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Women and Media, Then and Now: Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Lynn Hershman Leeson

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Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Lynn Hershman Leeson in conversation with Emily Watlington

Emily Watlington speaks with three pioneering women media artists who have been working since the 1970s: Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, and Lynn Hershman Leeson. Though media has changed drastically over the past fifty years, many of these artists' concerns—which span representations of women, voices and censorship, as well as agency and decision making—remain critical and timely. All three have recently mounted solo exhibitions in Europe with old and new work, and have lately been part of retrospective group exhibitions.

EMILY WATLINGTON: You all approach representations of women in mass media through a variety of means. I am thinking of Lynn's *Deep Contact* (1984), an interactive laserdisc that invites people to touch a female character's body, and she responds. Dara, I'm thinking of your *MTV Artbreak* (1987), which shows a brief history of animated representations of women, and of course *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-1979). Ericka, your films *Cinderella* (1986) and *Hiatus* (1999/2015) both reject the trope of the damsel in distress through women video-game protagonists who confront rules. What prompted each of you to take on this subject?

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: All of my work questions conditions of inequality and censorship. The characters often overcome inherited cultural restrictions, and through the process reverse the prohibition of verbal expression. The use of interactive narrative structures was, for me, a way of democratizing the medium itself by encouraging choice, which simultaneously created a political potency. Rather than passively observing or being subliminally affected by media, they become active participants in decisions.

DARA BIRNBAUM: When I was sixteen I entered the School of Architecture at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. At that time I was one of twelve women in our entire department, and the only woman to graduate in the class of 1969. Years later, entering the arts, I felt I needed to

find a way to speak to such inequities and inequalities. Almost immediately, I got involved with the structure and language of television, part of my nature as a baby boomer. It was this “voice” in our culture that reigned most predominant, and that I felt needed to be both analyzed and criticized. Thus, I “appropriated” and “deconstructed” programs such as *Wonder Woman*, *Laverne & Shirley*, and *Hollywood Squares*. I was against the stereotyping of women in TV in those years (and still today). I knew this subject matter intimately as a very young woman architect—a woman in a man’s field—and also saw this directly active on television, the most dominant voice in the American post-World War II home.

ERICKA BECKMAN: I’m interested in play as a way to change behavior and build in new responses. When I made these two films that depict a female character stuck in a game, it was a way for me to deconstruct the bind she was in and provide a pathway toward creating new behavior. I am interested in the automatic mimesis that takes place in game play. I feel that depicting the process of achieving freedom through a game structure compels girls to change, or at least see more opportunities in their situation. My fascination with experimental media in the 1970s was in the work of both men and women who created their own formats for an independent political voice.

EW: Around the time the three of you were starting out, feminist media theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane were writing influential criticisms of representations of women in media. Has such criticism resonated with you at any point, or would you say that the parallels between their work and yours are more that they are products of the same moment?

EB: I didn’t read film analysis until I started teaching in the 1990s, as I found it necessary for the discourse in the classroom. Previously I didn’t find that critical analysis important to my practice. Not to say that those issues weren’t on my mind. I am a woman and I represent women in my films. I think through all of the implications of representation thoroughly before I shoot. I want my films to be informed by many sources of research. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s I was completely absorbed in the work of Jean Piaget, fairy-tale analysis, and anthropological research into game play. It wasn’t until the 1990s when I started teaching that I read film analysis, which I found necessary for the discourse in the classroom.

LHL: I think the work of the writers you mention was indeed important and chronologically parallel. Of course we were all trying to find our way out of our severe cultural constrictions at that time, and simultaneously beginning to realize the degree to which these omissions were embedded in history.

DB: I was interested in media, predominantly in regard to film semiotics along with structuralist theory—not only the theory being developed by women such as Laura Mulvey, but also men, for instance Mulvey’s partner, Peter Wollen. Mulvey’s earlier essays were groundbreaking for me, as were Julia Kristeva’s. I was also drawn to Christian Metz, Harold Bloom, later on Paul Virilio, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, et cetera. At that time, I saved all the money I could from waitressing to buy the first two books by Jacques Lacan that were translated into English, or to buy the *October* journal. Every volume of *Semiotexte* that I could find and buy at that time was relatively cheap (thank you Sylvère Lotringer!). I read *Screen* magazine, on film and not yet touching television theory, as first loaned to me by Dan Graham. Such writing resonated strongly with me, affecting my

ways of looking, my overall perspective, my very being. Yet for me, there were no exacting parallels to be drawn between good theory and writing and the artistic work we formulated. Mostly there is the creative exchange—inspiration and invigoration.

