

# Art in the Agora

*Dara Birnbaum's new multiscreen installation at an Atlanta mall—the first permanent outdoor video piece in the U.S.—raises fresh questions about who should control public art.*



*This spread and next, Dara Birnbaum: Rio Video Wall, 1989, twenty-five 27-inch monitors; installed at the Rio shopping and entertainment complex, Atlanta, Ga. All photos Nick Arroyo.*

## BY REGINA CORNWELL

In spring 1987, New York artist Dara Birnbaum, known for her video work, won an international competition in Atlanta, Ga., calling for a permanent outdoor video installation to be placed in the plaza at Rio, a much-touted “new-age” shopping and entertainment center styled by the Miami-based neomodern firm Arquitectonica. Rio, a garish theme center drawing its name from Latin America (both the city and the word for river), is a two-story U-shaped strip around a plaza designed by landscape architect Martha Schwartz to include pools and a geodesic globe. The video installation, substituting for an anchor store, was intended to be placed where people would congregate; Birnbaum proposed a video wall complete with a video program of her own devising, which was to be neither aggressive nor flashy but elegant and restful, an oasis amid commerce. The construction budget on the overall site—125,000 square feet—came in at \$15–20 million, and stores began to open in late 1988. Then in April 1989, Rio's gala opening featured the working video wall. Financed entirely by corporate money, the Birnbaum installation is—or was to be—the first permanent outdoor video installation in the country.

The vast grid of Birnbaum's wall consists of five side-by-side stacks of five monitors each, covering about 360 square feet, in a black Spandreo glass housing that reflects its surroundings as it rises









of values that results. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the wall itself—the very fact and nature of its existence at Rio—has become the center of a real-life struggle between art and business.

**R**io is located in midtown Atlanta and is part of a large land-reclamation effort. As the urban renewal projects of the 1960s and early '70s ground to a halt, 78 acres of cleared land, considered undesirable by many, were bought in 1973 from the city by Park Central Communities, a profit-making subsidiary of Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), an influential not-for-profit organization whose active board is composed of corporate CEOs and presidents. Beginning its fifth decade of existence, CAP serves as a catalyst, negotiating sales of difficult lands to developers and bringing in community services and improvements. Public housing had already been built at the time Park Central took over this parcel of land, so the organization arranged for private developers to construct much-needed upper- and middle-income housing in the same neighborhood. Three supermarkets went up nearby, but the community still lacked a shopping center. To rectify this, a limited partnership was formed including Park Central, a neighborhood not-for-profit called Bedford-Pine Development Corp. and the developer Ackerman & Co., which stepped in to do the building. Preliminary agreements signed in 1984 were formalized three years later, when construction began. The result was Rio, and the arrangement whereby Ackerman & Co. agreed to return 25 percent of the profits from the complex to the neighborhood through Bedford-Pine Development Corp. and 25 percent to Park Central was heralded as unique.

IMAGE Film/Video, a not-for-profit media center in Atlanta, was chosen in the fall of 1986 to administer the Rio public art work competition for Ackerman. Once Birnbaum was selected, an agreement was made to continue to involve IMAGE's then executive director, Robin Reidy, as producer for the project. Her not-for-profit background and contacts were to be crucial in securing funding and reduced rates on services and equipment. So the project's modest line-item budget, included in the proposal, reflected this approach, suggesting at the same time a healthy relationship between the not-for-profit and the business sectors. However, the in-house Ackerman art representative, skilled at dealing with artists and art in public places, left the firm in late spring 1987, and, in an apparently unrelated move, Reidy bowed out by the end of the summer.

In spite of the public nature of the proposed video installation's site, without a link to the not-for-profit world Birnbaum and her sponsors were unable to obtain the reduced rates, in-kind services, free equipment and other funding necessary for what could now only

be perceived as a corporate art project undertaken for commercial ends. Consequently, the original budget rapidly ballooned. By 1987, however, digital video-wall technology had become more widely available than it was when Birnbaum first conceived of the project (using a less flexible analogue system) and had dropped in price by about a third. Seeing the sizable advantages offered by a digital system, Birnbaum appealed to CEO Charles Ackerman—himself an art collector and the first to publicly display art in office buildings in Atlanta—who had spearheaded the competition in the first place. He readily agreed to the more advanced system. Technical problems arose, however, adding to the costs. And, Birnbaum confesses, when she realized the extent of the resources available and how much was being spent on Rio, she did not hesitate to speak up for additional funds simply to make the work stronger. Charles Ackerman continued to agree to her requests, so that the budget climbed from its original \$80,000 to \$100,000, with a 10 percent contingency allocation on top of that. And indeed the figure went on growing from there, although some of the items in the final \$400,000-plus budget were for marketing and other purposes over which the artist had no control.

