go ahead and contact any of these artists?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Vito stayed like a friend. Bill—to give him credit, his last name is Menking [00:42:00] and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Menking? How do you spell that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: M-E-N-K-I-N-G. Took me years to be able to say that. And we were not getting along well. We decided to live separately. And after living separately, we were still kind of together, but it was a disaster it the end, in a weird way. And we finally split after being together seven or nine years. I never knew when to call it, because we were fighting so much at the end. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I understand.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Bill started to work. He promised me he would never get another waiter's job in his life—that was one thing, too—and we had no money.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So he was working as a waiter?

DARA BIRNBAUM: He was working as a waiter. So he went into the Spring Street Bar. He wanted to work in the bookshop, this very famous bookshop that was near there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On Spring Street?

DARA BIRNBAUM: On Spring Street.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Spring Street Bookshop.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, it wasn't that; it was someone—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, another one?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was someone. It was a man's name, and it was very well known. I mean, it really had a lot of respect, and Bill was hoping he could work for him. He had written him ahead of time, and he was turned down. And he felt so deflated that he just walked right down the street, went into the Spring Street Bar, because he had a lot of waiter experience and he was very nice looking, and they gave him a job right away. He worked there, and there were artists coming in there a lot—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, there were. Well, artists were living in SoHo, basically the only people living in SoHo other than whatever was left from the Italian/Portuguese community, and that was one of the bars, yeah.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, and so one night, Bill brought home someone [00:44:00] he was working with, or got to be a friend with, and his name was Dick Miller. He was a young artist, and he started to tell me about a group that he belonged to of young artists, and would I be interested in coming to the group? And that group had people that I still know, but many who dropped out, but people who were maybe getting known at the time.

And the goal was to always work out of alternative spaces, or maybe it was because that was all we could do, you know. And I still—like, now I teach with Robin Winters. He was in that group. Julia Heyward was in the group. And what happened is that we had two, slightly older people that would come to meetings, one of whom was Dan Graham and one of whom was Willoughby Sharp.

And yet another story—I worked with Dick Miller to present a work of his, and collaborate with him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On a video?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it was a terrible work and it was—I don't even want to describe it. And it ended up we had an evening at The Kitchen. He used a live animal, which I'm deadly against. I won't use animals in my work, and yet I did it with him. And he had various reactions and things like that, and the group turned to me and said, "You know, we're having a show in a loft, like an alternative space, and if you want to do your own work now, you can do your own work."

So the first work I ever made, I put up in this loft that was owned by Scott Billingsley, [00:46:00] who later became Scott and Beth B.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, the filmmakers.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Exactly. And we were reviewed, actually, in *Artforum*, in this loft.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what did you do?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did something about—it had slides, no video, and audio, and it was supposed to be about the return to New York into this place. So it showed slides of the loft, and then covering them would be my memories of Italy, of having been there. The audio had something to do with Jungian personality types and how people adapt to new places.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The audio was your voice?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was my voice, actually. I narrated it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And when you say "covering," you mean overlapping images?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I shot them superimposed, but they were shot that way, and then through a slide projector—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: —they were projected on the floor and on the wall.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was avant-garde of you.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Vito's girlfriend at the time, Kathy Dillon, said it was a very good work. And yeah, that was the first time. I got a terrible review in *Artforum*. They reviewed us, but *Artforum* picked the picture of my work to be in—

LINDA YABLONSKY: To illustrate?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, to illustrate the show. And the show was given a basically good review, so if you [. . .]read the article quickly—and you see my work, and that kind of thing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was a good start.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And then? So now you're in this community of artists who are experimenting with video and film.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Most of them didn't experiment with video. I [00:48:00] think I just liked what I was seeing through people like Vito, and learning about how to look at television, kind of analyzing it through Dan.

And my mother died, and I got a little bit, not much, of money. To be honest, I got a fur coat and a stole, and I sold them, and I bought classes at Global Village and took video editing classes. And then someone lent me a Portapak, and I did the first works on that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is fascinating. So what was the first couple of works that you made?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I thought they were exercises—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Actually, since we live in a different time, maybe we should explain what a Portapak was. It wasn't a broadcast-television camera, but it was a portable video camera.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, it was a portable video camera, but at that time, it was like a castoff of the industry that artists took up when they could, like Nam Jun Paik. Joan Jonas, I think, could afford one, or something. And this one was lent to me by Alan Sondheim, whom I usually don't mention, but he did lend me the first Portapak.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was Alan Sondheim?

DARA BIRNBAUM: He is an artist, writer, philosopher.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why did he have a Portapak?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't know, [they laugh] but he did, and he was willing to lend it to me, so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Around '75.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, '75. [00:50:00] Portapaks were getting really popular with artists around '75, if I remember correctly

DARA BIRNBAUM: I set it up, and my home was like my studio. Bill had moved out. We had decided to a trial separation. And I think the first works were very much influenced by people like Acconci.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

So can you describe—they were the *Control Piece* you were talking about and—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —*Mirroring*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, *Mirroring*. Mirroring because a lot of the artists I was around were reading Lacan. I was waitressing, and I saved every dime I could to buy the two books by Lacan. Every dime.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you waitressing in an artist hangout also?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Kind of. I think it was a little mixed, but kind of. Downtown and Brooklyn Heights, for a club, like a fashionable club that rich people would go to, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Can you describe *Control Piece*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: So to me, they were exercises. There were six of them. I don't remember them all, but Electronic Arts Intermix, years later, asked if I had early work. These were on open reel [reel-to-reel]. What we had was open reel, half-inch tape, and was there anything to be salvaged? They had gotten some money, and I did give them this. It was the first time I'd seen it in maybe a decade or two. And I still don't know how to describe them.

The big book that I left out here [00:52:00] on my worktable can describe them in six different essays, [00:52:00] but they were for me to wonder about Acconci's position. Many of his tapes were directed toward the viewer as Other, but directed as if they were almost to a female viewer, many times, you know. I wouldn't say *Centers* is directed to a female viewer, but if you put *Seedbed* together with starting to do video works at that time, it, for me, read more like—or for example, taking your penis and tucking it under to see what, supposedly, it was like to be a woman. Or burning the hair off your chest, or something like that. So he would position himself, I thought, in a central position in relation to that camera's eye, and would perform, act out, to the Other, and I said, What would it be like to be a woman doing that?

And the tapes to me are—I don't want to use the word "hysterical," that would be really off, you know—but they are really edgy. Like one of them is going to be in the Met Breuer show coming up, *Delirious*, because it has an edge of almost irrationality. It was like what the feeling was like to be viewed through this device by the Other, and what act or reaction I would have.

And they simply were exercises. One of them was entering and leaving a space, *Bar(red). Mirroring*, I like a lot, was off of the Lacan—starting a focus on the mirror self as real. You don't know that, then walking into the frame, meeting with [00:54:00] the mirrored image. Placing oneself before it, so that you're positioned first in front of the camera, but you're out of focus, so that the real is out of focus. Every time I made a pass, I would, off-screen, just reach out and change the focus more and more to the real, so in the end, the real does take over and is in focus, and the mirror image is out of focus.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. Did Joan Jonas have any influence on you? Because she did work with mirrors a bit, but very differently.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Not really. I started to see Joan's work early on, and I'm very surprised that I seem to go more toward, like I'm saying, Graham or Acconci or Nauman. All men, which is slightly—there was one piece done around that time that's a two-channel work that's now at the Kramlich Collection called *Attack Piece*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I was about to ask if you—go ahead.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And that was within that following year. And Dan Graham, as a friend, had said to me, "I'm going up to Nova Scotia," where a lot of artists from New York went and sometimes taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and all the guys, again, I'm sorry to say, but they were mainly these guy artists around, David Askevold, John Knight from LA—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, Joan went there; Richard Serra went there. Phil Glass went there.

DARA BIRNBAUM: But that wasn't the group that I was—like the group that I met with Dan was off-campus, and David, [00:56:00] John Knight, Ian Murray, who's a Canadian Artist, and we were hanging out basically. I forgot why Dan went up there. I don't even think he was teaching. It was just very beautiful, which it was.

So they were all talking art. Almost like business, art, and I started to make notes in the corner and very naively said to them—Dan had been doing work with, I think, double, like, cameras, or sunrise/sunset. Maybe the single camera, but double projections, and I thought, Wow, what if I take this position centrally, asking people—that I sit in a central position with a still camera, and I give these other people, of which one woman or two women did take part in it, too, a movie camera, a Super 8. And they attacked me. And I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Attacked you by shooting?

DARA BIRNBAUM: With the camera—by shooting, and getting the image—and I tried to fight back, because they

were running around, you know. It was outdoor, kind of a run piece, which sounds like Joan Jonas, doesn't it?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Kind of. [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, so, running toward me, and I'd take stills. Try to capture *them*. So it had to deal with still versus Super 8 kind of thing. And mainly a female position, a central position again. And so that piece was later found by others and then asked could it come out of the closet and be shown.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you didn't show it in those years, in the '70s?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't think so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting. [00:58:00] So you were very much—you performed in these early videos yourself. When did you start to move outside the frame?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, Dan—at that time, Artists Space had artists recommend other artists to show. And they asked Dan Graham, and he said, "Yes, I think this young woman, Dara Birnbaum," you know. So they sent someone over, who—I've forgotten his name—and he looked at the work, and that work was this, what we call now *Chaired Anxieties*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That what?

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Chaired Anxieties*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Chaired*? Oh, that's the title. Okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. Sorry, I thought you had it—but those were those exercises I mentioned. And so he looked at me after he was done looking, and he just said, "Did anything happen to you lately?" That was his only comment. And actually, in one way he was right, because my mother had just died. That did happen. But obviously, he wasn't taking the work.

So I started to work with a woman in the arts whom I met—I forget exactly how we met—who I thought was very bright, who had gone to Cal Arts, came here, and our idea was to try to do separate work, but get our work out together, to form this friendship that could get our work out together. Where to? I'm not sure where we were thinking. And her name is Suzanne Kuffler. She's dropped out of the arts. [01:00:00] That's K-U-F-F-L-E-R.

And the story about Artists Space is that, Artists Space [director] Helene Winer knew Suzanne from California and very much liked her, and asked her to show. And then Suzanne said, "I'll show, but I won't show without my friend. You have to give her a show, too." And it was me, the very person they had rejected. So they had to show me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So Helene was already the director when the curator came and said, "Oh, all right."

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, she had sent her second person in.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so what year was that show?

DARA BIRNBAUM: '77.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what did you show there?

DARA BIRNBAUM: So what happened was, I had this show all of a sudden, and I thought, Well, they had rejected this performative work. What do I show? I mean, I was young; I had just started. Also, I wasn't career oriented, in a way. So I thought, What's the most important thing you can say? And Dan had lent me *Screen Magazine* and other things I was very interested in, and I was reading Christian Metz about film language, and film theory. And I said, You know, it's funny, I'm reading these things that I really care about, but no one is talking about television. At the time they weren't. And I just made that jump. And I said, It has to be something about television, and television language.

And so I showed what was called *Lesson Plans*. And those were all stills taken off TV, of prime-time television that was all crime dramas, very structuralist, and it was all based on reverse-angle shots, because that was the most Western shot I could find, because in countries like China, [01:02:00] Mao was fighting against those reverse-angle shots appearing in films.

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DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, because he thought that it separates, which it does. It realigns you from one to the

other. And so he was very careful in filmmakings that were done, you know, at that time to have the philosophy that the viewer has to follow through with that person [shooting, the cinematographer –DB], and not take an oppositional point of view, which is what the reverse-angle shot is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting because that's a basic tenant of television, really—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —the kind of reverse angle of two—

DARA BIRNBAUM: And so I took five different nights, what was broadcast at prime time, that were all crime dramas, and did classic reverse-angle shots for each. And then because no one ever listens hardly to what's being said, you get the intimation of what's being said, but it goes by so fast. I got a way to [audio-record –DB] the exact—what was being said in the frame that I shot—and some of the things were really unbelievable. So you'd have, for example, two cops in a car looking out the window, and they'd say, "Do you think that's our turkey?" And the other guy would say, "I don't know. I hope it is. I could eat him," or something similar, and it's a black guy they're looking at, you know. As an example.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The way that you edited it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, as the way it was on TV. All I was doing was stopping and selecting, and picking the most dominant reverse-angle shots that I could find. So all it was was slowing down and distilling the essence of what was there, which—there were no home units or home recordings at that time, right? So no one could see your stop-action, or [00:02:00]—and so eventually my work became called, in Holland, *Talking Back to the Media*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So how did you ever—you were photographing the screen? How did you—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Without—you had no ability to stop the—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —image, no. This was so—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, this was live, as it was being broadcast.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, because we didn't have anything [like cable servicing –DB] down here, you know. There was no cable yet, or anything, or recording units. So that was the first show. And that went pretty well.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes! Well, at that point I don't know if you had any conversation with other artists, you know, Cindy Sherman or Robert Longo or Richard Prince or Barbara Kruger, who were all—and Sarah Charlesworth—looking at media for source material.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It gave me these other artists as a family, you know. There were people I knew. Barbara and I, for a period, knew each other. Sherrie Levine and I knew each other. Longo, Cindy Sherman were a little younger, but we knew each other. So I think that I feel that I was like an arm of the Pictures Generation, you know. Someone who became one of my best friends was Jack Goldstein.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Very much a Pictures Generation artist. But he was making films at the time as well as painting and recordings. So did you have conversations about work—did you have some kind of shared dialogue? Shared interest? It sounds like a shared interest. You said you became friends. This was why? [00:04:00]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, he—a lot of people were around The Kitchen—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. And Artists Space too.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And Artists Space too. And when Carlotta Schoolman—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: She was with The Kitchen. She was very active there. And there was Michael Shamberg, who was great, who was around her. He was part of The Kitchen too.

When they saw the show at Artists Space, they asked Suzanne and I would we be interested in doing a show at The Kitchen. And that was so great for us. I did another piece about television, that was about *Laverne & Shirley,* and that one dealt with the two-shot, instead of the reverse-angle shot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another basic trope of television.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, exactly. Especially sitcom, and also the—*Laverne & Shirley* was like two women facing the world together and dealing with the world together, and I thought, That's Suzanne and I, you know, in a way.

So I did that work, and different people came to see it, of which I kept seeing this guy hanging around few times, not zillions, but a few times, and I was looking at him, and to be honest with you, I thought he was attractive. And I didn't understand who it was, and that was Jack.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I need you to be a little more detailed about the *Laverne & Shirley* piece, because it wasn't just that you edited two-shots from [00:06:00] programs, still working live from—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, actually, at that time there was Ted Estabrook, who started what was called Exploring Post #1, and he had a heart of gold. And he was able, through a tuner that he had, to get me different programs directly off-air. I'd say, "Could I have a program from May 20 at 7 p.m. of *Laverne & Shirley*," or whatever it was. And then I finally could get that and go down to work at a film and media art place on Rivington. There was a little place that was funded by, maybe, New York State Council where you could edit, and then finally I could edit.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: So Ted Estabrook got you—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —the footage, and it was on Rivington where I edited.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you did some editing. So you edited this footage in what way? You added some text or —

DARA BIRNBAUM: Open reel. No, it took the language, and what I did was afterwards called the earliest, kind of, deconstruction. I edited the work down to the two-shots, meaning that you ended up with about five minutes instead of 30 minutes, and you only see the two-shots from the show, but you actually can tell the story line simply from the two-shots.

And then in The Kitchen they had another room, and I was allowed to use that room [00:08:00]. I took the sound off—the exact sound that ended up in the edits—and I put them in the other room as if they were, like, a radio play. And then on the screen all you could see are subtitles of what was being said—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: —and you read them, but they're going by so fast, and you can't believe what's being said, you know, like, "Watch your puck!" "Oh, puck you!" You know, things like that. Then I put, next to it, a kinescope, which was the first time I worked with kinescope, taking the video and making it into 16-millimeter film, so it would break that frame of the television. And I made the kinescope three times slower than the video, so what you saw when you came in actually was the video real-time, film in slo-mo, before Godard, and then if you went in the other room, you'd hear the sound like a radio play.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There was no precedent for this, so how did you develop this technique? Do I call it a technique? Or this idea?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You set the precedent. Did Godard see your work?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, but I was jealous because he did the slo-mo film later, and then everyone was so, Oh, oh, oh, and I thought, I did that. I did that, you know. [They laugh.] I loved Godard.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So this is still '77?

DARA BIRNBAUM: '[7]8.

LINDA YABLONSKY: '[7]8. Well that must have gotten people's attention, if not Godard, other people.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, it did get attention. And then hanging out was Jack, either because he was hanging out there or he was interested in that work. [00:10:00] He felt probably it was close to things that interested him, and he came back a few times, and I was hanging out with it more, and we met, and we liked each other. I mean, he was difficult, but we liked each other, and we became very close friends. And he taught me a lot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In what sense?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In the sense of exposing me to works. Maybe he's the person I felt closest to from that group, but I met other people through that group, or were meeting them at The Kitchen anyway; like Eric Bogosian was at The Kitchen at that time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As a curator.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, as a curator. [He also did performances of his own work there. –DB]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now what was he—was he the video curator?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Performance. Yeah, so that was the time, and I think we started to feel closeness, and what I felt very much—and this has to do with me going on in video—was that the people I met, like Jack, like Longo, who I felt came after Jack, in a way, and also learned from him, were dealing with media imagery and this idea of anti-gravitational, which actually started with Nam Jun a little bit, in a different way; he was outside that grouping, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What does that mean, "anti-gravitational"?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, Nam Jun would say, "Look, no gravity anymore," because the image could go upside-down at once. It could be bended and molded, you know, or extracted. It was in its own space, so the dynamics were not grounded as in previous ways. [00:12:00] But I thought, I'm not going to do that. I want to use video *on* video, and that was the most important thing that I could do. And so I didn't want to change mediums. I wanted to use it on itself. And I think that became an important breakthrough.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, so then what happened? [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You knew it at the time. Did you know at the time?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I felt it. I just felt it very strongly, and I then did the work I'm known for, *Wonder Woman*, and —

LINDA YABLONSKY: Its full name is?

