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Mirrors and Mimesis: An Examination of the Strategies of Image Appropriation and Repetition in the Work of Dara Birnbaum

Dot Tuer

SLOGANS TO BE SPREAD NOW BY EVERY MEANS

(leaflets, announcements over microphones, comic strips, songs, graffiti, balloons on paintings in the Sorbonne, announcements in theatres during films or while disrupting them, balloons on subway billboards, before making love, after making love, in elevators, everytime you raise your glass in a bar):

OCCUPY THE FACTORIES

POWER TO THE WORKERS COUNCILS

ABOLISH CLASS SOCIETY

DOWN WITH SPECTACLE- COMMODITY SOCIETY

ABOLISH ALIENATION

OCCUPATION COMMITTEE OF THE AUTONOMOUS

AND POPULAR SORBONNE UNIVERSITY

16 May 1968,7:00p.m. (1)

Je voulais écrire une poème

Je voulais écrire deux poèmes

Ce voulais écrire dix poèmes

Je voudrais écrire cent poèmes

mais je fais la révolution.(2)

The poem above preceeds the opening credits of Dara Birnbaum's *Canon: Taking To The Street*(1990)

In Dara Birnbaum's single channel videotape, *Canon: Taking To The Street*, (1990), the political act of taking to the street is framed and reframed through an *n.paradoxa* online issue no.3 May 1997

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iconic evocation to the Paris uprising of May 1968 and a digital reworking of amateur video footage from a Take Back the Night march held at Princeton University in April, 1987. In the opening sequence of the videotape, the words from a poem of art and revolution appear line by line on the screen. The background, a faint rose colour, turns to a vibrant revolutionary red as the lines of the poem add up to an affirmation of action over art. Then images from the silk screen posters made by students in 1968 burst upon the screen, and as quickly disappear. In quick animated succession, a line drawing of a woman throwing a brick with the accompanying slogan, *La Beauté et dans la rue*, is followed by a figure muzzled by the hand of authority with the slogan *Sois jeune et tais toi*, a blindfolded figure speaking into a microphone with the slogan *Informacion Libre* a fist with the slogan *Leur compagne recommence*. *Notre lutte continue*, and a final image of the Sorbonne With the words *université populaire. OUI*. In the wake of this quick time accumulation of historical references, video footage bursts through a line drawing of the brick: transforming a weapon of the street into television screen within the screen. Still-born icons of another era cast into motion, the hand made posters give birth to the indistinct and grainy black and white video images of a march held fifteen years later, and they in turn give birth to a complex entanglement of recorded fragments of history and their artistic representation. On one hand, the sharp contours of the poster's line drawings, imbued with the confrontational patina of an historical specificity, contrast starkly with the abstracted and dreamlike images of the Take Back the Night march, in which shadowy figures of an indeterminate darkness could belong to any street and any protest of a post-Vietnam era demonstration. On the other, the *speeding up* of historical time through the animation of inert posters, and *slowing down* of historical time through the digital manipulation of the video footage collapses temporal demarcations between these two moments of passionate resistance, blurring the boundaries between authenticity and simulation. Doubling back upon each other within an electronic sphere of mediation, the images in Canon become a series of ghostly echoes that displace the nostalgia for a representational purity with a slippage between art and action. Recasting the recorded fragments of the past as both the subject and object of a technological repetition, Birnbaum points to the fragility and the potency of image appropriation as an artistic gesture of remembrance and of re-enactment. For while the students of the Ecole des Beaux Artes in Paris worked feverishly through the night to produce artisanal images heralding a revolutionary daylight it was the visual remnants of their failure that inspired the students of Princeton to take to the streets with portable video cameras to claim back the night.

A deftly wrought play between the specificity of history and its re-imaging within an electronic sphere of mediation, Canon's conceptual framework pivots on the use of a double-edged strategy of appropriation and repetition: a strategy that has been central to Birnbaum's artistic practice over the last two decades. From early works

such as *Technology Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978) that takes as its subject the image circulation of gender through television, to her recent work, *Hostage*, (1994), that takes as its focus the media coverage of the kidnapping of a German industrialist, Hanns Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction in 1977, Birnbaum has explored the entanglements of identity and ideology through the juxtaposition and recirculation of found images. An image flaneur of the global village, Birnbaum takes as her site of investigation the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision, described by theorist Paul Virilio as the "the handling of simultaneous data in a global but unstable environment where the image is the most concentrated but also the most unstable form of information." (3) Prowling on the edges of this vast technological apparatus, she isolates and recontextualizes fragments from a swirl of electronic data to reflect upon the ways in which culture remakes nature and mediation reshapes identity.