EW: What other authors have influenced your work?

DB: Besides such theoretical writers, I have my favorite authors—not for influencing my work directly but for providing inspiration in my life. For instance Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* (1989), Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928), and Maurice Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day* (1981).

LHL: During those times I read Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Erving Goffman, many Surrealists, Lawrence Durrell, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, and Viktor Frankl, among others.

EB: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Johannes Kepler, Henri Bergson, Gaston Bachelard, Gregory Bateson, Hubert Dreyfus, Jack Zipes, Julia Kristeva, Angela Carter, and the list goes on.

EW: All three of you have worked with mainstream media while at the same time critiquing it. Some of your work takes video games or television as its subject or medium, but you have also collaborated with the mainstream media industry. Ericka did research in early virtual reality with developers at VPL and NASA; Dara showed work on MTV; and Tilda Swinton has starred in some of Lynn's films. What has it been like working with people from these industries, and how have they responded to your work?

EB: I do a lot of investigative and documentary research for all my films. If I'm working with a certain subject matter, I feel I must learn from and experience it directly. In 1991 and 1992, I researched virtual reality by visiting NASA Ames and VPL, both in California. Being an artist there seemed to provoke two very different responses. Some scientists welcomed the questions and proposals I brought to the discussions, and others felt that art had no place in research—that science could only be expressed through practical applications.

LHL: Tilda Swinton and I, beginning in 1993, worked with ideas embedded in or out of a script with improv, humor, and perhaps even hubris. As Tilda said, they were not works for first weekend they were screened. Indeed, thirty years later, those works—*Conceiving Ada* (1997), *Teknolust* (2002), and *Strange Culture* (2007)—are screened quite often.

DB: In the late 1970s and 1980s I found that small “holes” were evident in the media, where the arts could enter and be creative. I believed in Bertolt Brecht's philosophy that such industries (as in his time, radio) would so overfill themselves that small holes—or pockets—could be discovered and then utilized by artists. This was much more invigorating than the galleries. Some of my peers and I wanted more “slipped” boundaries, so we went into the clubs, or onto MTV. I was excited by such opportunities, and people in the industry were excited by us. Actually very few people in the industry held that pure excitement, but when they did, and “honored” a few of us by helping us edit in commercial postproduction houses, or producing with us, that type of collaboration seemed a very good formula for those days. Thus, I did *MTV: Artbreak* or *TRANSVOICES: Transgressions* (1992) for MTV, and showed in clubs like the Palladium, the Mudd Club, Danceteria, et cetera.

EW: Cindy Sherman's critiques of representations of women in mass media have become somewhat iconic, partially because her critique is succinct, even straightforward. Her still images are also easily displayed, disseminated, and digested. How did you see her work around the 1980s?

LHL: I think her imagery was easier to grasp and more accessible than work that broke through a decade earlier, like Martha Rosler, and Cindy's teacher Suzy Lake. Her characters mirrored part of the projections of that time, and therefore her work became a profound gesture.

EB: She is one of many strong women makers starting in the 1980s who drew from diaristic performance work of the early 1970s. She is a product of exposure to the conceptual work of women who documented everyday experiences, especially labor, and problematized the power relations they encountered. Cindy and I are of the same generation, the same peer and friendship group, and we were both highly productive at the same beginning point in our careers. Cindy had institutional support from the very start that allowed her to create a stable studio practice in which she flourished. She opened the gates for many other women in photography and media, which I am very thankful for.

DB: She marked a certain territory. Taking the self as her "chalkboard," being a chameleon in a hundred ways to try on and then discard the vestiges of mass media's stereotyping of women. Since she utilized her own body as both the easel and the palette to ascertain the nominative or normative portrayal of women in the industries of film and early media, the work is an important marker for us.

EW: How do the funding mechanisms for media art differ between the 1980s and today?

LHL: I never had funding mechanisms. I generally took three to five jobs simultaneously in order to make work. This is still true, but I've begun to sell work to major museums and foundations, so there isn't the financial desperation there once was. ZDF German television funded five of my films, which was an enormous privilege. As an American, I could not participate beyond that number.

EB: I had institutional support (grants) for my work until 1994. This initial funding was never quite enough to make thirty-minute films in 16mm. But I was fortunate to have a rent-stabilized IMD [interim multiple dwelling] protected live-work loft in Manhattan. This low rent offset the cost of my productions for thirty years. I worked in the 1990s with MTV (on *The Buzz*) and did animations for other music videos, but this was secondary to my own work. It was a way to be engaged in what was evolving in the United States as support structures for moving-image work. The public and national funding for individual artists had pretty much dried up at that point.