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*. It just got mentioned today in the [*Village*] *Voice,* with the *Wonder Woman* feature film coming out, you know, but they mentioned my video.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it's funny. Even though you didn't make that TV show, you own that character now!

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, I know. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Let's go into how that happened and why. I mean, it is extraordinary. We've already talked about some really breakthrough works, and there are many more to come, but you know, how many times have the Rolling Stones had to play *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction*? How many times has your name been linked with this particular work? And how many—it probably has appeared in more exhibitions, I'm guessing, than any other single video from that period. Not just your own. [00:14:00] Why do you think that happened? It's not the best quality. I mean, you had to use what was available at the time.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I mean, there's a whole book that T.J. Demos wrote on *Wonder Woman* for Afterall [Books], that I never finished because he started dealing with Italian theoreticians that I didn't know. I guess it just hit at a heart of the matter to take a superhero—

LINDA YABLONSKY: A female superhero.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Female, that's true. And so I got blessed and hated for it by maybe strong feminists in another direction that felt, "How dare you take an image of woman and do that to her?" And I said, "No, you don't understand. That image is made corporately by men, mainly." The year I made it, Wonder Woman bathing suits for kids were the most popular bathing suits around. I was still going through my vocabulary of television, from reverse-angle to two-shot and then to special effect. And that was special effect.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, so in that clip that you used, in the show—what was the actress's name?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Lynda Carter.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Lynda Carter spins three times in the show, not in the video, and magically—it's, you know, the Superman-going-in-the-phone-booth—Clark Kent emerging as Superman. In this, she just spins around like a genie out of a bottle and becomes Wonder Woman.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, there's a burst of light, and that burst of light is the special effect. That was what a special effect was then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: To hide the edit. Or the costume change.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, exactly, so—and the show made me very angry, actually, because I thought—well, as a kid I'd read the comics or something, and it felt very empowering to think you could have wrist bracelets that could fight off bullets, and a crown you could throw, and a lasso that was magic, and everything else, you know, but I felt life didn't go that way for me and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Nor for anyone. [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Some people out there. And I thought, This is such bullshit, you know, to turn around two and a half times and, with the special effect, to become a super-power woman, when there were a lot of prejudices, and still are, of course, and I wanted to fight back. And I just thought, If I exaggerate her special effect and twists and turns, you're going to begin to see almost a little doll-in-a-jewelry-box kind of turning, turning back and forth, unable to break through her role. That her role is as much entrapment as, you know, being a secretary. And that there's Wonder Woman, and then there's supposedly a real secretary, and there was no place in between, and I thought, That's where most women are living, in that in-between. We don't want to live in the secretary world in that way, in that definition. And we can't live up to the "super" definition, so they've completely obliterated the middle ground.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But this came—what year was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: '78.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, 1978. This is really 10 years into feminist politics and theory, and, I would imagine, you know, imagining yourself with superpowers [00:18:00] was—when women did not have much power at all, until they started to take it, and only got criticized for doing that from men and women. But anyway, the politics of the moment were ripe to receive this work of yours, I think.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I would agree, but it got hit by some feminist groups, you know, as not being correct to take what was considered a pretty woman—I mean, she was—for me it was ridiculous to see a woman dressed—although I read the comics when I was a kid, but not much—in wasp-waist costume, with big boobs, and you know, an eagle-spread kind of thing, in red, white, and blue. In fact, the funny thing is I only had a black-and-white TV, so I only saw part of it, and when I went down to edit, it was the first time I saw the whole outfit was in red, white, and blue, and gold. That knocked me out.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really. Superman was also red, white, and blue. There was yellow also. But it had some kind of nationalistic pride built into it, and she's mostly naked, so it was all about showing off the body, which wasn't particularly—I mean, she had a good body, but it wasn't—it's not like she went to the gym every day. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, it was almost an unrealistic body, in a way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Everything was an exaggeration. And her powers—so anyway, so I dealt with that. But I think you're right. It might be the right time, and I never imagined it going where it went to. I never imagined it [00:20:00]—which I'm glad about—infiltrating other countries. It's been on cable TV, but no one would take it onto real TV because of copyright issues.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, now it's on YouTube. Pirated.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's completely pirated, time and time and time again.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is what you did with the original show! [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: I know. That's okay; I had a nightmare about that, actually. I did. Yeah, so what can you say? People ask, Don't you want the pirated versions taken down? And I don't have any say in it that way, you know. [20:48]

LINDA YABLONSKY: But it's keeping that work alive, in front of an increasingly large audience for whom it still

seems relevant, interestingly enough.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, it's coming back, and that would be the thing to analyze—why is it coming back so strong at this time right now? And look at our politics, same thing. It just, you know, has an absurdist quality to it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what's happening right now?

DARA BIRNBAUM: There's a *Wonder Woman* feature film just released.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, it's a film?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Major motion picture, and that's what it was saying in the *Village Voice*. They just wrote it up, and I think they're putting the film down a little, though I've heard it's very good, and then mention my video as, you know, having broken the code of what she was anyway, years ago, or something like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. So is the new Wonder Woman more self-aware than the original?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't know. I haven't seen it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you ever meet Lynda Carter?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, never.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You're not in this video; it's another breakthrough [00:22:00] in many dimensions. How do you follow up? You're still a young artist. Now people are paying attention in a way they hadn't. [22:12]

DARA BIRNBAUM: I went with *Kiss the Girls*, which is funny because I didn't—I let *Wonder Woman* go out in every way that I could. I put it on cable TV opposite the real *Wonder Woman*. I made it into kinescope and put it into film festivals; like The Kitchen had an avant-garde film festival. I put it the storefront of H Hair Salon de Coiffure, because they had a monitor, and they only owned one tape that they would play for their customers. The monitor was in the window, but it would turn toward the people getting their hair cut, or could turn out, which they never did. And I asked, "Could it turn out to the show window and street?"

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was right here on Prince Street in SoHo. And nobody at that time had monitors and H Hair Salon owned only one tape, which was the Italian version of *Woodstock*; I don't understand why. And when I asked—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So there were video players—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, they had a video player, I guess, yeah. And I asked her if I could show my work there in her window, and could we turn it out to the street, and she said, "What's your work about?" And I didn't know how to explain it really, I just said it was about *Wonder Woman*, and she said, "That's fantastic; I love *Wonder Woman*." So that was the reason. And she said, "I've been told I look like her," and she did. And that was the reason she showed my work *Wonder Woman*.

But I loved this effect of putting it in the street at the time, because people thought it was the real show, but it's apparated, so there's an attract [00:24:00] and a repulsion at the same time, and I thought that was very good. So I know that at the time—I think people like Jenny Holzer, who had become a friend, and Barbara Kruger—there was this—and I'm mentioning women now at least—way of getting the work out through venues. Like with Kruger, it would be all different sizes in all different ways, you know. Like Holzer, it might be on a T-shirt, but it might be in Times Square and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Louise Lawler? Did you know her?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I knew Louise. Not as well. I still know Louise.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because she was also infiltrating various places.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Absolutely. I have a lot of respect for her work.

But what I mean is, for example, Baudrillard wrote the opening catalogue essay for the Mary Boone show with Barbara Kruger. It is really amazing. I don't know how they got him at that time, and he had mentioned in it—and I don't speak French—that he felt the work was as if it were a society that had swallowed its own double to the point that it had to vomit it out again. But he used a French term for "vomited it out again." And that always

stayed with me, because the work was proliferating everywhere, you know. They do pencils for museums; there'd be Holzerized affirmations on it; there'd be stickers in the phone booths that we still had at the time; there'd be T-shirts, you know. There would be [00:26:00]—everywhere it could go.

So I remember Coosje van Bruggen, who became a big supporter of mine. She got me into the first documenta I was in, she and Germano Celant.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was which one?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Eight. No, 7. [*documenta 7*.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: And that was what year?

DARA BIRNBAUM: '82. And so Coosje, who became a very close friend for several years, said to me, "Oh, you think that you can change things, that it makes for new art, that you keep changing the context, you know. As if that's great art. It's not. Make great art." She was pretty tough on us like that. [Laughs.] But it was a time, you know, of changing of context and reinserting the work like *Wonder Woman*. Like where does it go? Does it go in a hair salon? Does it go in an alternative space? Is it at The Kitchen as a film? Is it on TV? It was that time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. And tell me about *Kiss the Girls*.

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Kiss the Girls* is from—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, wait. I'm sorry. Before we leave the subject of—not that we can ever leave the subject—of *Wonder Woman*, your video repeats the same action a number of times, of the spinning and the explosion of light. And this repeated action going over and over and over again became an important part of your work. Am I correct in that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It became a real vocabulary of my work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And it ends with the lyrics [00:28:00] of the song that's playing. Just the text, floating, going up the screen. So can you talk about what went into making those kinds of decisions?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I got to edit—it was hard for me to find editing places, and I think it was Ted Estabrook again, or someone—it might have been from the networks—who snuck the tape out for me; I think that might have happened. Because I started to make friends my age, you know, who were fed up working for the networks, but it was like dealing drugs, you know, to take a tape out. It was illegal. And I think someone took it out for me, and I edited up at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where I was given my first job, by Dan Graham, in 1978.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Teaching?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Teaching.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What were you teaching?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was teaching media. It was the first time they were teaching media.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did that mean then?

DARA BIRNBAUM: A new course is what it meant. [They laugh.] Something new to look at that wasn't being taught yet. So, I mean, I can describe it if you want me to, but Dan did a year for Nova Scotia. He didn't want to be up there a year. They asked him to. And so he divided that year into something like five different people would cover. Michael Asher was one person; Jenny Holzer was another; Martha Rosler—I'm not sure Jenny, actually. I brought Jenny up. Martha Rosler came in, and I came in, and I—they liked me. I had a lot of energy.

And they said, "Would you like to take over next year [00:30:00] and reformulate, or formulate, a media [program] and a guest lecture series that would go with that?" And what I did, I brought in people who were also producers, who were very active with different types of media, not just video. So I brought in Peter Gordon, for example, Amos Poe, and Jenny Holzer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you were there not just for a summer then.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I was there during the year, but the agreement was that I could stitch this class and structure together, and then I would be up there, let's say three weeks, and back up there three weeks, and up there five, et cetera. During that time, I could use the equipment up there after hours, and that's where I edited *Wonder Woman*.

I'm actually not sure if that was already cassette or open reel. Anyway, we had no time-based code, you know, time code, so making seven-frame edits for the explosions, that are like, *pa-pa-pa-PUM*, I almost put my hand through the wall one night. It was so hard to do, and yet I was obsessed to do it. Or getting her just to twist and turn, back and forth and back and forth was hard.

And one night, when I was working, I did all the picture work, and then I thought, It needs something else; it needs [00:32:00] something else, but I don't know what that is. Coming through the radio was the song, "Wonder Woman Disco," by the Wonderland Disco Band. At that time, clubs were doing disco. So I searched all over to get this one record, the only record ever brought out by the Wonderland Disco Band, and it had an A and a B side. The A side was the American version, and the B side was the European version. And I mixed the two and made the soundtrack, and that's the soundtrack to it. And then I did the character-generator down here in New York, but if it says, "I'm your Wonder Woman, I'll take you down," when it goes like, "Ooh-ahh," that's the European version.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see. So that wasn't on the American version.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, that wasn't on the American version.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, interesting.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, like that "I'll make the axis fall," I didn't use that; that was our version. I didn't use our version for that. "Take it back to rule the world," didn't use that, but, "I'll take you down, I'll show you all the power I possess" and "ooh-ahh, make sweet music to you," a lot of that "ooh" and "ahh" was the European version. And I just thought, I've got it. Now I've got it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You did have it, indeed. Wow. All right. And you said it was very difficult to edit those seven frames. How many times does it repeat?

DARA BIRNBAUM: God knows.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the video is how long?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's about six minutes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So it must—it repeats a number of times.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, [00:34:00] I wasn't counting. Wasn't counting. I was just doing it rhythmically.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right, let's move now, move on. Thank you.

Just quickly, since I know we have to stop for today—*Kiss the Girls*. This came from Nova Scotia? Or New York?

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Kiss the Girls* started—the thought of it was New York; the editing of it started in Nova Scotia..

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what's in the—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's *Hollywood Squares*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The *Hollywood Squares*, yeah. It was a great show.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, so I was looking for a game show, exactly. At that time, *Hollywood Squares* was on three times a day on one of the syndicated national channels, and I just thought, That's ridiculous. And I thought, growing up with this song, especially in Berkeley, it was very popular, "Little Houses," or something like that —"Little Boxes," and I forgot who did the song now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was a folk song?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was a folk song.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Malvina Reynolds.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, thank you.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I believe. If I'm not getting her confused with another song at that time, but I think so.

DARA BIRNBAUM: But the stage for *Hollywood Squares,* that kind of knocked me out, this tic-tac-toe board of people who were actors and actresses, who were pretty much, like, your grade-B type team—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, down on their luck.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, exactly. And you'd kind of say, Oh, isn't that so-and-so? but you could hardly name them, except for [00:36:00] George Gobel, and I thought like, Well, all my works are autobiographical in part, and like with any artist, there's a heartbeat that has biographical material that is known. I don't think you can feel work unless it hits you on a very sensitive level. But it has to exceed that. It has to affect the culture as well.

And I was not having an easy time of a love affair that I was in, and the song—I also was looking, one, at game shows, and, two, thinking that, you know, these patterns that are on the show, as rewards—like, if you got an X and an O, and you made the line, they'd start blinking and flashing—and I thought, It's like a disco floor.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What? The *Saturday Night Fever* disco floor? [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. And it was right at the same time discos were popular, so I thought, That's very interesting to me, the television industry and the record industry being so entwined, you know, in the same way almost. And audience appetites were fed in the same way.

So I got the show. And then I looked for hits on the disco floor. If *Hollywood Squares* was the number one game show, showing three times a day, what was number one on the disco floor? So it was [Toto's] "Georgy Porgy Pudding and Pie," "Kiss the girls and make them cry," for a while. That one did go very big. So I took Toto, and Ashford & Simpson's "Found A Cure," and I mixed them all together. [00:38:00] But the true string alongside the two was singing to the craziness that was going on at this time. In fact, it will be in the show *Delirious,* at the Met Breuer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who's the curator of that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Kelly Baum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Kelly Baum.

DARA BIRNBAUM: She's been—they've been on it about three to five years or something. It's influenced by an article that Rosalind Krauss wrote in relation to conceptual and serial imagery, taking a different historical point of view toward it. When I get it, I can send it to you. And anyway, I think they're taking that piece; that's the reason it came up. I think it fits well. It's looking at these women presenting themselves to an audience of millions, you know, and how, when you take your gestures out of context and show them, they are very affected and very exaggerated.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just the women? Because there were men on that show too.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, so the men—just me, something I've done is they all recede. When they're shown, they recede, except for George Gobel, you know, that goes "Georgy Porgy, pudding and pie, kiss the girls, make them cry." But I concentrated on three women that I thought represented different stereotype roles. And when you see them, you see that they're very exaggerated [00:40:00] gestures and just saying, "Hello." Because at the beginning, they're all meant to say hello, and it's quite amazing to see what they go through—their contortions are not slowed down or anything, just taken out of context. And repetition is used to bring it home. So that was *Kiss the Girls*. Originally, it was an installation of two monitors. It was the first video to be shown at PS1.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another precedent-breaking activity.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was the first time they opened a video room under the curation, directorship, of Leandro Katz, I think, working with Alanna [Heiss]. And it was like all video rooms, down the hall, by the bathrooms, you know, something like that.

So I got the first video room, and we opened up on this two-channel video, just in the dark. And what I wanted to do, because it was so down the hall and video was so unknown or purposely under-recognized, you know, is let the sound speak for it first. So there's a heavy soundtrack, also with the disco, like "*tsu-tsu-oh-boh-boh-boh-boh* Georgy Porgy," and I got speakers that are club speakers. I don't know how I got away with that, but I got away with it. And you could hear the soundtrack way down the hall, so you were driven to it by sound. And then you just saw two little twinkling lights in the room that was completely dark.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So just for the record, PS1 was founded by Alanna Heiss, in—I don't know what year—in the '70s, and it was an alternative space. Now it's part of the Museum of Modern Art, but it was [00:42:00] in a former high school in Long Island City—well, it's still in Long Island City, but it used to be a high school. So these halls were—are—it's a very big building. It's a city school, so the halls are really long and—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was long, and we were way at the end. Yes, that was it—but *Kiss the Girls* did very well in a different way. It's one of the favorite tapes I've done, that Benjamin Buchloh likes. It still deals with pop iconography, but let's say *Wonder Woman* is more like going to a disco, and *Kiss the Girls* would be like coming home after the disco and having a bad hangover from it, or something. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you also showed in nightclubs at the time, right?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: People were doing a lot of video in nightclubs, the early music video days, rather than dedicated art spaces. Of course, the people who were going to these clubs were mostly in the art world, artists and filmmakers, don't you think?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They were all downtown clubs. Not all?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No. They weren't. What happened—well, different things happened. For example, in 1980 I think, a woman, Wendy Chambers, who was a musician-artist-performer, put together what was called Early Evening Mudd, and that was at the Mudd Club.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, Mudd with two Ds?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. And they were encouraging. [00:44:00] I don't know how she got that or anything, but we had a floor, and we had monitors at both ends of that floor. We had monitors on one side and the other side, and a bar that you paid for, and it was done earlier than the performances at the Mudd Club would start. But if you paid to get in to see the videos, you were allowed into the club later on. Or later on, also club people were allowed to come up and see it. But for those hours—those pre-, kind of, evening performance hours, we had a grouping of people who were mainly downtown people and who—it was like your own club, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, that was an artist-filmmaker-performance-band club. It was all creative people.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Exactly, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It only later got the tourists. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Right, that was one of my favorites, because we were in a controlled environment where it wasn't collaged with a performance or what was going on. I had also shown at the Roxy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The disco, which was a roller rink, but also a disco.