In so doing, Birnbaum's artistic practice aligns itself philosophically and conceptually with a vision of technologically saturated environment that extends from Marshall McLuhan's claim in 1964 that 'after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself into a global embrace, abolishing time and space as far as our planet is concerned,'(4) to Jean Baudrillard's assertion of a post-modern condition as one of a simulacrum, in which 'simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.' (5) Yet despite the obvious affinities in Birnbaum's work with the ways in which McLuhan's global nervous system or Baudrillard's simulacrum challenge a representational purity that privileges originals over copies, she shares little of McLuhan's unbridled optimism or Baudrillard's pessimistic passivity for technology's omnipotence. Rather than succumb to McLuhan's enthusiasm for technology's potential to refashion the self, or surrender to Baudrillard's modernist lament for a reality lost in the shuffle of degraded copies, Birnbaum's artistic practice calls into question the ideological underpinnings of a global nervous system, locates within the simulacrum the potential to destabilise the fixed identity of gender, to pry loose history from its temporal moorings.

In seeking to inscribe a site of intervention upon the smooth surface of the simulacrum, Birnbaum's complex play in her work upon copies within copies also finds a resonance in Gilles Deleuze's critique of a Platonic idealism that underpins the ordering of representation in Western culture (6) in Deleuze's reading of Plato's hostility to an imitation or mimesis of appearances, he notes that Plato distinguishes between good copies and bad copies. Good copies are based upon the degree to which the representation of appearances resemble ideal forms or Ideas. Bad copies, on the other hand, are imitations of appearances that while seeming to perfectly mimic reality are upon close inspection not even like the originals they profess to resemble. In Plato it is bad copies that give rise to the simulacra; to a false representation that

challenges the primacy of sameness linking appearances to models to Ideal Forms And it is the simulacra that Plato represses in the search for a knowledge and truth that enlightens rather than deceives, purifies rather than contaminates.

In turn, argues Deleuze, Plato's decision to exorcise the simulacra from the order of representation constructs a legacy in Western culture of repressing difference in favour of sameness, in repressing the power of mimesis to conjure phantasms of indeterminacy, to infuse the copy with the power to affect the original. What is condemned in the process, writes Deleuze, 'is the state of free, oceanic differences, of nomadic distributions, and crowned anarchy'(7) Thus to assert the primacy of the simulacra is not to give into a world of degraded copies, but in Deleuze's words to 'render the order of participation, the fixity of distribution, the determination of hierarchy impossible.'(8). For Deleuze, then, what is at stake in the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision, in the sense of each image of reality in turn affecting reality, of a nervous shifting and sliding of constants into constant flux of exchange, is a reordering of difference and sameness, an unravelling of fixed identities and representational certainty.

In one of Birnbaum's earliest works *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, (1978) it this primacy of the simulacrum that is asserted in her image appropriation of a popular American television show of the 1970s. Similar to other video works produced by Birnbaum from 1978-1982, she describes her strategy in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* as one of 'attempting to slow down the 'technological speed' of television and arresting moments of TV time for the viewer, which would then allow for examination and questioning.'(9) in so doing, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* becomes a crucial example of Birnbaum's ongoing investigation of the ways in which an interrogation of identity and ideology cannot be disentangled from the proliferation of images within a contemporary field of vision. Distilling from the smooth narrative space of television the explosive moments of Wonder Woman's transformation from office girl to all American Amazon, Birnbaum reveals in *Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman* a doubling of identity within mediation, points to gender as subject to an image chain of reproductions. For as the figure of Wonder Woman repeatedly *appears* and *disappears* in a puff of smoke, it is not the difference between her two selves, but their sameness, that becomes visible. Within this image play upon temporality and repetition the fluidity of identity is unveiled as an optical illusion; the ordering of difference and sameness is called into question. A seemingly simple act of isolating fragments from a global nervous system of image circulation, Birnbaum's gesture points to both the determinacy and the indeterminacy of gender within the simulacrum: in which the accidental and the heterogeneous reworking of television destabilises identity as that puff of smoke occurring between images.