DB: I seem rather inept at finding "funding mechanisms," whether in the 1980s or now. In the 1980s more doors seemed open, such as the TV labs at WGBH Boston and WNET New York, or European channels such as RTBF Belgium, or ZDF Germany, or Channel Four in England. I've been with Marian Goodman Gallery since 2000, which has helped fund my new work enormously. documenta 7 and 9 commissioned me as well. In 1987 I won an international competition through Ackerman & Co., Atlanta, which allowed me to create the *Rio Videowall*,

almost a half million dollar project. I just truly am not that good at playing the game of meeting sponsors, or snuggling up to the rich.

EW: All three of you are American, but have recently had (or will soon have) major solo exhibitions in Europe: Lynn at KW Institute, Berlin (2018) and House of Electronic Arts, Basel (2018); Ericka at Vienna Secession (2017) and the Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2018); and Dara at S.M.A.K., Ghent and the Museu Serralves, Porto (2010). What are your thoughts on your reception in Europe versus the United States?

EB: I find it really interesting that media artists now and conceptual artists before have had to rely heavily on European exhibitions for exposure and support. Their history of supporting the arts nationally and noncommercially has produced a culture that is a bit skeptical of the marketplace and, although running parallel to it, has the freedom take creative risks in programming. Everyone benefits.

LHL: I had great difficulty showing my work in the United States. Recognition came in Germany, Canada, Austria, and eventually the UK. The United States, particularly New York, took longer—in fact, I had very little presence in New York until just a few years ago. I don't know why. Perhaps it was because my work used technology, or defied categorization. Thankfully, at age seventy-two, my work was discovered in 2014, when Peter Weibel curated a retrospective and catalogue *CIVIC RADAR* at ZKM. That show had 702 works, and about sixty-five percent of them had never been shown or written about.

DB: Europe and the United States have different histories, including that of the contemporary arts. At first I felt it was Europe that better understood and could best contextualize media art. Now I am no longer sure. Europe, in a generalized way, for me has a longer-termed relevance and appreciation of the arts. America likes to turn art, as it does with all else, into commodity.

EW: I'm also curious about what you make of some of the historical group shows you've participated in: Ericka in *Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2009), Dara and Lynn in *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today* (ICA Boston, 2018), and Dara again in *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995* (MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2018) and *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980* (Met Breuer, New York, 2017). What's it like to see some of your work historicized as you make new work, and how do you see being associated—in some cases, sort of retroactively—with these movements?

DB: I am grateful for the exhibitions I've been in that keep my work alive, breathing, and exposed. The exhibitions you mentioned, such as *Before Projection* and *Art in the Age of the Internet*, were just up over the past few months, thereby forming a currency for media art today. Both were extremely well curated takes at historicizing this new creative contemporary medium. I can learn from such exhibitions, inhabit them, and be intrigued by them when they venture into unique definitions and explorations. Beyond that I am not interested, as I feel such curatorial gestures, while they can be strong and innovative, are for the viewer rather than the artist.

LHL: I'm grateful and a bit relieved that my work is now visible and collected. I love that the shows I am in now are mostly composed of artists who are thirty-five to forty years younger than I am. I'm learning a lot from young artists. Young curators and critics understand what I do and are giving me fantastic opportunities now, like Anna Gritz and Cathrin Mayer at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, with *First Person Plural*, or Sabine Himmelsbach at House of Electronic Arts Basel with the *Antibodies* exhibition, or Eva Respini at ICA Boston, and particularly Bridget Donahue and her New York gallery, which took a tremendous risk to show my work. The millennials were born, and they are the ones who understand what my work is about.

EB: I'm extremely happy for this resurgent interest in my early work and for the inclusion of my work in major institutional collections, and especially the dialogue with younger curators and artists surrounding my shows. As for historical shows, I always thought that structural film of the 1970s should be interwoven with the visual art of the same period, especially Conceptual and Earth art, which were concerned with duration and context. They were intertwined with concept and form, but I never read anything that acknowledged that.

EW: What art are you working on now?