DARA BIRNBAUM: So the Roxy, yes, but there was another one down here on the East Side. Well, I showed at Palladium. I showed *Wonder Woman* at Palladium for Guerrilla Girl Night.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] It was still on the monitors?

DARA BIRNBAUM: On all the monitors that were coming down—so when it came down, you had about 20 monitors on one screen. There were two screens that came down pneumatically from the ceiling, so we showed it that way. [00:46:00]

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's fabulous. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, it was great.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You couldn't have done that at a gallery.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, never, never. Well, now you can, but one of the places—and I'm forgetting its name, very, very well known also—had what was called an Eidophor screen, which had the biggest image at that time, something like, really, 40 feet long. It was really huge. It went the whole club dance floor, and then they asked me—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not Area?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Not Area. These were more on the East Side—13th—I'm trying to think. But what they did is they asked me and very few other video people who were hot at the time. I went for a test. And then I could see that they were secretly recording, taking my tape off and recording it, you know, that kind of thing. So that went on—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who were the other—I'm sorry. Who were the other videos?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I remember showing with Sanborn for example, John Sanborn. I don't know if he did for that one. But the two of us were kind of known as, like, hot editors, fast-paced. John and Kit Fitzgerald together opened up a video lounge at Danceteria. So that was starting to get more of a mixed crowd [00:48:00], and then another group was up at Peppermint Lounge, and that was more of a mixed crowd.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was still pretty arty. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Danceteria wasn't all arty, that's for sure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, there were a lot of fashion kids there, but we're still talking arts.

DARA BIRNBAUM: God knows who those people were. I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They were easily disposed to new ideas and new media.

DARA BIRNBAUM: When I met Jack Goldstein, I know I was working—I'd do anything I could to keep my art going, and because I had a background in architecture, I did take a job—I made it for about 12 or 14 months—showing apartments to people, and I actually got a real estate license.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. And I just thought it was one of the more deadly things I ever approached, so I didn't even pick up my license. And I just kept showing apartments and making rent, in that way. And I'd call Jack from there and just say, "I'm dying," you know, that kind of thing. But my boss was going to Studio 54 almost every night at the time, and coming in and bragging about it, so already these wealthier, entrepreneurial people had started to go to these clubs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, that's true. Is that how you got this place? When did you move here? We're in SoHo.

DARA BIRNBAUM: About 40 years ago. I got this place because I almost died at the place I was, on the slightly Lower East Side. Someone came in with a gun and tried—the building was artists—three artists' lofts, one on top of the other, all small, 800 square feet, in the edge [00:50:00] of what had been the Jewish machine shop district, into Little Italy. Chinese were taking it over. They wanted us out. They did anything they could do to get us out, and they weren't allowed to.

One of the people made too much money and left right away. The other person, Peter Downsbrough, my friend, had no money and left for the lower Lower East Side and took a chance there, and I was fighting for the building rights to stay there.

It was an empty building, and someone came in on a Sunday with a gun and tried to, you know, God knows what to me, and I got behind a door, my door. I got back up the stairs and into my door and closed it and called, actually, Dan Graham, and our only friends in the world who owned a car happened to be coming right at that minute. And he said, "We'll come right over," and they came and started to scream at the building, "The police are coming, get out, get out!" I was calling the police—I was shaking so much, and the police took their time getting there. If my friends hadn't come, I don't know what would have happened. And when the police went through the building, they just said, "You're fucking nuts to live here."

So it went to court, and what happened in the court was, a lawyer who knew my father said, "Do you understand where your daughter is?" You know, "Can you help her?" And that's the first time he helped me, put money down to get out.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you own this place now?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I own it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was very fortunate, at that time, when things were affordable. This is a conversion from an industrial building.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, this is a conversion.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So it was an early kind of conversion. All right, so, wow, that was frightening!

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was. I couldn't sleep. For months I couldn't sleep. And the funny thing was, then I moved here, and Dan was teasing me for going "fucking West Side," you know, and he and three friends came and tripped over the little steps [00:52:00] at the entrance, and say, "Oh, it was just too much for me—I can't

even stand straight," you know, that kind of thing. The weird thing was, the first day I moved in, someone tried to rob me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Here?

DARA BIRNBAUM: They tried to break in. Yeah, here [laughs]. It was like, just—but they hit the light switch, and something happened—because all the drilling holes were in there. That's how we knew. And they went downstairs and cut a hole in—they drilled through, cut a hole through that wall and took out all the things like TVs—downstairs. They could see the drill holes in my wall, but they hit the electric wires, so I was spared.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's life in New York.

[. . . –DB]

Anyway, you were saying a minute ago that you think there's an autobiographical aspect to all of your work. Did any of this enter into any of the work that you did afterwards?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Do you mean the New York roughness?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, this sense of danger and being threatened? Or escaping with your life?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, well, I think like that if things go tough; that's the rejection I had of *Wonder Woman*, is that you could spin around and not only save yourself, but save mankind. And that it just wasn't that easy, and I had very high hopes when I did environmental design. I was saying to Halprin that, "I'm going to save the Bay, if I have to do it on my own, so you might as well hire me." I was very young, so very naïve and very forward, but I think everything [00:54:00] does get into the work, and just to bring it about in the most linear way, perhaps, is that the work that's up at Marian's right now, like *Psalm 29(30)*, has multiple meanings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You're talking about Marian Goodman's gallery, which has been your gallery for a while now. There's a show there now called—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, *Psalm 29(30)*. And that psalm is a psalm of healing. And the healing is on two levels, because in 2014 I became very ill. And honestly, I didn't know this was going to happen, but there came a point where it went slightly the wrong way, and maybe I wasn't going to make it, you know. So the psalm is actually a psalm of David, and he is actually asking God—if you believe any kind of spiritual thing—for he had been very ill and sick; so there's a direct lineage, but it tries to go beyond that. It tries to be more about healing in general.

It takes the Syrian war that, in 2014 when I was having those operations—you're so interiorized in a hospital, but in the exterior all this madness is going out in the world, that it's very hard to do anything. It's only gotten worse from there. So I'm just saying that each of these things does have a thread somewhere along the line. Maybe it's not as personalized, but in that case, I wanted to allow for the personal.

Or something like *Tiananmen Square*. In that case, it's not that I felt endangered myself, but I sat [00:56:00] here just completely entranced at what the television could and could not deliver about something happening, where we're far from it, you know, and out of control with it, in a way that these historical moments that really affect you. Or that one of the parts of the *Damnation of Faust,* where a man being beaten looks up at the camera, pointing. And he is that person who also said that the whole world is watching; remember the whole world, right?

So these are, to me, the important, quintessential television moments, historically, and if they resonate with me, they can resonate with anything as being as personal as being in an operating room while Syria is going into the beginnings of its heightened civil war. That's all I mean, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, *Damnation of Faust*, we're getting ahead of ourselves; that's much later, so we'll catch up to that later, tomorrow. We're still in the '80s. [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: I know. It's like we used to tease—I used to teach with Benjamin Buchloh in three different places, and we were always friends, but I'd watch him in his classes. He'd have, like, "Art from 1965 to Present Day," supposedly, and they'd barely make it into the '80s. The whole course would go on and on and on.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So how long did you teach in Nova Scotia?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Two years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just the two years. You mentioned SVA before—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, I do teach there now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What are you teaching now?

DARA BIRNBAUM: [Laughs.] [00:58:00] In two different M.F.A. programs. One is Fine Arts, under Mark Tribe, and one is called Art Practice, which is under David Ross, and that's a low- residency program.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. Art Practice.

DARA BIRNBAUM: What is that?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it's what everyone does all day, right?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. That's what David thinks. He named it. I didn't name it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So have you been teaching consistently all this time?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, on and off. On and off. I never took a permanent job, except there were places I'd been, like, three years, or part-time at SVA.

Actually, I started when David asked me to come in at the beginning of his program, and I realize now we're going into maybe our sixth year. That's maybe a long time for me. I taught at Cal Arts as a guest. Benjamin was out there. We were a year out there. I taught in Frankfurt under Kasper Koenig for a year on a special stipend, and also with Peter Weibel, for the Institute of New Media, both for the Städelschule and the Institute of New Media. I taught at Princeton for a year on two fellowships, special fellowships.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you think any work came out of these teaching gigs? Did they interplay, either with other teachers or the students?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, for an example, at Princeton, I got to meet with students who were involved with coordinating what's called the Take Back the Night movement.

I'd always wanted to do a work [01:00:00] there—but immediately after I left, I got footage, through them, of one of the first Take Back the Night marches on campus, in '87, and did a piece called *Canon: Taking to the Street*. And that was through them, and using a lot of their footage.

Or the students from Princeton, they got me into the first symposium—gathering—of students across the country. That was to devise a platform for the upcoming elections. That was Bush in '88, and this was to fight that and develop—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The first George Bush?

DARA BIRNBAUM: —the first—a party line, and got me into the convention that they had, and no other person was allowed to record it, the student convention. And I did a piece from that for *documenta 9*, *Transmission Tower*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What's it called?

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Transmission Tower: Sentinel. Transmission Tower*, colon, *Sentinel*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you show it anywhere else after the documenta?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I showed it in retrospectives I had in Europe. It's a very large piece. It's a little hard to get around. I don't think it came to the U.S.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So I'm getting the impression that most of your exhibitions have been in institutions or alternative spaces, and not so much in galleries. Did you ever stay in touch with the woman in Florence who had that video gallery?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, we're still in touch.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Have you ever [01:02:00] shown anything there?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, she retired from that a long time ago, but she did some incredible work.

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DARA BIRNBAUM: She follows me and my work.

[Side conversation.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, anyway, is it true you haven't shown so much in a dedicated—outside of institutions?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. I could give you galleries.

[Side conversation.] [Tape stops, restarts.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: So the galleries—

DARA BIRNBAUM: I originally came upon video in a gallery. That's the first time I saw it, in Centro Diffusione Grafica, which became known as art/tapes/22, and a lot of very important videos were actually made there, that David Ross actually wrote a book about, but only now are people historically being able to see it. But I was just a kid that hung out. And I saw things that made me think they were a great gallery. I liked them, but talking about, How do we sell this video? You know. And only Castelli/Sonnabend—Castelli, I think—had a videotape collection that they had started.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Keith Sonnier did a lot of their earlier work and video transmission, and Bill Wegman—

DARA BIRNBAUM: But they were a little fed up—who was the woman who was working with him on that collection?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Working with Castelli? I don't know who actually was in charge—

DARA BIRNBAUM: She was always saying, "This isn't doing us any good." [. . . –DB] And so it was, yeah, not good, on and on, but the thing was not—when I started with that alternative group of younger artists, relatively, there was this feeling of almost anti-gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, did that group have a name?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I don't remember a name.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And the truth is, I think it's either two things. I grew up a certain way. I grew up kind of radical-left, you know. And the other thing was, galleries didn't want us.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

DARA BIRNBAUM: At all. So you had both, and I didn't care. I was for what I thought was a more populist medium. I did, by 1980, go with Electronic Arts Intermix.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is a distributor, not an exhibition space.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, they have one now, sort of.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. I mean, that little Dia room where you can have evenings. And went with them, and very few galleries—I never sought a gallery, but a few galleries did ask me if I was interested. So I have had some dealers like Rena Bransten in Chicago—I'm sorry, Rena Bransten is in San Francisco, Rhona Hoffman in Chicago. I was with Paula Cooper for about six years. I was with Leo Koenig for one year, when he was a young kid, starting. I do have a gallery that just was announced in every paper I turned to in the last day that they're going out. Wilkinson Gallery in London. I mean, she'll reopen, and I'll rethink. And also Josh Baer Gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I remember that one. Well, so you have had a number of gallery representations, even though there was, for a very long time, not much of a market for video.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think there are some people who would acquire it privately, but it was mostly institutions who showed it. I don't even know if museums collected video the way they do now. So how did you support yourself while you were doing them—by teaching?

DARA BIRNBAUM: By anything I could do. I mean, I waitressed.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even in the '80s?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, by the '80s, I was teaching. I taught at SVA; I taught at Hunter. But I might have taught for three years, stopped, you know, if something went well. My father paid my medical bills, [laughs] for

example. I realize that now, Wow, that really helped, you know, or your dentist bills. He was very generous that way. Places didn't cost that much. When I started here, maintenance was $184 per month. I regret to tell you what it is now. [They laugh.] The distribution brought in something. The teaching brought in something. Once in a while I would write. I'm writing now, an essay for the book on the Kramlichs' collection and Napa Valley residence.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And they are the early and continuing collectors of video, maybe the leading collectors in the country.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And I think [06:00] Eileen and Michael Cohen, they also collected a lot of early video.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Did they? They didn't collect me, but I think they were friendly toward me. I just saw her again and I didn't realize that. I think, not as much video. There were very few places. There's a new show opening in a week or so on the Sto—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Stoschek Collection.

DARA BIRNBAUM: —Stoschek Collection. Thank you. So I know I'm in that; I'm in the show. So that opens in her collection in Dusseldorf, right. Museums have brought my work. The work—the installations do sell at a pretty reasonable rate.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Are you surprised at the way the audience—the receptivity—of this art form has grown?

And I have an related question, one that I've been bothering myself about for quite a long time because of a problem I had with some early videos—not really experimental, you know, move-your-foot-from-one-side-to-the-other, or Bruce Nauman jumping up and down—that your particular practice actually caused a bit of distress in me. I think because we grow up—or so many of us grew up—watching television, when we see something on a video monitor, we're set up for entertainment, to expect entertainment. Or at the very least, a narrative, which you're not going to get with most artists' videos.

And so, for myself, I had to throw out all of my expectations of what would happen, almost involuntarily, inside me when I looked at a video monitor, and had to accept it as a completely different medium. It is, even though it was appearing on a television monitor. So that was hard. But your work, because it uses this imagery from TV that is both horrifying and entertaining at the same time, it kind of confused all of that. [Laughs.] You couldn't separate it anymore. But I think, not in the case of your work, but in so many others, because—well, in the '80s, music video was still entertaining. It had music you could dance to. How do you distinguish art from entertainment, if you do?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think of entertainment, actually, as having a commercial base that is client-bound, and is in direct proportion with audience, in the sense of one has to capture a certain audience and hold them, or the script is rewritten. And that, just like architecture has a client, so does television have a client. It's an industry.

And when I first went into the arts, I didn't think they were an industry. The truth is, the kind of capitalism that we're involved in, the underbelly of everything is industry. But I still think, as an artist, you have more of a chance. My hope for it was that art could test the First Amendment and hold onto presenting things that could challenge the way the dominant society was looking. Whereas with entertainment, I think you're fulfilling a need, almost like a food product, for an audience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, well put.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Like I have a friend who did video, who we've mentioned, but he thought video was an inadequate entertainment and he went into the Hollywood industry for about 20 years. Now he wants to be back into the arts no matter what, but he says art has to be entertaining. It's like, you know, Marina: "An artist must be beautiful; art must be beautiful." Something like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Marina Abramović.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes!

LINDA YABLONSKY: "Art must be beautiful. Artist must be beautiful."

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah! And not to criticize that piece, but these kind of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I think she was being facetious. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, she was! [Laughs.] Yes, she was, except she was beautiful.

LINDA YABLONSKY: She was making herself bloody—was that the one with the hairbrush?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —until her scalp was raw.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, definitely. But I still see a big difference between entertainment and art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So are you surprised at the way the audience for video art has developed into a market as well as an audience? There is a market now.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, because I think that it's an era where everything is trying to be made into a market, and that has to do with our culture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but we also live in a culture of proliferating digital media that makes use of video. I mean, action, and very, kind of, interpretative action. Not just news video or dramatic television, but Ryan Trecartin—let's take an example of a guy, a young guy, who has made a splash using the medium on the internet, but building elaborate installations and sets to shoot his—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's kind of like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but they're narrative videos, even though it's edited to death. And speeded up.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I think it has a titillation for an audience in a way too. It's allowed to be—you're looking into a different domain. You think it's like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, all fun, and the adult side is, you know, right there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But also, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, since you mentioned it, was also in the '80s.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So there was a moment when it hit television—and a lot of these videos were on TV.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And a lot of artists worked on that [show], I think. On the stage set for it. Ellen and Lynda Kahn went over into the industry, went for that. I mean, to me it's—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But don't you—I mean, '82, MTV came, and I think people got used to seeing, I think, kind of crazy videos that didn't have a narrative. It had music, but it wasn't just the band performing in most of them; there was some kind of other imagery. Michael Jackson took that up another level by the end of the '80s, so it was definitely maturing as a medium, but you were there first.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I was trying to stay up on such things, and was asked by the music industry if I wanted to come in and do some music videos. And when I saw that the formulas they were—for example, I knew two people out of LA, who were out of Cal Arts and I think one other school there, who formulated A-ha's video *(Take Me On) Take On Me*. It's actually quite a brilliant video, and it has a lot of theoretical bases, if you would look at it, but I think the normal audience rated it a top video without any of that. But it has that embedded in it, almost like a code. And the thing was, I was just not going to try to adhere to formulaic things.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even though the very vocabulary you were working with was all about formula.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was, but it was trying to break the syntax. It was trying to reassemble, and it was trying to remain visceral as an attract loop, but also to break codes, so one could also start to see what one called a hidden agenda of what was actually going on. And so that became early appropriation-deconstruction in that way. But I think it's actually very hard. I think my work led to—people have claimed, especially in Britain, that it's led to GIFs, for example. They're everywhere now. That the early works have that patterning of GIFs—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, G-I-F.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, yeah. And I don't know about that—or Scratch, they credited me with, like, Scratch, but it was done from the heart. I think it's actually harder nowadays to make valuable—in the sense of saying something important with video. Even thought it's being more collected.