With Reidy and the Ackerman art representative gone, Birnbaum found herself alone and without a contract: she was working on a tight delivery schedule with only a handshake for security. There was no time to seek a not-for-profit producer, and even if one could have been found in Atlanta, there was no money for the position, the expanded budget notwithstanding. To protect herself, Birnbaum hired a lawyer, Isidore Seltzer (from the New York firm of Stroock, Stroock and Lavan), who was both well versed in copyright law and experienced in dealing with major developers. While many issues were in dispute during this period, including the artist's liability for injuries, protection of trade secrets and noncompetition clauses, the largest problems were copyright, the interpretation of what actually constituted "the art" in question and, finally, how much programming time Birnbaum would have on her wall.

For the corporation, the art was a software package with images on a videodisc, but in Birnbaum's view, her work comprised the entirety of the site-specific proposal, with the two-part program for the wall, as submitted to and chosen by the jurors. Eventually, the corporation agreed to her definition of the art, and after months of battling, it yielded the copyright as well.

In an interview with the author in February 1990, Birnbaum remarked that at the beginning of the project it didn't occur to her that the wall would be used for other purposes. While the Ackerman art representative threw out casual hints about this, it wasn't until the budget was increased to \$100,000 that Charles Ackerman formally bargained with Birnbaum about running special events on the wall—a few times a year, such as on the night of the Academy Awards. But when the first draft of the contract was rolled out, the corporation proposed to show Birnbaum's piece only one hour per day, 296 days a year. The artist was caught completely by surprise. Thirteen months after negotiations had begun, the two sides finally reached an agreement Birnbaum felt she "could live with." According to its terms, her "permanent" installation was reduced to 24 hours of programming time per six-day week during Rio's normal operating hours for seven years. The rest of the time was left to the developer's discretion.

**A**s things stand at present, Birnbaum's piece has been further compromised. While the cameras were in fact positioned for the "interactive" news section of the work, they seem not to have been properly installed or cared for, and although some people say they have seen Birnbaum's piece running interactively, many insist that

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## Birnbaum

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they have observed only the landscape imagery. Nor are the expensive wall and equipment adequately maintained. Solutions were sought to the problem of running video outdoors in the light, but the alternatives Birnbaum and her crew came up with were ignored. Instead, the developers opted for an ineffective hood atop the wall and the installation of some banners nearby to deflect the glare. More time should have been taken on both sides to correct this serious problem.

But the gulf between the original conception of Birnbaum's piece and the manner in which her video wall is actually exploited today goes beyond the purely technical. Video disk jockeys use it for rock videos and as a backdrop for concerts, which they intersperse with advertisements for Rio's bar in the plaza. Ackerman & Co. speaks of employing the wall for satellite spectacles, teleconferences and fashion shows. With VJs at the controls, the wall is now more frequently a loudly bleating rock oracle than an oasis where people might rest, meet quietly and collect their thoughts.

What Birnbaum wanted from this untitled video-wall project was, after all, an alternative to the conventional media. She is surprised, she says, that her proposal was ever agreed to by Ackerman & Co., and it is hard not to share her wonder or, for that matter, fall into questioning the original motives behind the developer's acceptance of her project. If the various rumors are correct and the landscape portion is all that remains to be seen (however intermittently) of Birnbaum's program, the piece might well be considered, in this bowdlerized form, as a reductive idyll, stripped of its dynamic and demoted to wallpaper. On the other hand (and this is the artist's

view), if the program is run four hours per day in 30-minute blocks as required by the contract, even without the news element the emerging and disappearing landscape can be a powerful antidote to Rio's commercial milieu.