In choosing to focus upon the *special effects* that enact Wonder Woman's dizzying metamorphosis from a secretary to a prototype cyborg, Birnbaum's intervention upon

the smooth space of the simulacrum reveals not only a doubling of identity but of ideology. For in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it is not only the fixity of identity that is unveiled as an optical illusion but the emergence of a *new* woman through technology. In so doing, this early work by Birnbaum offers an interesting counterpoint to the feminist artists of the seventies who heralded the video screen as an emancipatory interface of self and technology that would undo an ideological and historical overdetermination of gender within mediation.

For curator Mary Jane Jacob, 'access to video allowed women and others- until then marginalized by the mainstream - to have an equal voice,'(10) while critic Martha Gever proffered that video reposed a redefinition of reality by asserting the validity of women's existence and experiences, by challenging accepted ideas about those experiences. (11). 'With its grainy white and black images, awkward close up framing and image feedback capabilities, feminism with a portapak appeared to offer the opportunity to turn the technological eye of the camera back upon the simulacrum, to refuse the narrative devices and encoded repetitions of television through a fluid mirroring of body and machine that art critic Rosalind Krauss has termed an "aesthetics of narcissism.'(12)

Upon a closer examination, however, the utopian aspirations for this *new* interface of technology to challenge an overdetermination of gender through self-exploration and self-representation disappears like Wonder Woman in the lightning flash of an explosion. For while video offered women artists the potential to explore the identity of self as an ever-changing, shifting, and unstable reflection of *reality*, the ease with which they entered the arena of video art also can also be traced to an already predetermined system of ideological coding; a coding in which the entrance of women into the work force and public space at the turn of the century was linked to the gender-typing of the typewriter and the telephone. In turn, the attribution of technological innovations in the industrial work place with specific gender traits can be traced to a nineteenth century speculations upon the relationship of electricity as the *vital source* of female energy: a speculation that finds its materialisation in the telephone operator, the office girl, and in the contemporary armies of word processors and micro-chip fabricators.

For example, a recruitment catalogue for secretaries from 1892 notes that 'as stenographers and typists (women) have special qualifications in neatness, taste, deftness of action, and quickness of perception, and there is no line of industry to which they are better adapted ... possessing nimble fingers, nervous and delicate organs and being quick to hear, think, and comprehend.' (13) Similarly, the decision of the Bell Telephone company in the 1890s to use women operators instead of men was accompanied by an assertion of femininity as essential to a human interface between a flow of electricity and the voice. The trade magazine of Ma Bell, as the company is informally known, praised in 1898 the 'clear feminine quality of the voice' as best suited to 'the delicate instrument of the telephone,' proposing that

women could "put their femininity to the service of the community"(14) through their occupation as telephone operators. In turn, the gender-typing of technology at the turn of the century finds its contemporary echoes in Marshall McLuhan's description of the telephone as a kind of electronic call girl, and his argument that ' the typewriter and the telephone are most unidentical twins that have taken over the revamping of the American girl with a technological ruthlessness and thoroughness." (15)

In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it is the "technological ruthlessness and thoroughness" of this gender-typing that becomes visible through Birnbaum's double-edged strategy of appropriation and repetition. Isolating from a global swirl of images those of an office girl and her Amazon double, Birnbaum highlights the simulacrum's fantasy projection of an instant emancipation from the dreary and everyday exploitation of white collar labour. Simultaneously, Birnbaum's constant repetition of Wonder Woman's explosive moment of transformation bears witness to the violence that the simulacrum enacts upon the social body. Reworking the narrative devices and encoded repetitions of television, Birnbaum turns the eye of the camera back upon the simulacrum to reveal in the "new" interface of the video screen a container of old and problematical ideologies. For, as Wonder Woman stares into a mirror during a sequence of the tape, it is not a fluid exchange of identity that is reflected back, but the chimera of a technologically induced liberation. Here, the narcissistic gaze of video art is hemmed in by the insistent glare of the mass media; the utopian aspirations to refashion the self through a "new" interface of technology are encircled by the image proliferations of a central nervous system. A subject produced not only by technology, but also by ideology, Wonder Woman's "good copy" of her former secretarial self offers up an illusory emancipation: an illusion that is echoed by the soundtrack of the videotape, in which Wonder Woman's image is framed by the overtly sexual lyrics and fabricated voices of The Wonder Woman in Discoland Band - a group explicitly engineered and marketed during the height of the television's show's popularity to cash in on the commodity fetishism of Wonder Woman's mystique.