When I started, the moving image was very restricted in a certain way, and the TV was a box. But the box has exploded, and now you have to deal with that. And the imagery is manifold a gazillion times over. And how does one deal with moving imagery with meaning?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, it's become very diluted as your *Psalm* kind of points to, as far as the Syrian battle imagery, but I'll come back to that later. So how did you finish the '80s then? Very differently than you began.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think I was—successful, you mean, or something?

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, I mean what were you doing at the end of the '80s? Where are you? Are you still in New York? Where are you traveling? [17:39]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh! That's pretty funny. It's like amnesia. I think the '80s for me, at the end, were a kind of—I'm having a hard time [18:00] remembering—I don't think I was as "productive." I think that picked up again into the '90s, with pieces like *Hostage*, that were more directly political. *Tiananmen Square*, 1994.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Hostage* was the Iran hostage crisis?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it was actually a very prime terrorist event from the RAF, Baader-Meinhoff, from 1977, and using that just as a key that terrorism might come here. It was done in the year that the first bombing of the World Trade Center took place.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was '93.

DARA BIRNBAUM: That was '93, and *Hostage* came in '94.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see. *Hostage* used the footage from the '70s?

DARA BIRNBAUM: From the '70s. More like a critical turning point moment of terrorism in Europe in the '70s, when there were a lot of terror cells, but in a different way than what we refer to now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I tend to think and believe and say that the 20th century ended in 1989—

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's interesting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —because almost every government in the world changed that year, for one reason or another, all heads of state, and there was a lot of foreign investment in New York, in particular. Of Japanese buying up property and—

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's true. And even Russians, even at that point.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, the Berlin Wall came down, and the Soviet Union collapsed very shortly afterwards. We got Bill Clinton, and that was a radical shift from the Republican years prior. So [20:00] we'd had to enjoy years of Reagan and Bush. And everything changed then, but it changed again in '89.

But what I meant by the end of the 20th century was because the internet was—I mean, suddenly we had fax machines and ATM machines that didn't exist before. Cell phones were just beginning, but not popular, hardly. But the technology was there. People were acquiring computers at home. We all had video players in our homes. So there were a lot of big shifts worldwide, and basically all the old technology came to a dead stop. It was just before digital really came in, but this was the moment we had to get used to doing things differently.

DARA BIRNBAUM: The first digital lab I worked in was '87. It was the first digital room in New York. That's true.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So how did this affect your working day, or all these changes, or they way you related to the world? The internet was really mid-'90s, late '90s, when people really were using the World Wide Web as a source of information and a way to communicate, but it was starting. So since you were so ahead of your time [laughs], how did that affect you?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think that I never got to evolve in the same way when digital came in. I couldn't keep up with it, actually. And it's not that I don't utilize it, but I work more collaboratively. I have not been an artist that has gone onto the internet, you know. It's a very good question, because when you asked me, I went blank. [22:00]

LINDA YABLONSKY: So in the '90s, you made this *Hostage*, early '90s, and then the *Tiananmen Square* was earlier?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Earlier. It was 1990, after the uprising of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Tiananmen Square was in 1989.

DARA BIRNBAUM: But my piece was from 1989.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but I mean, it was another thing that happened in that year.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, yes, definitely. Definitely. And to me that was, again, a historical moment of television, because one of the elements that I did was to be able to get the—I watched 24 hours a day on cable to get the exact moment CNN and CBS were taken off-air—forced off-air by the Chinese government. So there was no more transmission that was allowed to occur.

And what happened was that students, and others working with them, had gone to fax machines and things like that to get images out. And they were trying to drop Portapaks—smaller Portapaks, little things—in to try to get any information out, but we had a total blockage of imagery. It was the first time there was a forcible stop. It was, to me, one of the critical moments in television history, I think, because CNN—you could see it, the government comes in, the government agents, and CNN starts to push them back saying, "Stop; what are you doing? You're going off record." Push 'em, push 'em. And the harder they pushed them, the more they came at them. And they took them off almost immediately.

Dan Rather was the head of the group for CBS. What Dan Rather did is, he used a very diplomatic way of dealing when they came [24:00], and in a dumb way, he just said, "I'm sorry, I don't understand," because in his earphone, he was getting that there were the first recordings they were getting of bloodshed, because that's what the Chinese government didn't want out, that bloodshed was occurring. And so he held them off by saying, "I don't get it. Wait, please. Could you just re-explain that one more time?" They got through the first images of bloodshed and then were taken off air.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you have all this in your piece?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In the piece, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't know if I've ever seen that piece.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, it's one of the channels that just constantly repeats both of those two. And I did an excerpt of it in print for an art piece for *Esopus*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Esopus*, yeah, very good journal.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it's in there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It sounds like—what is the name of that work?

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, quite descriptive. [Laughs.] I wish people were looking at it right now.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, that work will go to the Dallas Museum of Art, thank God. And it may go to Palais de Tokyo. I think Dallas within the next few months. We have to reconstruct it because both of the editions are bought, so the gallery wants to construct the artist proof, and then it will go to the Dallas Museum of Art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So they're buying it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, but I guess the hope is always that they might buy it. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: So how have your installations changed in the way people experience the videos in a gallery setting [26:00] or in a museum setting? Are they still on monitors on pedestals? Are they on big screens? How do people experience this particular video?

DARA BIRNBAUM: This one is actually—you know, I wasn't thinking of conservation, as most artists weren't, and this one has what I call four "depots," or "down stations." I started trying to hang from ceilings down, as if transmissions brought that way—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like the Palladium.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Just like the Palladium.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Big influence on your career. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: [. . . –DB] I felt it should come down, and not be on the pedestals that were usually there, or hidden in walls with little peepholes or things like that. But the original *Tiananmen Square* was using Sony Watchman, which was a very specific medium—piece of equipment. Like about that big—tiny—and when you look from the side, you couldn't see anything, so you have to really have to confront the image, to see it head

on.

And these Watchmen were in four different places, playing four different stories of Tiananmen Square, and there was a hidden surveillance switcher. So there was another TV on the wall, mounted, a larger TV, and the surveillance switcher was going around the room and taking grabs, like seven- to 11-second grabs of imagery you were watching, and taking and putting it on the big TV, and then constantly re-cutting it. So looking like we're cutting it the way the news does.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is very complex.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It is complex.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Amazing. That's what's going to happen at the Dallas Museum?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. And then I did the *Rio VideoWall* in Atlanta, Georgia. [28:00] That's really complex. That was a huge fortune. It's no longer existent. That was the winner of an international competition. It was the first of its kind in a public space.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was from 1987 to—'89 is when it opened. I worked on it for two years. That was the first time I looked at TVs explode from Palladium, you know, I was affected—you know, beyond the frame. And it was to be a work devised of artwork—"electronic artwork" is how they called it in the competition—to be in the main central space of this new entertainment—"entertainment," they called it that—and a shopping center in a way. But it was a public space, you know, and I wanted to bring something meaningful.

And so what I did was shoot the landscape that was there before they destroyed it. It was Georgia, old Georgia, you know, before they took it out to make the new Arquitectonica building. And having been an architect in environmental design—and so I used a video wall. I brought in the first digital video wall, topping—you're right, Palladium—but using 25 screens for the video wall. It was the first digital wall in the United States, brought in from Germany.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did the idea of the video wall have anything to do with Nam Jun Paik? Because he had these massive piles of TV monitors that set—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, that is true. That is true, and I don't know why I don't feel Paik was so influential on me as on other people. There's a kind of funny—it's only after the fact that I started [30:00] to learn more about him. I have some very favorite Paik pieces and some very unfavorite, you know, kind of Paik pieces. But this wall, you're right, because I remember on Broadway there used to be this bank that had the United States mapping by Paik, actually, in the window for a while.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't remember that.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, so anyway, this wall plays back an A and B roll of the landscape that was originally there, and then it has two interactive elements, that if you come into the plaza from two of the main entries, the wall is made like a light box on its side. And you go against the light box, and there's a camera. So it captures your image, but it puts it into silhouette, because it's totally light, and cuts a hole in the imagery, a keyhole. Up on the main wall comes a keyhole that's in your body shape. But what's brought in through the keyhole is the news of the moment through CNN—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Live?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Live. From their own satellite transmission, pre-edited.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And of course, CNN is based in Atlanta.

DARA BIRNBAUM: In Atlanta. Exactly. So that was a hard project. I got an ulcer from that project.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. I'm sorry.

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's all right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Hopefully, you got paid well for it.

DARA BIRNBAUM: We got paid—I don't think I got paid well, but the project was a $400,000 project.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it was in a very commercial zone, physically.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was. But it was trying to fight what that was by bringing back the natural landscape [32:00] of what had been there—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and what people were doing to it via the newsfeed.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Exactly, you know—what they were trying to escape from by shopping. So it was a good project, and someone is studying it now, who has a Ph.D., down in Atlanta, trying to bring back what it was through a conference and maybe see if something like that be recreated and where and why.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What happened to it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: We had a contract. That took three years to make: What is the art, you know? What is the art? Because I also designed the wall's architecture. How do you interpret—it was miserable working with them [the developers, Ackerman & Co.], and they probably thought it was miserable working with me. They had a clause in it that if they were going to redo the plaza, and if the building was going into bankruptcy and they could redo the plaza to re-engage, you know, re-strengthen what they considered the building, that they could take the wall out if they wanted to. And I wasn't around when that happened, and I didn't want to get in a lawsuit, to be honest.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm surprised no one—no other—well, there are a lot of developers now who are also art collectors.

DARA BIRNBAUM: See, that's what he was. [Charles] Ackerman was an art collector, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, and I'm surprised that no one in, like, Miami or Chicago or San Francisco has asked you to do another project like that, only for now.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I know. Maybe I don't want another ulcer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There is that.

DARA BIRNBAUM: So do you want to stop right there?

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think we can stop for the day. We've covered a lot of ground, and we'll pick up from here tomorrow. Thank you very much.

DARA BIRNBAUM: You're welcome.

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LINDA YABLONSKY: This is Linda LINDA YABLONSKY and I'm interviewing Dara Birnbaum, the groundbreaking, illuminating video artist. We are in her studio home in SoHo, in New York City. It is May 31, 2017. This is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Hello again, Dara.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Hi.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I want to continue our conversation from yesterday, but I need to backtrack a little bit, because I realized there were a few things we didn't talk about from the '80s. I think we were at the end of the '80s going into the '90s yesterday.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: We didn't talk about your videos *Kojak* or—what was the other one called, *General Hospital*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: That was a series I called *Pop-Pop Video*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was *Pop-Pop Video*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was, like, a popular-image video. Actually, it was started from a residency at The Kitchen [NYC]. And so what I did at the very beginning is kind of do A and B lists—that I felt was like a Chinese menu—and the A list was popular TV shows of the time, and the B list were musicians that were around The Kitchen that I thought would work with me.

And [the Kitchen] did have a way to get things off cable [TV], I think, at that time, like 1980, but the cable was so bad that I had to use my body as an antenna. [They laugh.] Yeah, it's like, hold the thing and try to get the programs downloaded, of which one of them was *General Hospital*, or *Kojak*. And I asked some of the [00:02:00]

musicians that I was familiar with and/or knew through The Kitchen whether or not they'd like to take part in this project. And so for example, with *Kojak/Wang*, as it became known, *Pop-Pop Video: Kojak/Wang*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Kojak*, slash, *Wang*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. That was Rhys Chatham who did a guitar trio for it. And the only two that I finally did was [that and] *General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating.* And what I was doing is, like, editing together two different types of TV programming.

So with *General Hospital*, it would be taking something that was the most everyday, like a soap opera, like *General Hospital*, and then putting it against something that is considered extraordinary, or extraordinary on TV, like the Olympics. And I would intercut them. Then I would ask a musician what music would he or she put to this. And, for example, I had [two jazz singers, Dori Levine and Sally Swisher –DB] doing the *General Hospital* one, and again, it used repetition, and this time a lot of intercutting.

Kojak/Wang was taking the *Kojak* TV show versus a Wang [commercial], which at the time was the biggest seller of computers in the world. So it took commercial-TV and then TV-commercial, like that, and intercut them. And that's what that work was.

We had a night at The Kitchen, which I thought was wonderful, where we did live music to repeat edits of the work [00:04:00]. Otherwise it showed in the video viewing room, the final cuts. But I would also experiment with the experimental cuts, I think, in the viewing room, and then they would turn into the final. And now there are pieces that are known that get out on their own, like distributed through Electronic Arts or other distributers.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Your work always seems to be involved with music, rather than dialogue, say, or other kinds of ambient sounds.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did that enter into your method, and what's important to you about the music or the quality of the sound with the image?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I think that there were a number of us that I consider my peers at the time who realized that the potential of video was not only that it was image, because the earliest video was more about almost living with a Portapak, Simone Forti kind of getting up, turning it on when she rose, good morning, goodnight. Things that were not simplistic, but might have been simple like, Joan Jonas's classic *Vertical Roll*. One would say they are not dealing with the audio factors as much, and I think that coming in as a second generation to that, that a number of us were thinking, no, this medium really has audio *and* visual.

And I learned from Godard, a lot. He was a hero to me. And when he, for a while—and I'm not going to remember the year—decided to kind of leave Paris and leave the [00:06:00] industry of film and go back to Switzerland with Anne-Marie Miéville, they opened a studio called—and I'm going to say it incorrectly in French—Sonimage, like "sound and image." And he always utilized sound, you know, and the potential that it had, and I really admired that. [And it also was especially important for the generation that was coming into MTV. –DB]

I did a clip for MTV, for example. I had been asked if I would do a [commercial] music video, you know, for MTV, to which I said no. But I did work with musicians, recorded some who [normally] wouldn't be recorded or who did [smaller] shows of their work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What exactly did you do for MTV?

DARA BIRNBAUM: For MTV, they asked me to do what they called an "Art Break." So you got 30 seconds, and they told you that you had no budget. I always said I never had a budget, but the truth was, it meant you could—at that time they were feeling very important. It was around 1983, you know, and they were really high, and they just said, "Whatever you want to do." They picked six artists, I think. And I was the only one who was kind of a video-artist related, so the budget was—there was no limit to it, but they quickly saw that, as a video person, I could eat up a [larger] budget very quickly.

Richard Tuttle was one of the artists. Jonathan Borofsky. I'm trying to think of another one, but there were about six of us. And Tuttle, I believe, did very slow pans of his work [00:08:00]. So with me, it's that video has a double root, in the sense that it has its medium of video emerging maybe after film, but it has the secondary root of television that we grew up with, and that it has this potency for sound and image.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what exactly did—

DARA BIRNBAUM: So what was the MTV [Art Break]?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

DARA BIRNBAUM: The MTV was—they said, "You can do anything you want," and what I wanted to do was, everybody in the industry was doing Claymation that year [they laugh], certain animation, so I kind of wanted to fight against that, so I said, "I want to go back to cell animation. And I want to use"—you only have 30 seconds—"and I want to use Fleischer," Max Fleischer—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Betty Boop?

DARA BIRNBAUM: —and not Betty Boop, but—yeah, he did Betty Boop, but I liked Koko the Clown, because Koko the Clown always wanted to take the pen away from Fleischer, from the animator, and animate himself. And I thought that was great. And I hated the use of women—the representation of them on MTV. So what happens in the video that I did, very quickly, is that we finally found Fleischer's Koko the Clown in UCLA vaults. They thought it'd be very easy to find. It wasn't, actually.

In this one that I took, the episode, Fleischer draws a mechanical drawing arm, and then Koko wrestles this machine away from him and starts to have the drawing arm draw a woman. So with Koko, he has this machine, [00:10:00] it's a mechanical [arm], and it draws a woman. And we found someone who actually animated for Fleischer's studios in the '40s, and we got to him at Buzzco, at an animation house, and I said, "Can you draw, like, in the actual Fleischer, and the machine draws a woman, and the woman blows Koko a kiss." And instead of blowing him a kiss, we reanimated, and he was blown an MTV logo that knocked him out of frame in the crotch. [They laugh.]

And the ink spilled over—that was there for the drawing machine—and out of this inky, murky pool come bubbles of images of women from MTV, like Whitney Houston. And images that I thought were bad representations of women on there. And we did our own soundtrack to it, and that was it. At the end, after these bubbles, you see an animator, and it's a woman animator at a paint box, and you see her palette, and in her palette is Fleischer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When you say "bad representations of women," what's bad? What do you define as "bad"?

DARA BIRNBAUM: For example, walking legs of a woman, I don't know, with half her body cut off and a "Walk/Do Not Walk" sign on top of it as a special effect utilized on MTV. Or looking ditzy. [Laughs.] You know, like, purposely rather ditzy. Or too glam.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and did you get any feedback after it was shown?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Some people saw it actually in flow. It wasn't in heavy rotation, but [00:12:00] some people saw it. I'm trying to remember. Our producer was Abby Terkuhlian.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Terkuhle.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Terkuhle. Thanks.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I do know him. Now I understand how it happened. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, who did *Beavis and Butt-Head* later on. He was really good with us. And I don't know a lot about the feedback. I show it. It is rented. It gets around. I always say in lectures when I show it that I wanted to try.

