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Phantasmagoria of the Media

Dara Birnbaum's most recent video installation is addressed to the fundamental contradiction of technocratic society: the irresistible rise of the irrational in a civilization based upon the practical application of rational, scientific thought.

BY CRAIG OWENS

The philosophy of representation—of the original, the first time, resemblance, imitation, faithfulness—is dissolving; and the arrow of the simulacrum released by the Epicureans is headed in our direction. It gives birth—rebirth—to a "phantasmaphysics."

—Michel Foucault
"Theatrum Philosophicum"

In *PM Magazine*, a multi-channel sound and video installation based on the prime-time television program of the same name, Dara Birnbaum uses advanced electronic image-processing techniques to produce a phantasmagoria of the media. Working with material taken directly from broadcast TV—the opening sequence and musical theme from *PM Magazine*, as well as a commercial for home computers—Birnbaum first isolates a set of discrete, emblematic images, primarily of Americans at play, which she then combines and recombines into four tightly controlled yet delirious three-minute loops. These tapes, presented simultaneously on four monitors installed in an artificial environment carefully engineered to simulate and intensify our experience of the media, rely on the same effects as the earliest phatasmagoria: "Figures rapidly increase and decrease in size, advance, retreat, dissolve, vanish, and pass into each other in a manner then considered marvelous" (*Encyclopedia Brittanica*, 1865).

Birnbaum's immediate reference is, of course, broadcast TV; yet her work also belongs to a much longer tradition of phantasmagoria, which begins in the early industrial age. A French invention, the phantasmagoria was introduced into England in 1802 in Philipsthal's magic-lantern show: on a transparent scrim specters and skeletons appeared to rise from the dead. While its influence on both visual and verbal art (Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony* is a virtual phantasmagoria) was immediate, its potential was realized only later, with the invention of film and, now, video, which have become its primary vehicles. The phantasmagoria in fact anticipated both mediums, not only because it depends for its spectacular effect on abrupt shifts in the size, scale and direction of moving figures projected onto a screen, but also because of the peculiar mode of existence attributed to phantasms: incorporeal emanations or extremely thin membranes that detach themselves from the surfaces of objects to imprint themselves directly on our imaginations, without the intermediary of an object. Film and video, then, appear as highly sophisticated technological means of production of phantasms.

A phantasm has no objective, physical existence; it is not a representation, but a simulacrum. Throughout the history of Western thought, beginning with Plato, simulacra have been denounced as "false appearance"; yet philosophy has never successfully contained or exorcized phantasms, for they are not, as has been claimed, the antithesis of rational thought, but its dark underside. (Thus, Freud described the images the unconscious presents to consciousness as "phantasms.") It is not surprising, then, that the phantasmagoria emerged in a period of rapid industrial expansion, or that throughout its history it has been affiliated primarily with industrial modes of image production. As Régis Debray has written, "The rise of the irrational parallels the rise of the threshold of applied scientificity; *it is its compensatory effect*. The more the 'objective' world is 'rationalized,' the more the irrational takes hold of the subjective" (*Writers, Teachers, Celebrities*; italics added).

In Birnbaum's postmodern phantasmagoria, then, the extraordinary level of technical sophistication achieved by the recent marriage of computer and video technologies is exploited as a "means of production of delirium" (Debray). (Here, Birnbaum takes her cue from television: the media do not represent life, they simulate it.) Unlike other artists working with similar technologies, however, she does not use them primarily for the dazzling visual effects they facilitate—although her *PM Magazine* is certainly a visual and technological tour de force. Rather, Birnbaum's work is addressed to a fundamental structural contradiction in technocratic (now mediocratic) society: the irresistible rise of the irrational in a civilization based upon the practical application of rational, scientific thought.

Birnbaum is neither a rationalist nor an irrationalist. She does not criticize the irrationality of the media in the name of rational thought (demystification); rather, she uses rationality and

irrationality against one another in order to expose their mutual implication. She focuses on the *ambivalence* of our relationship to the media: we are simultaneously seduced and alienated by them, fascinated and at the same time critical of our fascination—even when our critical attitude functions only as an alibi. In *PM Magazine* Birnbaum does not simply allude to this ambivalence; she *stages* it.

What fascinates us is always that which radically excludes us in the name of its internal logic or perfection.

—Jean Baudrillard, "Fetishism and Ideology"

None of the technical effects used in the *PM Magazine* tapes will be unfamiliar to viewers of commercial network television; yet Birnbaum has designed a viewing situation in which we experience those techniques physically, immediately, on an environmental scale. Hence the importance of the installation: Birnbaum has occupied a relatively small gallery on the ground floor of the Hudson River Museum, painting one of its walls a scorching red, another a noctilucous blue—hues selected to match the colors of the chroma-key backgrounds that appear throughout the tapes. As a result, the entire gallery is suffused with an artificial, video-induced incandescence; strategically placed colored spotlights intensify this effect.