Playing a double game with technology's seduction in *Technology/Transformation : Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum unveils within the simulacrum a seamless web of images that tightens imperceptibly around a capacity to distinguish the self from its technological interface. Responding to this spectre of a technological omnipotence, she repositions the viewer as a smart agent of mediation navigating a nervous flow of images and data. In so doing, this early work by Birnbaum becomes an example of counter-modernist or anti-modernist strategy: locating within the simulacrum a site of ideological contestation in which a cybernetic collapse of TV's, VCR's, PC's, satellite transmissions, and cable networks threaten to redefine consciousness as subject to the interfaces of a global feedback system. Here, the entanglement of technology and ideology is externalised in the sensation of surveillance cameras stalking one at every turn, like a secret agent who is discreet

in his distance, but nevertheless persistent in his task of shadowing one's every activity. It is internalised in the rarefied experiments of corporate laboratories such as Xerox's Palo Alto Research Centre in California, in which a visionary investment in the development of ubiquitous computing leads Mark Weisner, the head of its Computer Science Laboratory, to proclaim that 'the most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it.'⁽¹⁶⁾

Ten years after the making of *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, it is this seamless weaving of ideology and the social body through the video interface of a global feedback system that becomes the focus of Birnbaum's Rio Videowall. A public art wall project commissioned and designed for an Atlanta shopping mall Rio Videowall extends Birnbaum's interrogation of the simulacrum as a site of contestation to an investigation of the ways in which a proliferation of image and data flow occupy the social body, subjecting the reordering of difference and sameness to an ideological circularity. In the middle of the public plaza, Birnbaum has placed a video bank of twenty five monitors. When the plaza is emptied of people, the data bank of images exist in a dormant state of aestheticized tranquillity: filled with digitalized images of the natural landscape existing on the site of the mall before it was built. However, when the shoppers fill the plaza, the movement of their bodies interrupts this smooth simulacrum landscape. For within the mall itself, two live surveillance cameras are linked to the video wall, so that when pedestrians pass in front of the camera, the silhouettes of their bodies are keyed into the pristine Edenic state of the image data banks. As the live body is dematerialised through the surveillance camera and rematerialized as an image in the plaza, the body's shell is simultaneously filled with live satellite transmissions from CNN: Atlanta, of course, being the hometown of Ted Turner's media empire. In the process, a riot confusion of feedback and transmission, appearances and copies, ensues: pointing to the interface of the video screen as a mechanism of representation that leads, in Paul Virillio's words 'from the aesthetics of the appearance of a stable image to the aesthetics of the disappearance of an unstable image.'⁽¹⁷⁾

Using the interface of the video screen to intertwine the architecture of commodification and rewriting of the body through information, the distractions of the mall and the distractions of the news flow are temporally suspended and conflated within the simulacrum. Here, the externalisation of technology through surveillance and internalisation of technology through the ubiquitous computing of Xerox PARC are reversed. Instead of technologies 'weaving themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it,' Birnbaum's installation highlights the invisible economies of technology's coercion. For rather than amplifying an information flow of data and images, the insertions of the bodies as shells overflowing with information points to the sensory deprivation that occurs when the determinacy of culture displaces the indeterminacy of nature. In the Rio

Videowall project, the reordering of sameness and difference through the interface of the video screen points to the paradoxical function of technology to insure an ideological unity through a decentralisation of image transmission. In so doing, Birnbaum's work serves to echo a warning issued by Michael Taussig, (an Australian anthropologist and theorist) that 'the most critically important feature of the war of silencing is its geographical, epistemological and military strategic decentredness.'⁽¹⁸⁾

In Birnbaum's work, *Hostage*, first exhibited at the Paula Cooper gallery in New York in 1994, an interrogation of the global nervous system at its most nervous ensues: an interrogation that explicitly links Virilio's 'aesthetics of the disappearance of an unstable image' to such a war of silencing. A six channel video installation with an interactive laser beam, *Hostage* takes as its point of departure the media coverage of the kidnapping of the German industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction in 1977, and the subsequent suicide of three of the Baader Meinhof members in Stammheim prison. In the installation, four monitors were suspended from the ceiling, diagonally spanning the gallery space. Another two monitors were mounted at eye level on opposite walls of the gallery with a laser beam ruffling between them at the chest height. On the four monitors suspended from the ceiling, images of archival television footage of events from the period of the kidnapping are simultaneously transmitted: images montaged and repeated by Birnbaum to construct from the invisible order of the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision a perceptible chaos.