Like, for example, my colleague and friend Benjamin Buchloh thought I was crazy to go into MTV. He said, "What are you doing entering that supermarket of imagery?" And I remembered that I said, "I'd rather try, and fail even, but try." And at that time, change is happening in the art world, where, for example, the NEA was coming down a lot on some artists and—Andres Serrano?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, that happened 10 years later.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Later?

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was in the '90s.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, I didn't know that. So whatever I'm thinking of, some start of some feeling of censorship, or "behave," or "be in this box," or whatever it was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Reagan was then president.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Thank you. So it felt more open, actually, to go into experimental pop culture at the moment—it was the beginning of it—and see what one could do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did that have a title?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, *MTV: Art Break*. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, your own video?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think I called it that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know that you had done that. And I don't remember seeing it either. But I'm sorry I didn't. I remember those *Art Breaks*—I remember at least the idea of them. But MTV was—that's when everyone started to get cable. When MTV became a fact of life and in those days it was just music videos, not what it became.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Programming, yeah. Well, USA [network's program] *Night Flight* would show some artist videos, and they had more programming than MTV did, and later on MTV went into it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, they were great. I remember watching some of those, and it was so surprising to see these clearly art videos, or films, or experiments on television, commercial television.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, I think that they showed—for example, *Kojak/Wang* could have ended up one of the nights on *Night Flight*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In 1989, you were included in an exhibition at the Whitney Museum called *Image World*. Do you remember that show?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And thinking back on it now, I mean, I don't think it was very well received at the time, but I am not sure, but I happen to have been looking at the catalogue for that show just yesterday and I happened to think, Wow, there's a lot of great material in this show that at the time maybe was too soon for any kind of historical perspective on what was happening then in moving imagery. It wasn't just moving, but it was a lot.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, but I think there was a lot also from '70s art. I remember Smithson, I think, being in it, or other artists being in it, but there was a lot of media involved.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it was about the arts' relationship to media, to popular commercial media really, and I think that *PM Magazine*—is that what you had in it? [00:16:00]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But do you remember any conversation with other artists or anything surrounding that show? Because it was really the first of its kind, I think.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Right. I don't know why it kind of slipped under the radar in a way, but I know, for me, it typified the kind of hanging that was going on, for whatever reasons, of the Whitney at the time, very, very crowded.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because it was too small. [Laughs.] Or they were too ambitious.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, exactly. And it was very hard—you could hardly tell where one work ended and then the other began. And I think that kind of explosion, like, in showing media needs some breadth. There was no way to kind of take it apart a little bit to examine things in a way that was maybe necessary at that time. It just kind of came at you and all melded into one another. That's a feeling that I had.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you remember seeing anything in that show that surprised you? That you might not have known about prior to it.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Maybe the extent of the Nam June Paik wall, I think.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There was a big wall. We talked about that, I think yesterday.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, that when you came off the elevators on the fourth floor, it was almost a wall of televisions, and although I knew Nam June had entered that territory, being present in a museum with that [large a wall of monitors –DB] kind of knocked me out.

He had a whole crew there, and I remember that at that time it was a little difficult to [00:18:00] maneuver and get a certain number of monitors. Like I had four or five monitors for *PM Magazine*, and that was seen as a hardship, you know, and meanwhile there were about 500 monitors in the Nam June Paik. And I said, "How did you do this?" And he said, "Oh, very good Samsung." At the time I think he was finally bringing in, from Korea, Samsung, with a crew who was wanting to do it because all of us were on Sony at the time. It was very funny. [Laughs.] So he went back to his roots.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Also, I think Samsung at the time was starting to get into sponsoring art exhibitions and importing them, or commissioning artists to do them in Seoul.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Sony was [. . . in Japan and elsewhere. –DB]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Maybe it came later, but I remember talking to other artists who were invited by Samsung to do things in Korea. I may be misremembering.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I know that was a time when artists like Bill Viola were invited by Sony into Japan, and they would give them cameras that weren't even yet on the market. So all of a sudden this kind of quality that we'd never seen before emerged.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Similar to what Polaroid did with Walker Evans, but in a different age—

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —when they gave top-of-the-line cameras to artists, beginning with him, to experiment.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, and they continued through with that through the large format.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, exactly. So corporations are good for something, I guess. [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Ulcers.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so moving into the '90s, seems to me just looking over your CV, [00:20:00] you seem to break out in a big way in European institutions in the '90s. A lot of exhibitions in Europe, all over. Maybe it was the same here, or in other countries? What happened?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I would say that mainly in Europe—I was showing a lot in Europe. At that time I felt that Europe had a richer dialogue in relation to video, in the sense of being able to talk about it as a valid art form and bring history to it, where in the United States we lacked that a little bit.

LINDA YABLONSKY: We were still wrapped up in entertainment, I think, as far as you were talking about, or that I was talking about, yesterday, in terms of when you see a screen and you are ready for, you know, entertainment.

So let's talk about some of these shows. When did you do *Faust*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Damnation of Faust* started in '83 with the first—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, it was the '80s.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Ended in '87.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, all right then, let me, before we jump ahead with the '90s—can you talk about that work first, describe it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, I had been for the first time in a documenta in '82—first time for me—and I was very aware in going there to see people whom I felt were close to me, my peers. I'm thinking of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Sherrie Levine. We were kind of all around each other. And I came back feeling that [00:22:00] maybe that stage of work of direct appropriation was something I'd like to move away from or experiment otherwise. There were a couple things in Europe that I had seen that made me think, What if I did as I did with *Wonder Woman*? Take a kind of mythology of woman. Still utilize that, but actually went out and shot footage, you know, and edited it.

It was the first time that digital editing was available, and I put in a grant to the NEA, because I actually was seeing—I had shown at the Stedelijk the same summer, in '82, and coming up from documenta to the Stedelijk, next door was the van Gogh Museum. And I saw his collection of Japanese prints, and I was very impressed by them. I had not seen those prints and the way framing embodied a different depiction, with different stories going on. I mean, it's typical of a lot of Asian historical work, but to me that was something new.

And I was thinking, you know, digital technology, right now, on television is being utilized to show us—it was the first time you'd seen picture-in-picture easily and effects work that was growing. So I thought, There's got to be a better use for it than the Olympics, which was [00:24:00] using some of the first digital technology by showing, like, diving, and someone diving in a diving championship and his mother in the audience crying at the same time [on screen].

So I was wondering, Could I construct these pictures-in-pictures and tell a story of woman again, mythological, and picked the *Damnation of Faust*, where I felt the woman character, Marguerite, or Gretchen, suffered immeasurably and had a very unfortunate—let's say, her role within it—it had no power to it. So anyway, I went to try to tell this, and I told it in a trilogy, very abstracted, but that was the start of the *Damnation of Faust*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You showed that in Europe?

DARA BIRNBAUM: And actually, the first part of it, which is called, *Evocation*, which was [completed in] 1983, did premiere at film festivals, because at that time film festivals had adjunct—they had just added, like, video sections to them, to major film festivals, like Berlin. And for example, the *Evocation*, the first part, won first prize at the San Sebastian Film Festival. But it also actually premiered at the AFI in Hollywood at the same time.

Every time I did one of the episodes of this trilogy, I tried to do an installation as well, to see the difference of installation and what it could say in relation to a certain part of the single-channel video work I was doing. And when I was cutting [00:26:00] the single-channel video, which was done through the Standby Program, which saved the lives, I think, [00:26:00] of many, many video artists at that time—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was that—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Standby was developed by a few people, one of whom was Rick Feist. He was someone who proposed to one of the post-production houses here, whose name I'm forgetting [Matrix], to see if they would offer time at night, downtime, at much-reduced costs to artists, and run a program that way, but you were always on a standby basis. So you could be kicked out by a commercial client, et cetera. At that time, we paid about $100 per hour for editing, but the going rate for a commercial client was about $1,000 an hour.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And that saved that whole period of video-making—Juan Downey, Gary Hill, like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You know, listening to you talk about all of this, it strikes me that—maybe it's not true, but it feels like that would never happen now. That this freedom to experiment with the cooperation of commercial entities, television or other electronics corporations, or banks or whatever, even those today that support exhibitions and sometimes commission artists for their corporate headquarters or something, but there's very little risk-taking in this way [00:28:00], even though we have—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's an attitude.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —hundreds of channels.

DARA BIRNBAUM: What Rick did—it's a funny story, to be honest. And it's the truthful story. I don't know how much he wants it known, but he had been working in Germany. He came back—originally, he graduated Princeton with someone by the name of Alex Roshuk, I think, and the two of them started Standby, perhaps with one or two other people.

Rick actually did not like working in the commercial industry here—compared to Germany—and felt it was a lot less experimental. Certainly by that time, in Germany and in other countries, you had, like, fourth channels, like in Britain, or ZDF in Germany. And they were sponsoring [artists], for example, Belgian TV—the French-Belgian TV sponsored Robert Ashley. So you had that going on. [Rick] came back and was very disappointed and frustrated by the commercial clients he had. And he was looking—I hope he doesn't mind me saying this, and if he remembers it—for a way to get fired. So he tried to come up with what he thought was the most ridiculous plan possible and present it to these people at the commercial house that he was working at.

And he laid it out for them. He said, "What I'll do is, you keep the house going at night anyway with an engineer because all the equipment has to stay up and running. Let's get artists in at a reduced rate. We'll pay off your electric bills, at least. You won't have [to do] anything, and one or two of us [00:30:00] will volunteer, editing." They didn't turn it down. They said, "That's a brilliant idea," but they gave him double shifts. So he almost killed himself getting these wondrous videotapes out during that time period. He was a brilliant editor.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When you bring artists into a situation like that and they're experimenting, that's a form of research that can be exploited, or developed, later into something else, which is how everything develops. So

it's to their advantage to spend money on research and development, which this is. But it doesn't happen now.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, but the Standby Program is still existent. I don't know who is using it. Years ago I gave up on it, because I felt that they were getting in second- and third-tier editors, and I needed better editing collaboration, but they are still existent. But there are places that at that time surfaced. Like at that time PBS had an experimental lab that supported, early on, people like Nam June.

Even Electronic Arts Intermix, through Howard Wise, kept an editing studio that at that time was somewhat up to date. And artists could go in at a very nominal fee and work with decent editors. So for example, *Fire!/Hendrix,* and *Early Evening Mudd*—out of that I did two video works [or more]. That was all produced up in that small studio out of Electronic Arts.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Fire!/Hendrix* was the title?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, *Fire*, exclamation point, slash, *Hendrix*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As in Jimi?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. So what happened is [00:32:00] that, actually, during those years, Electronic Arts had a director, Eric Trigg—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Trigg?

DARA BIRNBAUM: T-R-I-G-G. And Eric Trigg came from commercial TV and things like *Night Flight*. He was active in getting some of that artwork on there, and he believed that we, as video artists, should enter into what might be considered entertainment. He got a gig for six of us that was Jimi Hendrix songs that had never been released in the mix that they were in, that his father somehow held onto. I took the song "Fire." And [I was] allowed to experiment with that. And that was presented at the American Film Institute, again in LA.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's cool. And what was the name of the other one you mentioned?

DARA BIRNBAUM: The other one was actually recording—oh, it was called *New Music Shorts*. And that was two different recordings, one from the Mudd Club, from Jules Baptiste and someone who he was working with, whose name, unfortunately, I will forget. And they were called Radio Fire Fight. Just a short kind of clip of what they had been doing that I shot. And then the other was Glenn Branca at Performing Garage for *Symphony No. 1*, again a very short clip and experimenting, at my end, on it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So now you're shooting your own footage. [00:34:00] What were you shooting with?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, I did have a camera that I got.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What kind of camera?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was a single-tube. I didn't have money for what was a three-tube camera. It sufficed, and I called it "Sweet Dixie." [They laugh.] You'd think I'd remember the numbers. It was something like a Sony 1600. I loved that camera.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did Sony give it to you?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I bought it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is actually a big shift in your work, from appropriating, or pirating, images to shooting your own.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go back to appropriation after that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did, depending on the project, or like this current project that's up at Marian Goodman's; *Psalm 29(30)* is half appropriation and half shot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's very interesting. We'll get to that in a little while.

Well, I get the sense now that there's this constant forward motion in your work that sometimes, but isn't always, dependent on changes in technology. It's more ideas and concepts that are driving you.

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's true. But I think that ability to have a digital editing room did change me, and there was one writing by Jean-Paul Fargier—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who's that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Jean-Paul F-A-R-G-I-E-R, who used to write for *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, and he wrote on *Damnation of Faust,* and he wrote it almost from a cinemagraphic point of view. He said what intrigued him is that usually, in cinema, a normal narrative, conventionalized narrative, is that someone would be on screen and call for someone off screen to enter. And with mine, due to the digital editing, I did this picture-in-picture, so what's on screen and what would have been off screen are brought together for the viewer, as an example. So in that way I was looking at what this new technology could bring, in representation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you know at the time Charles Atlas, who was working closely with Merce Cunningham?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I knew Charles, because when I came to New York, he and Jasper Johns were incredibly kind to me, and for some reason reached out and asked, very early on, if I wanted to utilize[their] equipment that I think Jasper Johns had gotten. And they would allow me to use it. And the truth is, I didn't take them up on it, like an idiot. I didn't know what I would do with it. I was very self-taught, basically.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So was Charlie.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Is Charlie? Yeah? And during the years I've kind of known Charlie [00:38:00] and got to know his work probably best when he started breaking from Cunningham and going into—I want to say Mark—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mark?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Like [. . . *Hail the New Puritan*, 1985. –DB]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, Michael Clark. Sorry.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Michael Clark.

LINDA YABLONSKY: He's a friend of mine. I should know—

DARA BIRNBAUM: You know that amazed me, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I thought of him because he was, you know, constantly experimenting, partly inspired by Merce. He was just constantly like, Let's try this, let's try that, in his choreography, but particularly in the video, which appeared in the performances. They weren't documentations. And that was happening at the same time, in the '70s, '80s, into the '90s, when you were working also.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so what new came in the '90s in New York? Where did you go from where you were?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I went—1990 was *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, and *Hostage*, which we talked about yesterday.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, and then also *documenta 9* commissioned me to do a work, and that work was *Transmission Tower: Sentinel*. So that would be an example of combining newer technology with brilliant editors, collaborators, with the subject [00:40:00] matter, which in part was shot by me and in part was appropriated. So you have a real admixture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what was—you seem to have a number of titles that are two titles with a slash.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I think starting—like *Wonder Woman*. Technology transformation is what I was talking about in *Wonder Woman*, so I can't just appropriate it and call it the same thing, I guess, like that. Or maybe I just like colons.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is this a colon or a slash? *Transmission Tower*—

DARA BIRNBAUM: *Transmission Tower,* colon, *Sentinel*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so what was that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: That was a difficult piece. It consisted of eight monitors in [the configuration of] a linear

video wall, and it was commissioned through Jan Hoet, through documenta 9. It consisted of three sets of images. I did it because the Gulf War was starting at that time, starting off. I couldn't confront utilizing images [directly] from the Gulf War. I couldn't face it at all, but I wanted to make a statement that I felt was pertinent to our times.

I think I told you that I was asked by students—I wasn't asked; I was given permission by students at Princeton when I taught there to go to this student convention, which was the first convention in 24 or 28 years to try to develop a leftist kind of platform, going toward the election with George [H. W.] Bush. I recorded in part, during [00:42:00] that, Allen Ginsberg, who was there to open the session, the three or four days, and he recited several poems, of which half of the group—it was a cross-country [representation of students]—loved it. The other half thought, Let's get down to business; this is crazy, having this older man reading poetry. Well, that's the truth. And I recorded one of the poems; I recorded him reciting "Hum-Bom!"

LINDA YABLONSKY: How do you spell that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: H-U-M B-O-M. And it has some kind of umlaut or something going somewhere. He wrote that poem originally against the war in Vietnam. And what I did was we called him and asked if I could have permission to use that footage that I had taken of him for this piece in documenta 9. And I told him what the reason was, and he said, "That's amazing; I just took out that poem to rewrite it in relation to the Gulf War." So he said, "By all means, use it." So it goes like, "Hum bom! / Who do we bomb? / Why do we bomb? / We bomb who? / We bomb you! [Hum Bom! / Whom bomb? / We bomb'd them! / Whom bomb? / We bomb'd them! / Whom bomb? / . . . We bomb you! / . . .].

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, there's another shift; now you're asking permission to use—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, yes! [They laugh.] But I felt so honored by him—that is a shift. [They laugh.] And I devised this tower that was actually made from transmission tower pieces from Peoria, Illinois. I don't know. And the tower would go up. It was in the Fridericianum [Museum, Kassel, Germany], from the floor to the ceiling, 23 feet. We brought the tower pieces from Peoria [Illinois]. [00:44:00]

So it was a tower that sends out signals, radio usually, you know, and television, and strung along the tower, eight monitors going down, as a linear video wall. And they were in the curve that was graphically the curve of the most common bomb we were dropping during the Gulf War. And the other images were that, as Ginsburg would say, "Hum bom! / Who do we bomb?" rhythmically, he would come down the tower.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The sound?

DARA BIRNBAUM: The sound and the image. The image would pop on and go across these screens, floating down the tower. It was a brilliant editor [whom I was working with. –DB].

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's a brilliant idea.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, thank you. So Peter Eggers was the editor on it, E-G-G-E-R-S. And coming up the tower, against [the other falling images, were] green images for God knows what reason, but green, almost electric green, of students from the convention and statements they were making. And so they would kind of rise up and leave behind the statements they were making. As this was going on, there was a third set of images. The third set was George Bush, just as a small insert. And he would slide down the tower as this insert, reciting his "Thousand Points of Light" speech. So that's basically what it was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is there any documentation of this in action?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I have very, very bad documentation of it, because [00:46:00] the way we tried to document it—while actually, I could have recorded it at the time. And this was done up at PastPerfect, which was a great editing house, and Dean Winkler, who worked with a lot of artists, he let me in there to edit at cheaper rates. We did a composite screen of the eight monitors on one screen, but at that time, [analogue] video was not strong enough, so it's a very mushy-looking picture that shows what it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And then which documenta was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Nine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I meant, which year?