The same walls also function as "mats" for two six-by-eight-foot bromide prints—oversize enlargements of stills taken directly from the tapes—mounted by means of a commercial suspension system designed for easy assembly and dismantling (and therefore used primarily for trade shows rather than museum installations). Birnbaum's images float in front of the walls; her monitors are set directly into these panels. The relationship of these panels to their colored "mats" reproduces, on a grotesquely magnified scale, the relationship of images within the tapes themselves to their chroma-key backgrounds. In this way Birnbaum stages a simulacrum of the media enlarged to architectural proportions.

Mounted on parallel walls, the installation literally surrounds us with the media. (This effect is heightened by the musical accompaniment, based on the *PM Magazine* theme, recorded on four tracks, and played through speakers mounted in the corners of the gallery.) We do not watch TV, we are plunged headlong into it; our awareness of our actual physical circumstances gives way to a media-induced vertigo. Birnbaum thus offers a direct, visceral experience of television's enormous (yet often imperceptible) power; at the same time she invites us to examine our relation to it critically.

Only two elements in Birnbaum's disorienting environment appear stable—the two stills—and it is to them that we continually return. These images—one of a child enjoying an ice-cream cone, the other of a woman seated at a home computer terminal (an actual monitor has been substituted for the word processor's screen)—are familiar, typical of the kind of imagery the media continually purvey. It is conventional wisdom that the media project stereotypes for emulation, imitation; here, however, they seem to function as keys for the decoding of the installation.

The image of the child is perhaps the more seductive—and with the media it is always a question of seduction. She seems to be without history, without defect, and therefore without desire—an image of complete self-sufficiency, absorbed in her own pleasure, which nothing can disturb. In his 1914 essay "On Narcissism," Freud proposed that "the charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and large beasts of prey." He compares these narcissistic types to women who "love only themselves with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them," observing that "such women have the greatest fascination for men, not only for esthetic reasons, since as a rule they are the most beautiful, but also because of certain interesting psychological constellations." Thus, Freud associates seduction with alienation: we are most fascinated by that from which we are most estranged.

Because of its mirroric capacity for the simultaneous reception and projection of an image, the video apparatus itself has been described as essentially narcissistic; this analysis considers only the equipment, and not the *institution* of television and its reliance on precisely the interesting psychological constellations discussed by Freud. Most of the images in Birnbaum's *PM Magazine* tapes are images of the same self-satisfied autonomy and thus inaccessibility: baton twirlers, professional ice skaters, experts in the martial arts—bodies, that is, involved in the display of their own physical perfection, their own self-satisfaction.

It is not, however, simply in their content, but in their very structure that the media estrange us. Television is frequently criticized as non-interactive, as a one-way channel of non-communication. There is no possibility of viewer response, except in the form of the ratings referendum. Proponents of the "revolutionary" potential of the media endlessly harp on the potential for viewer feedback; but feedback is merely static that results from the improper adjustment of a microphone, that is, a flaw in the system that must be reduced and, if possible, eliminated.

Thus, it is in the relentless pursuit of the perfection of the means of representation itself that the media radically exclude us; we respond, however, with an uncritical fascination with their apparent automony, their total indifference to our existence. (As Georges Bataille has written of the potlatch ceremony, power resides with the one who gives and cannot be repaid.) Seduction and alienation, then, or fascination and detachment, are not alternatives; rather, they are mutually inscribed within the media apparatus itself, the source of its extraordinary power over our imaginations.

Modernist artists generally subscribed to the Enlightenment myth of unlimited technological progress as the key to the liberation of mankind from necessity; they frequently joined forces with technology for the transformation of the environment according to rational principles of function and utility (Productivism, the Bauhaus). Postmodernist artists like Birnbaum, however, are skeptical of the modernist belief in rational enlightenment; they view it as an agent of increasing social domination and control. These artists do not, however, retreat to preindustrial modes of production; nor do they attempt to redeem technology by using it in a disinterested, i.e., esthetic, manner. In this respect, Birnbaum's *PM Magazine* is exemplary, for it is a simulacrum of the media that engages television critically, and on its own terms, in order to expose it as the phantasmagoria of the late 20th century. □

Commissioned by the Hudson River Museum as the first in a series devoted to "Art and Technology: Approaches to Video," Dara Birnbaum's PM Magazine*—or a version of it—will be included in this summer's "Documenta" in Kassel, West Germany. The same series, curated by Nancy Hoyt, presented a musical video game by David Behrman and Paul De Marinis; currently on view is a multichannel installation by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn [to May 30].*