LHL: I just completed a twelve-year project, *The Infinity Engine* (2014), in which a 1,500 foot installation about the implications of programming the genome is, in the last room, presented as DNA itself. I see that reduction as a haiku of the intent. I also worked with Novartis to create an antibody for both myself and a former construction named Roberta. Next year, I will complete the trilogy I began in 1993 with Tilda Swinton, including *Conceiving Ada* and *Teknolust*. Finally, I will complete the last part of my *Electronic Diary* (1984–ongoing), which will be about not only evolution, but also facing death. I am trying to secure unscheduled and unfiltered time now.

DB: I'm working on a new commission from the Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York. It will be shown there no later than April 2019. Since I'm directly engaged with this multichannel video installation—currently in the editing room—I prefer not to speak too much about it. This for me would take away from its creativity. However, I can briefly say that it starts with the 1964 race riots in Rochester and goes through to the first African American-Black syndicated television program, *Soul Train*.

EB: I just finished a lot of shooting. I got very excited when I discovered that Monopoly was altered from a socialist game designed by a woman named Elizabeth Magie in the early 1900s. Her game taught a socialist economic theory. I am fascinated with this idea of two economic systems competing against each other, and decided my next film would try to visualize that as two competing games.

Lynn Hershman Leeson (1941, United States) is an artist and filmmaker based in San Francisco and New York. A pioneering media artist, her work deals with issues such as identity in a time of consumerism, privacy in an era of surveillance, interfacing of humans and machines, and the relationship between real and virtual worlds. She has focused on the changing relationship

between the body and technology, leading her to work with artificial intelligence, biological computing, and DNA manipulation. Recent solo exhibitions include *Civic Radar* (ZKM, 2014), *First Person Plural* (KW, 2018), and *Anti-Bodies* (HeK, 2018). Group exhibitions include *Electronic Superhighway* (Whitechapel Gallery, 21016) and *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today* (ICA/Boston, 2018). Her films have been shown in the Sundance Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and Berlin International Film Festival. Her work is in numerous collections, including MoMA, SF MoMA, ZKM, the Hess Collection, the Tate Modern, and others.

Dara Birnbaum (1946, United States) is a video and installation artist based in New York. Her provocative media works are among the most influential and innovative contributions to the contemporary discourse on art and television. Birnbaum entered the nascent field of video art in the mid-1970s, challenging the gendered biases of the period as well as television's ever-growing presence within the American household. Solo exhibitions include *Psalm 29(30)* (Marian Goodman Gallery, 2017), *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (MoMA, 2008) and *Dara Birnbaum—Retrospective: The Dark Matter of Media Light* (S.M.A.K., 2009 and Museu Serralves, 2010). Recent group exhibitions include *Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s* (Hirschhorn, 2018), *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995* (MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2018), and *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today* (ICA Boston, 2018). She has been the recipient of numerous distinguished awards, including: TV Picture Prize, International Festival of Video and Electronic Arts in Locarno, Switzerland; Certificate in Recognition of Service and Contribution to the Arts, Harvard University; and the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists. Her work is in major collections including the Kramlich Collection, MoMA, The Tate Modern, Museu Serralves, Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Ericka Beckman (1951, United States) is an artist and filmmaker based in New York. Largely associated with the Pictures Generation, her films concern the relationship between people and images, and how images structure people's perception of themselves and of reality. Her playful yet formally demanding films challenge traditional aesthetic and cultural values that mix games with fairytales to create hybrids with new rules. She studied in John Baldessari's post-studio, as well as the Whitney Independent Study program. Recent solo exhibitions include *Ericka Beckman* (The Zabłudowicz Collection, 2018), *Game Mechanics* (Secession, Vienna, 2017), and *You The Better* (2015, Mary Boone). Group exhibitions include *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (The Met, 2009) and *Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970-1980* (Whitney, 2013). Her work is in numerous collections, including the Walker Art Center, the Centre Pompidou, the Metropolitan Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and others.

Emily Watlington is a 2018-2019 Fulbright Scholar based in Berlin and Cambridge, MA. Previously, she was the curatorial research assistant at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, and holds a SMArchS degree in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art from MIT. In addition to being a contributor to *Mousse*, she has written for numerous publications including *Frieze*, *Art Papers*, *Leonardo*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. Recently, she contributed to the exhibition catalogs *Sheida Soleimani: Medium of Exchange*, *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995*, and *An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art*. In 2018, she

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received the Vera List Writing Prize for Visual Arts for an essay she wrote on Ericka Beckman's work. Currently, she is at work on a project titled "Pretty Gross: Aestheticized Abjection in Feminist Video Art, 1996-2009," and is editing a special issue of *Art Papers* on disability and the politics of visibility.