DARA BIRNBAUM: 1992.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And is that the only place that you had that work, or did you do it somewhere else?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, no. It's a hard piece to put up, and it came to be in the retrospectives I had at S.M.A.K. in Ghent and at the Serralves in Porto [Portugal]. And it is owned by the Serralves Museum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And have they exhibited it at any other time?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't know. I honestly don't know. I haven't asked.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting. They bought the piece. So that's—it's unique. That's the only one around?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It comes in an edition of three, but we have not sold or made—nobody wants to handle it, hardly. They all go after it, but it's a little tough [to work with. It's very complex. –DB]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so that was '92.

DARA BIRNBAUM: '94 was *Hostage*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And then Clinton got elected.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I didn't vote for him. I did a write-in. [Laughs.] [00:48:00]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I guess I should ask you who you wrote in.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I dare to think—more left than Clinton.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In any case, so that was '92. And '93 was the first attempt to bring down the World Trade Center, which we talked a little bit about. That was when *Hostage* came about. Can you remind me the name of the man whose murder—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Hanns Martin Schleyer. S-C-H-L-E-Y-E-R.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see; if your work prior to this had a certain feminist cast to it, this is really much more political.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So did something happen in you to change the tenor of your work?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think it was the tenor of the times that I was reacting to. I felt like I had grown up in Berkeley—I had moved there; I was there from '69 to '74. It was a hotbed of political activity.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But I mean, women still had trouble being fairly represented in the '90s, so that issue hadn't gone away really.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I remember—I don't think he'll remember or if he'll like me saying it, but I was very close to Hans-Ulrich Obrist and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —who is now the [artistic] director at the Serpentine Galleries in London.

DARA BIRNBAUM: We were close friends for a couple of years. [00:50:00] And I liked that I met him when he was very young.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was going to say, he must have been much younger.

DARA BIRNBAUM: He was very, very young when I met him, because Kasper Koenig was doing a book project around 1990, I think called— *Year Book* in English—and sent Hans-Ulrich to the United States to talk with different artists to be in it. When we met, we just clicked. And we stayed very, very close friends. So we would —he would tease me a lot, sometimes.

And at the documenta, 9 I believe, Ute Meta Bauer, who was a close friend of his, wanted for women to kind of protest and have their own show because there weren't enough [women artists] in documenta. And I know there was a point that Hans [Ulrich] Obrist said, "You should drop out because it's not properly represented, you know, the women in that, and join with Ute." And I just said, "No, I'm going to hold my position, and I think it's important." And he said, "Do you know how many women are represented in *documenta 9*? " I think it was four percent. So he said, "Well how could you?" And I said, "Well, I was in *documenta 7,* and it was two percent."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, you, in juxtaposition with what seemed like hundreds of artists. It may not be hundreds, but it feels like it.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And my numbers may be a little off, but not by much. [Laughs.]

But I'm trying to now think about what did I do going toward the mid- to the end of the '90s. And that's problematic for me. [00:52:00]

I know in '95, I had a fairly large retrospective at the Kunsthalle [Wien] in Vienna. They commissioned two works, in addition to everything we put up. And what I did is—they were at that time [at the] Karlsplatz, in this huge container that was meant to be a temporary museum but lasted quite a long time. It was huge, like a football stadium. And I took out all the partitions and just made it one big open space, almost like an exposition, with—all the work I had done to date was there, [and in addition] they had enough money to commission two works, and one was *Erwartung*—E-R-W-A-R-T-U-N-G—that actually officially has a slash—slash, *Expectancy* [*Erwartung*/*Expectancy*].

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is that the translation?

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's the English, yes. That's the translation. That was based on the opera by Schoenberg, and one reason it interests me so much is it's one of the only operas I know of that had a woman who wrote the libretto.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really? Who was that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: And that was Marie Pappenheim. P-A-P-P-E-N-H-E-I-M. Pappenheim had been around the circle of Freud, and Schoenberg actually reached out for her. And I felt as [00:54:00] he was changing music—experimenting with it in fragmentation; like a fragmentation of the original scales had been and going atonal—that Pappenheim was looking at what would be the unconscious for the first time.

Erwartung is the story of a woman who was lost. It's a one-act opera that has only one character, who is a woman. And she is lost, perhaps in a forest, and looking for her lover, who either she killed or has died. And she's constantly asking for things to be brought to light, or to see light, because she's in darkness. And when she asks for light, it's like, "Oh, if only the moon." And then the moon would be there, but then it would turn blood red. It was that period of time. And she keeps asking, "If only the light would come." But then, of course, when the light comes, which it does, everything dissolves, because it's really been in her subconscious. So her love, whether or not he was killed, the lover, is the whole, the feelings, the sentiments, everything comes to light and disappears, and can no longer exist in the light. So I was really attracted to this.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Great material.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, and I took the [exterior] side of the museum—because all the guys, to be honest, were able to use the long side of the museum [00:56:00] to do paintings at that time; like Douglas Gordon I remember being one. And I took the short side of the museum and made an inkjet [print] as if it were a large painting made on canvas—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Douglas Gordon made paintings?

DARA BIRNBAUM: He did a kind of conceptual work that was like a painted graphic image.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, so he's—yeah, he didn't make paintings, you know, per se, but unfortunately, I remember his name and not others' names right now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, he's done more work in film and video than paintings.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, he has, but this was expressed, I think, as a conceptual move to—I forget actually, what it is. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you took the short side.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I took the short side, and I took a sketch by Schoenberg for [the stage set of this] opera, and I reproduced it very large. [The space is] still very, very large; even on the short side it would be like 30 by 60 feet or something. And we used theatrical PANI slides and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's like slides, but very large-format, for theater purposes, and put an outdoor projector and a timer. And what you would see [outside] is Schoenberg's—during the day—Schoenberg's sketch—because, of course, Vienna—Schoenberg's sketch for his own opera. When the light would go down, there was an automatic

trigger to turn the projector on. And the projector would bring out the woman.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And she was cast against this [00:58:00] backdrop, and kind of looks over the backdrop, along with the words of Pappenheim I excerpted, reemerged.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was the image of the woman?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was just posing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But who was the woman? [. . .] An actress?

DARA BIRNBAUM: An actress. She was—acted like an actress. [Laughs.] Yes. She wasn't an official actress, but acted out 17 tableaux that each dissolved into one another and told the story. Then when the day came, like the light, she disappears.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was the sound?

DARA BIRNBAUM: There wasn't any sound.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It wasn't the opera?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No. Years later—

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is interesting, because we just talked about how you always use sound—

DARA BIRNBAUM: I know, but it's very hard to do sound when you're in an [outdoor] urban space.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because of the outside noise, you mean?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was a traffic circle. It was in Karlsplatz, so cars could see it, and people walking by from the university could see it. It was open-air.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When you said "container," I was thinking of a closed space.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, all the [retrospective] work was inside, but this commissioned piece was outside. On the outside, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay. I get it.

DARA BIRNBAUM: But years later, in 2000, I was in a show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and was showing *Tiananmen Square,* because it was—the Kramlich Collection was on view for the first time. And Marian Goodman was out there with her artists. There were about five of her artists in the show, and I did not have gallery representation right at [01:00:00] that moment. And she saw that the work was being paid attention to, and it also was the first video work, installation work, that the Kramlichs bought, and they mentioned that at the large opening and things like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Tiananmen Square* was the first?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, they bought a piece by Fischli/Weiss that was a projected work a few years ahead of that, and around '87, '88, something like that, I don't remember.

And so Dick Kramlich announced this story—and I think Marian's artists were saying to her, "She's a very good artist," and Marian liked it. So she came over to me, because I would never go to Marian, although I admired her forever, and said, "Would you like to show your films in my gallery?" And I thought, I don't care if she's calling them films, you know? And I said, "Yes, it would be an honor to show with you." But it was a test to show, you know what I mean?

LINDA YABLONSKY: When was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: That was 2000.

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2000. Marian Goodman is, at least today, just for the record, a towering figure among art dealers. One of the best in the world and most rigorous, who's close to 90 and still going strong. And has always represented a number of video artists. Not always, but certainly over the last 20 years or so.

So you really don't remember what happened between 1995 and 2000?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think I got knocked out by the retrospective. Actually, I did a [01:02:00] piece based on music alone, on Bruckner—

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DARA BIRNBAUM: —and that was a sound-only work. And that was two different interpretations of Bruckner's *Symphony No.5* in B-Dur, D-U-R. That actually was started for the cafeteria of the Kunsthalle, where if you sat on one side, you'd hear one version, and if you sat on the other side, you'd hear another version. The reason this is important to have excerpted aspects of the Bruckner symphony is that it was Hitler's favorite symphony. And it was not allowed to be played for 26 years in the United States, so I thought that it was important to reengage it, and got somebody who immaculately edited the two versions, one against the other.

I also did another sound work with Stephen Vitiello for Swiss radio, and that was, again, about the bombing of the Gulf by the U.S. Of the bombing of Baghdad, of Iraq.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The second one?

DARA BIRNBAUM: The first bombing. When was that? The first bombing?

LINDA YABLONSKY: You mean the first George Bush's Gulf War? Or the second?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's around that time when it was announced on radio, live bombing. It was the first time we announced live when we were bombing a place. So I took this off-air, appropriated, what the newscasters were saying as they were listening to the bombs drop live, and then Stephen did audio tracks [00:02:00] for that. And that was put onto Swiss radio, onto what was called "soft news"; it became an interrupter. So I did do that. And I'm having a hard time remembering another big project.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see here that the piece that Marian saw in San Francisco she showed at her gallery in Paris, not in New York, in 2001.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, actually what she showed was *Erwartung*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, that's what I'm talking about.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, but what she did is she allowed me to transform it into an interior piece.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right. Yes, in the gallery.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And so what in the gallery you would see is—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That one isn't very big, the Paris space.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, no, but it went across the whole space, and it became Plexiglas panels that used a Duratrans [image of Schoenberg's drawing for his stage set, –DB], and that was like a screen, a projection screen, that was like the sketch by Schoenberg, the same thing. And what would happen is that there would be a light against this, and all you'd see is the Schoenberg [sketch]. Then it would go dark, and the woman would be projected onto this. Because of the Plexi, and the way that the projection was, you saw her go onto the Plexi, onto his stage set, but the light also went through and onto the back wall, so the back wall meshed both his image and her together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And it also bounced off the Plexi and created a forest of images of her throughout the gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And it was a time that I dealt with sound [00:04:00] and got a DJ and musician Sean McBride, who calls himself something else now, but was Sean McBride, and asked him to take what most made Schoenberg Schoenberg at that moment in *Erwartung*. And we took just selects, and we mixed a whole new electronic track to it, and it was like a seven- to 11-minute track of sound for that piece.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Amazing. Sounds amazing how you transformed the first installation into this whole other production.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I didn't want her to show my films. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: What do you mean?

DARA BIRNBAUM: The offer was to show my films, but I thought, Boy if I could transform that into, you know, an interior piece, what would that be? And that was exciting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm thinking back to some of the other installations you described yesterday and today. They're all pretty inventive in the use of the space and sound and walls of different materials. You also have made work—I mean, we're sitting here with a pile of books you've written, some for exhibitions and some as books—so you've worked in printing, publishing. But I would like to talk to you about the *Tapestry* piece.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Nobody talks to me about *Tapestry*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't know why.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is the name of that show? [00:06:00]

DARA BIRNBAUM: [The work?] It has a colon somewhere. [Laughs.] One second. I think it's *Tapestry for Donna: Elegy*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you made this work when?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, around 2006 [2005].

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2006. So we have this big hole to fill.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I know! I know, well, it could be—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you teaching?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I probably was teaching. That's not an excuse.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, no, but it can be time-consuming.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I don't think I've ever been a big producer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It seems like you've done a lot.

DARA BIRNBAUM: We'll have to look up, like, a '95, '96—or try to remember, but it might have been that I just went under, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm looking—well, I see that there are lots of retrospectives.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was presenting a lot of the work over again. That takes a lot of time. Upgrading, updating them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Losing Paula Cooper as a gallery—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you were showing with Paula Cooper?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, for about six years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When did that happen?

DARA BIRNBAUM: '96, right after the end of my retrospective in Vienna.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So Paula Cooper had been showing your work in New York in the early—in the first half of the '90s, or when did you start with her gallery?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was there at least five years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So in the '90s. [00:08:00] And that just didn't work out after several years?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It didn't. She was going to move to Chelsea.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, that's when she moved. She did change her gallery at that point.

DARA BIRNBAUM: She let go of a lot of people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, nearly everybody.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was a very hard time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And she's one of the other towering figures among art dealers. Certainly pioneering, I guess she was the first.

So I think this is important to note, because this is a big part of the work of an artist, when you're talking about all these years of reconfiguring or keeping, conserving, maintaining the work, getting it out there. I'm looking at the TV again from the Goodman Gallery, and not only did you have solo retrospectives all over, mostly Europe, but were in, every year in the '90s, in group exhibitions at various institutions and galleries in America and Europe. So, yes, I can imagine that this would keep you pretty busy, and this is almost the grunt work of an artist.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, also especially a media artist, I think, where things constantly have to be updated and upgraded and made sure they work or not work. I remember during that time period, about 1999, showing with Leo Koenig for about a year. That didn't work out either. I think he was just a little too young at the time to handle the kind of work that I had. We did do, brought back a work called *(A)Drift of Politics,* and that—

LINDA YABLONSKY: *(A) Drift of Politics*? [00:10:00]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And it has a colon. It's *A*, in parentheses, *Drift of Politics*: *Two Women Are Active in a Space*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And that's the work you made for Leo's gallery?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I was originally showing it at The Kitchen, and he brought it back, and we orchestrated it for [his] space in a different way, the same material.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what was this?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It took [footage] from the show *Laverne & Shirley*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, this was the same—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was a two-shot. And that sold almost immediately to—maybe it doesn't matter—a very famous French collector who then brought his collection to Venice, who—

LINDA YABLONSKY: François Pinault.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, thank you.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Good for him.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, I don't know if they've been showing it, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, interesting. So you're talking about *(A)Drift of Politics*, not the original with *Laverne & Shirley*.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. But maybe all these shows, maybe they did keep me busy too. I pay a lot of attention—I thought, As long as I'm alive, I'd like to recognize the architecture of the space, readapt the installations toward that.

I remember doing that for a show at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, when we built a huge wall to house a [00:12:00] work called *Will-O'-the-Wisp,* and that was, as I said, as I was doing *Damnation of Faust*. Each time I did a segment of the single-channel work, I would do an installation work. So that was from the second part of the *Damnation of Faust*, *Will-O'-the-Wisp*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, we didn't talk about each part, come to think about it. So this is the second part? And that was only at Castello di Rivoli?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, that showed at the Carnegie International. I'd have to look up which one.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How many Carnegie Internationals have you done?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Only one.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Only that one.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, I think this was in 1985, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right, you made *Damnation of Faust* in the ’80s.

DARA BIRNBAUM: But what I’m saying is that maybe I showed in Turino later, and then that had to be reconstructed and orchestrated and things like that.

I think that video artists, many stayed with single-channel. Some who did go into installation utilized different means of showing it. There were very conventionalized means of showing it, like on pedestals, or as I said, on walls, et cetera. But for me, I felt that it has to approach a more sculptural object or sense of being, and that it also needs to, while I’m alive, recognize the space that it’s in.

So for example, at Castello di Rivoli we actually built this huge wall to put a very large photographic image of a woman. And there’s three videotapes playing within that, so it’s a little still like poking through the wall, but the photograph is blown up to about 23 feet long, about 16 feet high, and [00:14:00] contoured the edge of the wall the way the details of the ceiling and the room where it was being positioned—they brought in the painters who did the renovation on the Castello—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is actually an old castle with stones, a stone castle—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Old castle, like 17th century. But was brilliantly renovated, and the painters who did it were up on ladders painting details of the frieze. So I wanted to always—having started in architecture and, you know, have that degree and background, it meant a lot to me to do that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it means a lot to your viewers also. It makes a difference.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think so, and just to, again, go forward, the piece at Marian’s right now, with *Psalm 29/30*, is that even there, which is a smaller space, the project space, there’s a column in the middle—not in the middle, but like a third of the way through—but it was essential to design the entry into the chamber as the apse and volume of what that column represented, to be the entry to the chamber, you know? So I kind of get very detail oriented, and maybe that’s what happened, is that there were a lot of shows without a lot of new work officially.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what was the third part of *Damnation of Faust*?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was called *Charming Landscape*. The title was *Damnation of Faust*, colon, *Charming Landscape*. And *Charming Landscape* kind of broke open—I don’t know how to say that, meaning it’s not true to the storyline of *Damnation of Faust* as much as—[00:16:00] what I did is, there were two women who are prominent in part one, in the *Evocation*. And it was very much about them, and evoking a sense of feeling, just like the beginning of *Faust*, where the very beginning of the Goethe *Faust*, he looks out the window; he hears bells going off. It’s Easter, children are running to the church, and this is when he says, "If only I could feel that way again," and this eventually calls Mephistopheles in on it.

There were groups of children who used to play on the playground near here, who were [mostly] Italian. And they were very private about it. And when I came back from the documenta in ’82, I told you, I had a feeling I wanted to change. And I saw them, and it gave me a spirit of change. The way they occupied the space of the playground when it was their own. When others came, they disappeared. The ways the girls and boys had different language, because they were teenagers: the girls would swing on the swings there one way, where the boys would do it in an absolutely different way. They would roll the swing up and swing very short jerks, kind of, and the girls would do loops with long chains and things like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really? How interesting.