Even if Birnbaum's wall had been cosponsored by a not-for-profit organization, its nature as an electronic work in a consumer context renders it especially vulnerable to co-optation. At the same time, given what the wall offers and considering that the developer paid the entire bill, some dialogue and compromise about potential "non-artistic" uses seems appropriate. Ackerman's view of the wall as a stand-in for an anchor store probably made its use as a revenue-producing site inevitable. This is the kind of issue that should be considered by jurors of any future competitions for public video pieces, so the terms may be made clear to all. In the Rio project, there seems to have been considerable naïveté and lack of understanding on the part of all involved.

Inevitably, the relationship between artist and corporation has, like the condition of the wall, deteriorated. While Birnbaum has not abandoned her efforts to maintain the piece as it was intended, she feels that she has few choices. As a lone artist without the support of an arts organization, she may once again be forced, with limited means, to seek legal counsel.

In any case, despite the paradoxes and contradictions affecting the video wall as it stands at Rio, Birnbaum's art work seems to join the tradition of abstraction that evokes the transcendent and speaks to the soul. But the wall's incarnation as a site for contemplation, for rest, is all too infrequent in this consumer paradise where shopping equals entertainment. □

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## Bloom

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used to refer to the man-eat-man, dead-end viciousness of human existence without God.

Bloom's sensibility has always had a strong eschatological component, and a recent painting makes apocalypse literal. Titled *The Last Performance* (1989), it is a panorama of the end of the world—a charged terrain of volcanic craters boiling with reds and oranges against a sky swept with strokes of blue, pink and yellow. Only the black figures of rats nosing around the foreground situate us in our own world. Yet the image conveys less a sense of horror than an almost celebratory appetite for nuances of color and form, rather like that in the intestinal still life of *The Cauldron*. This sense of a vivified mortality finds its clearest statement in a large-scale still life like *The Blue Carafe*, from 1982–83. Set in a painterly abstract space relieved of natural forms and gravity, it comprises dozens of vases and bottles, lined up chockablock on and around a gorgeous rose-colored cloth. The vessels are Art Nouveau in design, and Bloom lovingly renders their iridescent glazes and raised ornamental details as he earlier did the fantastic tiers of his chandeliers. As voluptuous and repellent as ripe fruit passing into rot, containers have a fleshy, sexualized presence which suggests, as so much of his work does, an imbedded though ambivalent moral: in the center of this glorious, fulgent vanitas, we find a single candle, dripping white wax, guttered out or waiting to be lit.

**B**loom's spiritual concerns, his moral anger unattached to specific politics and his personal version of a "magic realism" were worlds away from much of the high-profile American art that appeared after World War II (in general, his work is temperamen-

tally closer to European painting), and one wonders if they may strike a more responsive chord now. Physical mortality has, after all, run like a thematic bass note under the art of the last few decades: one thinks of Warhol's electric chairs, Robert Longo's stricken figures, Peter Hujar's juxtaposition of corpses and underground celebrities; the list goes on, and expands dramatically in the past five years under the spectre of AIDS—indeed, Bloom's vessels and Ross Bleckner's memorial vases are not, it seems to me, metaphorically dissimilar. Yet one suspects Bloom will remain separate, partly, again, because of esthetic fashion, partly through his own choice. On the one hand, both his subjects and the rhetoric with which he presents them will feel somehow esthetically over-pitched in our present conceptual environment, where painting is regarded as a mortuary exercise, metaphysical inquiry is suspect and irony is coin of the realm. And on the other hand, nearing the age of 80, Bloom continues to argue in his work for painting that functions as a medium for spiritual resonance—on the principle that art should not do less. □

1. Theodore F. Wolff, *The Many Masks of Modernism*, Boston, Christian Science Monitor Books, 1989, p. 173.

2. Among the most useful essays about Bloom's work are: Frederick S. Wight, *Hyman Bloom*, Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1964; Alfred Werner, *Hyman Bloom: Recent Paintings*, New York, Terry Dintenfass Gallery, 1975; and Marvin S. Sadik, *The Drawings of Hyman Bloom*, Storrs, Conn., University of Connecticut Museum of Art, 1968. Bloom's drawings, it should be mentioned, comprise a body of work as important as his paintings and, unexhibited as a group for over 20 years, beg to be seen in New York.

3. In conversation with the author, autumn 1990.

4. Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, New York, Viking, 1951, p. 118.

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