DARA BIRNBAUM: So that was part one. It was very much about that. And it showed these two women, especially Georgeann and Pam.

In part three, the playground is destroyed—that’s the charming landscape; they knocked down that playground and gentrified it into a later SoHo version of itself. And [00:18:00] most of the Italians were leaving, or forced to leave, as were some of the Portuguese as well. So I asked Georgeann and Pam to come back. I found them finally, through the church actually, because they moved away; their families had moved away.

And I asked, "Look at this footage of yourself from part one. What do you see? What do you feel now about the playground?" "Oh, it’s over now; it’s all torn down." It’s this; it’s that. "What did you feel about those years, and what you were aware of?" "Oh, we did what everyone did. If one person did it, the other would do it." This and this and that. So they’re talking that way, and what it does, it breaks into a timeline of when they were born till the day we were shooting—very small snippets.

They were born in 1968 and 1969, very hot political years in the United States. And it shows events from those

years, news events that were turning points, like Chicago ’68, and that ends up with Tiananmen Square, with ’89, the year that this was ending, the beginnings of Tiananmen Square, with footage that I was actually able to sneak out of the newscasting. I had a friend who edited news that didn’t go on air, but was willing to sell [some footage to] me, almost like drugs or something.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, you mentioned that yesterday. We talked about that.
DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now you ask permission. That’s kind of a sign of the times. [They laugh.] Well, so have all three parts of *Damnation of Faust* appeared together in an exhibition?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I’d say [00:20:00] yes. They have. Maybe at the ICP, a place like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The International Center of Photography?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The old one, I suppose, in an office building no longer there. Now it’s in another office building, but in a basement.

DARA BIRNBAUM: This was the uptown one.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, in the house.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, the house.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was in a townhouse.

DARA BIRNBAUM: The townhouse, yes. It has shown, but I’m not going to remember exactly where. It showed in many countries, but I can’t remember when only one part was shown or all three parts were shown.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I’m interested in what kind of installation you made for all three parts—the ICP house was not very big—because I’m imagining this gigantic thing.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I’m talking about the single-channel.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, sorry.

DARA BIRNBAUM: The installation that was done for the first part of *Damnation of Faust* was commissioned by the Stedelijk [Museum] in Amsterdam, and that showed there, and it showed in many places. I reconfigured the large-scale photos with videos, depending on the place. It was very reconfigured for the Long Beach Museum of Art, which had a much lower ceiling, but the same images, but cropped differently, with the same footage. It was shown at the Whitney, in the Whitney Biennial in—I don’t know which Whitney Biennial.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In the ’80s?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it must have been.

LINDA YABLONSKY: ’85, don’t you think?

DARA BIRNBAUM: ’85, yes. The second part was the *Will-O’-the-Wisp*; that showed originally [00:22:00] at the Carnegie International. They brought it into permanent collection. Castelli owns another version of it, the edition that showed around in several different places in museums, and the *Transmission Tower*, which is a little bit aberrant in a way, at that point takes a little bit more freedom, has been shown in lesser places. It’s a difficult piece to show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but all three parts of *Damnation of Faust*—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —as a single-channel work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But that’s the only way it was shown? All three parts together in one exhibition?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, except in the retrospectives they brought together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The one in Ghent.

DARA BIRNBAUM: The one in Ghent and in the Serralves.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, yes, now that you're talking about this, I can see how this kind of work could take up years. [They laugh.] Because you're remaking the work every time it's shown.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which, you know, painters don't have to deal with. They just crate it and ship it.

All right, so let's catch up to the *Tapestry* piece that we started to talk about. Which, I'm sorry, I've lost the title now, *Elegy for*—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —*for Donna*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —*for Donna.* What was the first word?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Maybe *Tapestry*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Tapestry*. Okay, so it is a video, a projection—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's an installation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you did weave a tapestry.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it's an installation. It was commissioned by Contour. C-O-N-T-O-U-R. It's a triennial in Mechelen, in Belgium. I was invited in that year, probably around [00:24:00] 1996 or something, I think. When I went to Belgium, they brought us over for a site visit. And I didn't even leave my hotel room, and what I saw on TV was—well, I eventually left it, but at the beginning I crashed, and I saw this program on TV, and it was called *Donna*, like "woman." And it—

LINDA YABLONSKY: In Belgium?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In Belgium.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But "*donna*" isn't—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's Italian; I don't know why they call it *Donna*, but they called it *Donna*. And there was a [woman] VJ who occupied about three hours of airtime on the TV, and all they did was pretty much spin different discs and records and stuff like that, with one person who acted as her engineer, and her kind of talking, almost like a Rachel Maddow, you know, type of thing going on. She had a big personality, very strong, like that. And I thought, This is amazing, because nowhere in the United States could you occupy three hours of time on a broadcast, not even Howard Stern, of being in a control room broadcasting out. So it looked like a deconstruction that maybe Dan Graham and I or Michael Asher would have made, you know? And I thought, This is just extraordinary.

Then we were allowed to go through the town and see where would we like to put our work. You had your choice. And there could [have been], like, 20 sites.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Outdoors?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Indoors, outdoors, mainly indoors.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was the name?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Contour.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, the town.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, the town. Mechelen. M-E-C-H-E-L-E-N. They still have Contour. [00:26:00]

And it was a great festival. So someone would show in a church, someone in an old theater. They had a very famous tapestry place called De Wit. D-E and then W-I-T Tapestry, who does the tapestries for the UN, repairs and things like that. And also, that area of Belgium is very known for tapestry. And I was looking at her on the TV and saying, We each kind of weave our own pictures, in a weird way. And looked at the tapestry place, and they allowed me an antique loom that they used. And they reset it, and what we did was editing, first in Banff, which didn't work totally well, and I got a great editor here, who would weave the picture onto the—it would look like the picture was weaving onto the loom, and formulate her and different profiles of her.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So it looked like it was being—you had the actual loom. But the image was projected on it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, and it would go line by line, like weave this way onto it, until it finished itself.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Then it would weave another picture of her, like portraits of her.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see. So you were making kind of virtual tapestries.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, in a way, and there was music involved. I took the song "Bird on a Wire," by Leonard Cohen—Leonard Cohen was one of her favorite musicians and composers—and also the way she looked [00:28:00] in her role on TV, to me, looked like someone who was like a bird on a wire. There was just something about it, a kind of forcefulness and fragility at the same time, and a kind of, Let's get it over with; let's get the next one playing. Or something like that, you know, fooling around with her engineer, but she had a great personality. And I wanted to portray her. Turns out she was rather known.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, she was on TV, after all.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, she was on TV, in a prominent way. And that show went out on radio at the same time. The sad thing is that I was right in my feelings about her; she committed suicide shortly after I finished the work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, my God. I'm sorry to hear that, but at least you have her on video. And so how did people experience that work?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, it was shown in the De Wit tapestry room. They had rooms that were filled with antique tapestries of other [portraits] of women, and I selected tapestries from their collection. So we had a room with tapestries on the wall that represented other images of women, that had been portrayed centuries earlier. And this was, like, the contemporary image of it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What a great site for—

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was a great site. We recreated it for S.M.A.K., for the retrospective. We got tapestries from De Wit that were on loom, historical tapestries, but the feeling wasn't as strong as before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No. It's a problem. Unless the—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, it's a site-specific [00:30:00] kind of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But it's true. Museums, especially in big urban centers, you know, they're too clean. The white cube doesn't always add to the experience. [Laughs.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. We had a separate room that was painted the same color as the room there, with the historical tapestries, but still, you know. I was thinking of trying to talk, years ago, Marian into showing it, and us getting a loan and everything, but it never went anywhere. And it hasn't been re-requested anywhere.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, now so many exhibition venues, either temporarily or not, are in Castello di Rivoli, adaptive-reuse industrial buildings that come with character. I guess it could work in a different space. I often feel disappointed by seeing work that I've seen in galleries or in other situations in a museum, where it's properly installed, and yet doesn't have the same emotional power.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Resonance.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, because the context is so deracinating [ph] somehow. It takes the soul out of it. But it's a representation of the work rather than the work itself, which is right in front of you.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's true.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't know what museums can do about that, but it happens a lot. When you showed the *Wonder Woman, Technology/Transformation*: *Wonder Woman,* at MoMA a few years ago, that was [00:32:00] part of another show?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, it was a solo show.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, they actually put it up, and to be honest, they didn't tell me they put it up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was just in a room by itself?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it was on a ground floor, one of the entryways to the museum being on 52nd Street, right?

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, 54th Street.

DARA BIRNBAUM: 54th Street. And the reason I call it solo is it was presented on its own, but it was surrounded by painting or photography, which was very unusual. And to be on the ground floor. So it was an experiment to take it out, but they didn't tell me about it. Someone called me and said, "Oh, the piece looks great up here at MoMA!" And I was very proud to be showing at MoMA—I mean, it was in their collection. So I thought that either we've really made it or really not made it.

But you know, you don't ask a painter to take out their painting, each time, to put it up. With video we kind of had that, How is the sound going to be? Or, Are you going to project it or do you want it on a monitor? Nothing was ever asked, so I had to call them and say, "By the way, you're showing my work, but I didn't know you were showing my work, and you put it out projected, and I wasn't asked if it should be projected and how the sound was," which was pretty lousy actually, to be honest. They're working their way toward that. And so they took me out to lunch at this great Italian place across the street and gave me a private tour of the museum. That was the makeup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was when the new building opened.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, after that, I think. Just after that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was just opened. They didn't know what they were doing with that building at the time. Because there is that hallway now, on the 53rd Street side, going into the film entrance, where the [00:34:00] escalator goes down to the theaters, where they sometimes have paintings or video. And then the other hallways where the elevators are that take you upstairs. They always have videos now, on monitors, like five or six, always. And now they rotate them.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's a pretty hard placement, I think.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I actually always stop and look at them—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, that's good.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —but you're standing there in front of the elevators, so there is traffic. But I'll usually pick one and watch it, because it's usually some really archival thing that I'd like to see.

Okay, so *The Dark Matter of Media Light* was this retrospective at the—

DARA BIRNBAUM: S.M.A.K and Serralves.

LINDA YABLONSKY: S.M.A.K. being short for [Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst / Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art]?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, real art. Actuele art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In Ghent, and in [Porto at the] Serralves. [The Serralves] is a foundation?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But they have a museum. There's the foundation, but within that structure of the foundation is the museum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so it traveled—this is in 2009, and this was a career retrospective?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. It never made it to the States.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was it in Japan too?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is this CCA—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Where is it?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Here—Kitakyushu—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, okay. [00:36:00] That's just the next show. Center of Contemporary Art. It's a very famous place, actually, that I think you can do residencies at, but also has an exhibition program.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But in Japan, though?

DARA BIRNBAUM: In Japan.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right, so this was a very big retrospective. It must have been complicated because of all the screens, monitors, sound requirements—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, but Japan didn't take the retrospective.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, I understand.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it took a couple of years to put it together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did that have the radio tower piece?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It had everything?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did it feel when it was all done and you could see everything together?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I felt like going to bed. [They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Weren't you proud?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was proud, but I was pretty exhausted, I have to say. There was a party for me, and I made about a half hour of the party and then just went home. I just—I was exhausted. It's difficult to get all those things up, and we were working with someone at S.M.A.K. They have curators, but not really, and the director didn't take that much of an active role, which he has apologized for 10 times over since. It was difficult, really difficult. It was a little easier at Serralves, but you're still dealing with multiple issues of all kinds of equipment and, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You've projected on various kinds of surfaces, so you were talking about the importance of the surface before. Is there a surface that you'd like to see your work on that you haven't utilized [00:38:00] yet?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I don't think that way, but I had a surprise that they showed some of my single-channel works at Art Basel Miami [Beach], maybe about two or three years ago. They commissioned me to make a work that had been a four-channel installation work that showed at Marian Goodman and showed at the Hammer Museum, for example, called *Arabesque*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was about to ask you about *Arabesque*, which was shown the following year, after the retrospective, in 2011, at Marian Goodman and the South London Gallery.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And *Arabesque* was restructured, same thematics, same imagery, maybe excerpted into a single-channel work, but with a fragmented screen. It wasn't like looking at one projection screen.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Fragmented from what?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, *Arabesque* was a four-channel [work]. What happened was that I went back to what I considered more gendered politics with *Erwartung*. *Arabesque* would be similar. I was interested that, as an example, Clara Schumann was relatively lesser known than her husband, Robert Schumann, but she is the person who got Robert Schumann to where he was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That so often happens with husbands and creative wives.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And had eight children.

LINDA YABLONSKY: She had eight children? Wow.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And supported the family, basically through her concerts. She was a tremendous pianist.

And I went online and [00:40:00] I saw that for Robert Schumann, there are a lot of people, male and female, playing his works, but especially classic works like *Arabesque*. And I downloaded women of all statures—some professional, some amateur, some young, some old—playing *Arabesque*. And then I looked for what is being played online, on YouTube, of Clara Schumann, and I could only find one woman playing one thing, like *Opus 11,*

or something. So I made a work that—also there had been a film called something like, something *Love*. It's a Hollywood film about the Schumanns [*Song of Love*, 1947].

LINDA YABLONSKY: About the Schumanns?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes. So in it, there's a scene where Robert turns to Clara and says, "I have a new idea. I'm creating this new composition and it's going to be [called] *Arabesque*." And she says, "Oh, Robert," you know, that kind of thing.

So what you get is four channels, projected, like across the Marian Goodman space, about 40 feet, or very large projections of different women playing *Arabesque*, playing *Arabesque*. Very hard to edit, to get it being a composition, because some are off tune—but worked with a great editor. The fourth channel is constantly showing images from the film of them in love or not in love, or questioning about Brahms, or something. And then that crescendo and kind of wave of images stops. It goes down to two projections only, and it shows the one woman that I got from YouTube—asked her permission—to play Clara Schumann, and then on the other, you see Clara Schumann's diary excerpts of what it was like to be a woman during that time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So was this the first time you pulled imagery from the internet rather than television?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it was, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And all the other images of people playing—

DARA BIRNBAUM: We asked permission.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Of all of them?

DARA BIRNBAUM: We didn't get one. About 20.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And this was all from YouTube?

DARA BIRNBAUM: All from YouTube, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And they're all well-known professional workers [pianists]. How did you even find them?

BIRNABUM: No, most of them are amateur. We had someone who's a production head in a commercial studio who was hired to look up and try to find these people and trace them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see. It takes a lot of people to make an artwork.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, well, I think, actually, for me—I actually like collaboration, and I think it throws me back to architecture again, in a way. I'm oriented that way, and I think there's something fantastic about taking the very best of talent, like someone who might be a great musician or a great editor—like when I started to do *Damnation of Faust*, I brought in a second editor with Rick Feist, who was a professional commercial editor, John Zieman. I then worked with [John] for 30 years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it's less lonely than working alone in your studio.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I try to think about that, because I mean, I sketch everything up on my own, and it can get damn lonely. And I think when you get involved with a work, to me, it's like diving into a very deep ocean. And even though I used to love to snorkel, I felt that sometimes you dive so deep, it's scary—when are you going to come back up, and how and where that bottom is. And that's one part of the activity.

And maybe there's a great joy, because in *Damnation of Faust*, Rick and John would tell me—I'd say, "God, I wish I was doing this with my own hands." I used to edit my own. I mean, *Wonder Woman* was all my own edits; all these early ones are. And I just said, "I don't have hands anymore." And the more advanced the technology got, I didn't keep up with it. Some people have. And they said, "Don't worry. Just sit there. Be the director." And so I kind of took on that role, and it actually is, for me, wonderful to have talent that exceeds my own in certain areas. That brings together a piece that exceeds all of you.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you have hands, so—

DARA BIRNBAUM: I do, but I feel like I kind of lost them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not so hands-on.

The other thing is, that I envy, in artists who either do more physical work or can collaborate with others, is that unless you're writing a musical or something for a writer, you're kind of alone in a room, talking to yourself, or having your [00:46:00] characters, if it's fiction, talk to themselves. I often find that I can work out some ideas after days spent not talking to anybody, then I go out to dinner or lunch with someone, or am just talking to someone about what I'm doing, which I don't particularly like doing in progress, but suddenly, there's more energy in the give and take, and when there's several voices bouncing around ideas, it leads you to other things and it becomes exciting.

And maybe I'd arrive at the same conclusion eventually, maybe not, because you need kind of a clear or fresh eye; that's what editors are good for, to bounce ideas off of, and other writers also. I mean, without that conversation, it's kind of hard to—I don't know. For me it works. It's a wonderful stimulant, and it opens doors that I'm not sure I could have opened on my own.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, I remember going in on one of the last projects and entering into John's production house that he is a co-owner of, and when you go in there, even when you're not in the edit room, it's just kind of you and him, you know, for better or for worse. But entering a place that has a receptionist that says hello to you, that has a buzz about it, that has other people editing very hard in the other rooms around you, you know, it creates more of that kind of office environment I had with architecture. There's something about it.

Like I'm trying to write an essay now for a book for the Kramlichs, and doing it alone has been really tough, you know, really tough. I'm having a hard time with it. I've done writing before, and it's partly to do with the subject matter, you know, and in this case, I'm fighting it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Are you the subject matter?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I'm not, actually. They want me to be more of the subject matter, but it's about their collection—what it feels like to have media inside of a home. This kind of thing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now, let's talk about *Psalm 29/30*. You started making this work in 2014? Is that right?

DARA BIRNBAUM: The idea hit me. But I think it was 2016 that I actually did the work

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so two years incubating, sort of. So this is a video—well, it's more than one video, but there's the appropriated video, more footage from Syria that you hunted for on the internet. And your own footage you shot during your residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's place in Bellagio, in Italy. Two radically different landscapes.

And I know you said that you shot the footage in Bellagio thinking you were going to use it for an entirely different purpose, so let's go into the process of how these various elements came together into a single installation. So the Iraq footage—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Syria, Syria.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm sorry, Syria, [00:50:00] in its own house in a way, with its own music. And outside are a number of flat-screen monitors that have—is it a static image, or was the light changing?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, they're very—they're slow. They've either been slowed down a little technically, or they were slow because you were looking out on the lake. But you can start seeing the motion of the water and the sky and the light—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, you can see the water move, but what I meant by "static" was, it's a single point of view?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That doesn't change, but the light does change? It is a time-based thing?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, the light does change.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you're looking across Lake Bellagio at the hills beyond—

DARA BIRNBAUM: To the foothills of the Alps, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and see the lights of the towns around the lake. All right, so how did this come together? Because one is kind of tranquil, this landscape in Bellagio, and the footage—I have a few questions to ask you

about this footage, but if you would say first how you went about getting it, and how you decided to put these two things together in one exhibition. It's two hands playing together.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Part of the piece is—it's not meant to be a personal piece, but the spark of it was from something personal. Not that other things weren't. So was *Wonder Woman*, to be honest. [00:52:00]

But I was in the hospital, and I somehow started to relate to the psalms, of which 29 or 30, depending on what Bible you have, is a plea from David. His health had failed, and he was hoping for healing.

Beyond that, it also is the psalm that asks God if he, David, could build the first temple that would house the Ark of the Covenant, and God says to him, No, you're not allowed, because you have been a warrior and you have blood on your hands, and you can't. And so he couldn't build it. He said, I live better than the Ark lives. It took until Solomon later to do it. And the blood on [David's] hands in part was Syria. That he had conquered Syria.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean in actual—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Historic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I understand.

DARA BIRNBAUM: So just that idea of spans of time, and you know, 2,000 years or something goes by and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: More.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And more, and lands are still in contention. And I wanted to use the psalm that I heard that is the version I used. I heard it first at St. Patrick's, and then the version I used was by monks from the south of France who are sworn to silence. It's a Gregorian [00:54:00] chant; they can only pray, you know, or recite prayers or psalms, sing psalms. And there was something very appealing about that to me. And this asking for healing at a time that I just think it's gotten so complex and so difficult, the time period. The footage I shot that I thought I would use in another way seemed to be very solemn. And I just felt there's this solemnity and stature and almost like an eternal beauty, in a certain way, but you see the devastation of places like Syria.

So being in a hospital room, where you don't know if you're going to live or die, it puts you in a very strange bubble. And I wanted to bring out this feeling of healing, or an effort toward it. I also was very aware, because when I was in the hospital is when the war heighted, the civil war in Syria, and I was wondering how to finally approach war imagery straight on, as I said I could not do for the Gulf War.

And also, how could a viewer be subjected to—I don't know if that's the word—or exposed to that type of imagery? Is there a way to do it that isn't just spectacle? And I had, years ago, read Sontag's [*Regarding*] *the Pain of Others* and was thinking about, Could you in a gallery—and we've talked about the limitations and positive aspects of galleries or museums—[00:56:00] set up a different sense of being, so that when you walk into that room, you go into a different sense of space, that would have a kind of meditative feeling?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like a room where your footage is showing?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, the outside [Bellagio] footage. And then enter into the Syrian footage, and change the composition, the music composition, but their synergies go together in a way. But it's a little more agitated. Not to beat you over the head, but to allow you to look from a distance that's highly questionable, where you have to face the devastation that does exist.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I have two things to say about that. First, when I saw it, I didn't realize right away that there were two different musical tracks playing, because I thought it was filtering when I was in the room with the Syria footage. And when I was outside looking at the Bellagio footage, it was kind of filtering, or I thought it was, but I don't know that it was now.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was pretty well contained.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, so now in my mind, not realizing that they were two different things—so inside, with the war footage, what was the name—it was still the psalm?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it was composed by Neil Benezra—the psalm is not only the psalm; it's one of the sources for the outer material. So it's a composition, again by Neil, but with the psalm as its feature. And when you go [00:58:00] in, Neil tried to follow the structure of Syrian music. You'd have to ask him about that. It's a different pacing. It's not meant to hit you over the head, but it's getting more agitated. Also it's more atmospheric in that it has the church bells and other aspects, but it has no bombing or war sounds or things that will knock you out. And it's a different sensation that is meant very much to be guttural, that when you hear it, you feel it at the same time, as you do with the outside. And those are the two compositions.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, when I was looking at the Syrian footage—the room is not tiny, but it's not that big. It's a very enclosed space with a relatively small screen, not a monitor size, but I don't know, how big is the screen?

DARA BIRNBAUM: About eight feet wide.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And I guess I knew it was from Syria, but I didn't know what was going on in it, because you're not hearing the sounds of battle. And some was day; some was night; some was close up; some was from a distance. And some was shot by the actual soldiers in the field? And it looked like they were just kind of running around. You know, nobody was carrying guns, but I didn't know what they were doing. If they were running from or towards something. Or if they were actually fighting or out on reconnaissance—

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think it's all questionable, because these are the actual records.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, it's what [01:00:00] battle looks like, but this was a civil war, so there are rebels and there are soldiers, uniformed soldiers. And then I went back outside and I looked at the Bellagio footage and listened to the music, and then I went back inside, and I thought that—I wanted to ask you at the time, but I wanted to think about it first—it seemed like you were aestheticizing the violence? And I didn't understand why you wanted to do that, or why you would do that, except that—it makes it too acceptable, easier to look at. So can you tell me what you were actually thinking?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, the goal was that we are exposed, through major network news, CNN, et cetera, and the type of exposures we've had, and even online, have been rather horrendous. Dead bodies, decapitations that aren't followed through, except online and then taken off.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, not so much in this country. We don't see what people in Europe or Asia see. They see really graphic stuff.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, it gets taken off.

LINDA YABLONSKY: With suicide bombers, we don't see those bodies, for the most part.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I've seen—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Very little. They don't print them or show them on TV. We don't see the actual event. We might see the aftermath.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I've seen so many people in orange uniforms, you know, being put down to their knees. I've seen gays being thrown off roofs. I've heard bombs going off. And I was hoping that this was not a pure aestheticization, but rather a way of allowing to look [01:02:00] without all those bombastic, more—

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DARA BIRNBAUM: —I think, spectacle-type way of viewing, but having footage that brings you closer to the soldiers, because it's actually their own soldiers carrying the cameras, just to keep track. And the truth is, the country's so devastated, you don't know what anyone is doing anymore.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, that's clear; I mean, the landscape is destroyed everywhere they go, as opposed to the one in Bellagio, which is pristine, you know, and unchanged, and there's no activity. You don't see people in that footage. There's no human activity. It's just the natural—

DARA BIRNBAUM: I think it's an idealization, you know, of a utopic kind of land that exists, where in actuality, we have so many places, like Syria, that are devastated. There is nothing to fight over, hardly, anymore, except the supposed principles of the few people that are left. I mean, this is an erosion of humanity in every sense that can be, and some people who saw it—I haven't talked to a lot of people—I know in France it hit hard, in a good way. In a way I meant it to. Here, some people said they actually could hardly face the footage, so they didn't feel the aestheticzation as much. I wanted it to be something that stays with you a bit, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It definitely stays.

DARA BIRNBAUM: And pulls you into a kind of after-image of vacantness, you know, of decay. Of real decay.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Here again it's a problem because of what you were saying we've been exposed to, which is a lot of Hollywood kind of war-making, which purports to be like the real thing, but it never is. There are actually some war movies that are kind of close to the brutality of actual combat, but that is the spectacle, even when it's meant to be an anti-war film, which some of them are. What's the Kubrick one? *Paths of Glory*. Powerful anti-war film. You haven't seen it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's Kirk Douglas at his best. And Kubrick, also, peak—well, he had so many peaks, but it's pretty brilliant as an anti-war movie, and it takes place in the trenches in France in World War I, and in the rooms of the generals who were sending their soldiers to their deaths. And in the middle of that, there's an execution of so-called traitors, or cowards. I mean, it's horrible. And you don't see the violence so much, but you see its effects. You do see some, but it's really the emotional resonance or the aftermath or the moral—the consequence of insensitive or senseless human beings who only care about themselves and their power or maintaining an image of power. Anyway, the juxtaposition of the videos and the fact that the Syrian—

DARA BIRNBAUM: They all have something in common.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —combat footage is surrounded—it's in a ring around it, as if it were embracing or walling off the combat footage to contain it in a place within a ring of beauty. Which is a little upsetting somehow. It's disturbing.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Well, it's meant to be a very disturbing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, thank goodness there is still beauty in the world to salvage from—because there's not much beauty.

DARA BIRNBAUM: But for example, there's moments—I don't know if you saw them, because you really have to watch—where the clouds from the inside, the explosive clouds, circle around the outside and disrupt the footage that you were watching.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I did see that. How many hours of footage? Of Syria?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Not much. It's only an eight-minute loop.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really? I stood in there for more than eight minutes, I'm sure. It seemed much longer. I didn't get the loop at all. Very effective.

Can I ask you, how many awards have you been given for your work? You've won grants, prizes.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I've had grants.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You've got a US Artist grant.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I did get a US Artist grant.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is a nice, big cash prize.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was so happy about that. I was very happy. When I was in Bellagio, I got a phone call; I got a call from Anonymous Was a Woman. I didn't know about them. And I always need money—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Of course, who doesn't? [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: And they called me, and it was very funny because—just a short story—in Bellagio, I got an artist residency, but I don't walk that well. And if you're an artist, you stay usually at the bottom of this hill, and the villa's on the top of this hill. It's about two miles around, you know, and you're going up to it. And artists don't get the food that's cooked by the villa. They have to go buy their own food and make their own food and things like that. But they have quarters with studios, so it was decided—we talked when I got this—that because of the situation with walking, that they would move me up to the villa. Which actually was a great thing, because in the villa you had like heads of state, you know, writers, and biologists, and things like that. And very few artists, but people I never normally meet.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I thought that was the idea, that people should mix and talk?

DARA BIRNBAUM: The artists are down, but they can come up to the villa, but they only can come up like twice a week or something like that, whatever it was. So I was up in the villa, and every night you're supposed to meet before dinner and after dinner for drinks and talk, so that you're exchanging, you know, what you do and have that. And I don't drink that much, so I kind of go out, but the sun would be setting usually, which was gorgeous [but I would be trying to shoot those scenes that you saw, so that was a little disruptive]. Then afterwards, I would always get a little tired and go back earlier than most people. Some people would just stay down for hours, and got drunk and talked.

And that night I went back to the room and got this phone call at maybe nine or 10 at night, and I was just like,

I'm going to go out and celebrate and have a drink! And ran out to where the people usually drink. And it was the one night that nobody was there, and it was just an unbelievable feeling. And the guy was rolling out the tray of the bar, you know, and I looked at him and I asked, "Where is everybody?" He said, "They all went home early tonight." And I said, "I just got a big award," and he said, "Well, let me make you a drink." So I had my drink with him, which was nice. So that one, I remember.

I have this award now, that's not given to me, that I don't know where to put it yet that—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's the Birnbaum Award.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is that?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was just established in February by the university I went to.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's named after you?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, it's named after me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And given to?

DARA BIRNBAUM: It's given in the art school—

LINDA YABLONSKY: At Carnegie Mellon?

DARA BIRNBAUM: At Carnegie Mellon. The most talented graduating senior who involves both art and technology together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow.

DARA BIRNBAUM: That's kind of nice.

LINDA YABLONSKY: An award named after you. And it has a TV monitor on top of a black pedestal?

DARA BIRNBAUM: Someone was teasing me—yeah, it's marble. It's very heavy. And I think this is a 3-D print. That's the prototype one. And every year—so they just gave [it] at the end of May to the first person who won. And they get money. And for me, it acts like a legacy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, absolutely. That's wonderful.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah, that was really great.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why didn't they give you one? I guess you have it sitting here. [They laugh.]

DARA BIRNBAUM: It would pay for the dog food. [They laugh.] And the vet bills. And I did get the first award for a woman in video from the American Film Institute, the Maya Deren [Award]. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: There's a whole long list of things here that you've been awarded or granted. It's been well deserved too. Starting in 1981. Residencies, grants—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Right. Even teaching residencies I consider close to that. Like the Städelschule [Frankfurt], that was an incredible stipend. They paid my house here and my house there, plus very good money. Very generous. Princeton was a double fellowship for teaching, and so I got [one fellowship] from the School of Visual Arts, and then also from the Department of Humanities. The one from the Humanities Council is the one that Albert Einstein got, which is a great one to get. So they gave me both, and I was able to live here and live there, and was able to make four times as much money as anyone else who was there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: At Princeton?

DARA BIRNBAUM: At Princeton.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Are you still teaching there?

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I'm not with Princeton.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Are you teaching now?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I am, at SVA.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, you're at SVA.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Which is not Princeton. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, you mentioned that David Ross is one of the heads of departments—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, and Mark Tribe is the other one [for the graduate programs. –DB]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, you can't say you haven't been recognized for your work. This is quite a lot and it's very special. You're also on the board of Creative Time?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I was. That's over.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, it ended? But it looks like for a long time.

DARA BIRNBAUM: It was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Twenty years? Is that right?

DARA BIRNBAUM: A long time. I don't remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And also you spent some time as a director on the independent—

DARA BIRNBAUM: Cee Scott Brown, is that who—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is that who brought you onto Creative Time?

DARA BIRNBAUM: To Creative Time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So is it important to you as an artist to be in this kind of supportive position for other artists? That you feel that you must give back to your community? I mean, this is not a paid position. It should be, on the board of a public art agency.

DARA BIRNBAUM: No, I like Cee Scott a lot, and he thought I could bring something about media to Creative Time, and I just thought that's good, you know. The more I think I try to give back to my work—see, I have these kind of simple beliefs that if everyone has talent and that it's all different kinds of talents, and some people, for whatever reasons, have a kind of fortune that they're able to use their talents or they're able somehow to get support at a time that's very necessary, and if you have that, it's very important to give back.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Thank you, Dara. I think we can end there. That's a beautiful ending. You made a great statement, which clearly means a lot.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Thank you so much. This has all been most illuminating and generous on your part. Fantastic.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, but this is like a legacy. Then people get to hear your voice, you know. Your voice isn't lost. So that, you know, is a blessing in a way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I agree. Thank you so much.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Thank you.

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LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, we're back again. It is now, well, almost June, and your plans for summer include—

DARA BIRNBAUM: I'm writing an essay for a book on the Kramlich Collection in San Francisco, Napa Valley, and then starting—although it's started, but barely—a commission that was given by the Memorial Art Gallery, through John Hanhardt, as the independent curator, and Jonathan Binstock, who's the new director of the Memorial Art Gallery, which is like an encyclopedic museum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And that is—

DARA BIRNBAUM: —in Rochester. They want to bring the museum—Jonathan, coming out of Washington, DC

[Corcoran Gallery of Art], wanted to see the Memorial Art Gallery come into this century more, to bring media into it, to bring a better quality of 21st- and late-20th-century art to it. Started to collect and bring works there, and asked John Handhardt, who we know as having been the head of media in various museums, such as the Guggenheim and the Whitney and then the Smithsonian, if he would curate for shows of single-channel work, but commission three large-scale commissions, of which one will be Isaac Julien, and one is Javier Téllez. Téllez is the last [02:00] name. T-E-L-L-E-Z. He's been in the previous documenta, I think. And me.

And it needs to have a resonance with Rochester, is the one thing about the commission, but not be about Rochester. Because Rochester, as John Hanhardt has made me aware, has had a very rich history in a way, and to me the richest history is associated with blacks and African Americans. It was the last station of the Underground Railroad. The riots that broke out in '64 were major there. And I was looking at a musician that came up from the region of the [Mississippi] Delta, Son House, coming up there, and when he first hit Rochester—he first went there for work during World War II, actually stopped playing, and then reengaged playing later on there. But there are some songs that he's done, like "Grinnin' in Your Face," that really mean a lot to me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's called what?

DARA BIRNBAUM: "Grinnin' in Your Face." And I'm not sure how I'm handling this yet and what it means. It's not developed enough yet for me to talk well about it, but that is this summer, along with teaching. Along with shows that are going to happen in September at the Met Breuer. I'll be in group shows at the Palais de Tokyo, in the Dallas Art Museum. Two shows opening this week, group shows, in the Barbican London and in the National Portrait [04:00] Gallery later on, around the end of the year in London.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This isn't bad for 70 years old.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yeah. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Independent artist. This is great, if you could keep working like this.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, that would be great if I could keep the roof over our heads.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I'm glad to know that our world appreciates an artist like you. Not buying into all the commercialization, you know, the cheapening of so many other things.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, it's been a crazy time, but I also, since I was operated on, made a deal with myself that the year after the operation, if I was alive, I would—originally I was going to go to this place in Utah that you don't see anything; you just see the mountains. But it's so expensive, it's ridiculous. It's an Aman hotel.

So I went to bed and thought—I was working with someone from MoMA and they were going there, and I looked at it and I thought, I'm promising this if I live through this; I'm promising that to myself. But I couldn't in this lifetime, as one of my friends said. But I went to bed and I dreamt of Sedona. And I got up and thought, Where's Sedona? What's Sedona? And I looked that up, and there was a place I could afford, and I promised that to myself. And I've been back three times. I'm going back this summer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, you like it?

DARA BIRNBAUM: I like it a lot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, good. I'm happy to know you're taking a vacation after all this.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Yes, I love the land there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't want to finish only by saying thank you. I feel like I should say, Congratulations and more power to you.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Oh, thank you.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What a privilege.

DARA BIRNBAUM: Thank you for doing this. Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]