At the far end of the gallery, the video screen mounted on the wall featured an interview with Schleyer videotaped through the eye of the vitro clandestine camera of the kidnapers, and rebroadcast on German television at the time of the kidnapping to *prove* Schleyer was still alive. Directly opposite this video, the sixth monitor bombarded the viewer with fast cutting clips in which text from various American newspaper reports on the hostage taking crisis and the Red Army Faction is superimposed upon a visual background of archival footage from the other monitors. When the viewer passed in front on the laser beam that connected the two monitors, the image and text on the news gathering monitor was frozen in time and space for as long as the viewer remained in the line of the laser's light. Fragmented, disjointed, nervous making the video installation positioned the viewer in a place where all images were collapsed into simultaneous time. The viewer, as much as the Germans at the time of the kidnapping, is held hostage to an image machine: as if the interface of a global feedback system had gone awry, no longer assuring control but producing chaos. Here, interactivity was not the allure of integration, but the shock of finding oneself a target of the nervous system. For it is only when caught in the 'light' of the laser beam that historical time was momentarily frozen.

In turn, the role of the viewer as a media target was mirrored by the plexiglass silhouettes of a firing range target that were suspended in front of each ceiling monitor, Resembling the shell of a body, these targets became metaphorical

interfaces between body and screen, explicitly linking the omnipotence of technology to state control. On each target, the imprint of a bullseye ring was elongated to simulate a fingerprint: evoking another form of interface in which the imprint of the body's contact with the state entangles identity and ideology not only in the flow of images but the classification of information. At the beginning of each of the six video tapes that were continuously playing, an image of this target was reproduced and superimposed upon an electronic identification countdown for the broadcast transmission of United Press International Television Network. Serving as an image map for the information flow on the video screens, this target was keyed with the words, *roving reporter*, to acknowledge the independent news gathering service from which Birnbaum obtained the footage for *Hostage*. Footage that had been withheld by all the major mass media sources and German television. As the countdown reached zero, the image of the target was riddled with bullet shots, further adding to the noise and confusion of the installation's visual pandemonium.

While only the most determined viewer could have pieced together the disparate data of the six monitors into a coherent narrative, a viewing of Birnbaum's installation channel by channel makes explicit the many guises in which the State deploys the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision. For the German state, the screen not only functions to transmit information, but to withhold it. It becomes a mask to black-out information, a tool of negotiating with the kidnappers, a broadcast site for the video sent by the kidnappers of Schleyer. After the murder and recovery of Schleyer's body, it also serves to resurrect the body of Schleyer as a martyr to the central nervous system's collapse, in the newspaper text on the sixth monitor which included a *New York Times* report that 'television cancelled programs and substituted funeral music,' and a *Chicago Tribune* report on October 26, 1977, that 'the ceremony was televised into the factories of Daimler-Benz, of which Schleyer had been a director.' On the other hand, for the members of the Baader Meinhof group, the interface of the screen becomes a site of absence, a space in which only the guards at Stammheim prison are witness to a continual video surveillance. As a result, the subsequent "suicides" of the Baader Meinhof members while in prison become a discursive site of media theatre, in which the reports on the hostage taking crisis circulating in print medium construct a narrative that fills in the image gaps of television.

In Birnbaum's archival reworking of this narrative, she uncovers the use of gendered identity by the mass media as a division between monstrosity and violence. Interspersed throughout the more factual reports on the hostage taking, news clips from American sources on the sixth monitor construct a psychology of West German "terrorism" based upon women's participation in the Red Army Faction. Revealing the paradoxical determinacy and indeterminacy of gender in the flow of information, Newsweek attributes this phenomenon 'to the typical emotional fervour of females,' while simultaneously reporting the denunciation of a German woman politician who

argues that "these women negate everything that is part of the established feminine character." *The Chicago Tribune* quotes a German police official in saying "women's participation (in terrorism) is the dark side of women's emancipation," while a headline of the *Los Angeles Times*, "A new generation of deadly young women," is accompanied by an assessment of a German criminologist who links their feminine pathology to "the influence of domineering mothers,' and fathers who were "often described as dictatorial and absent." But perhaps the most succinct analysis is offered by a neighbour of a Baader Meinhof member, who is quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as describing how "she sang communist songs all night and never cleaned the stairs."

A cacophony of image circulation and information overload, *Hostage* succeeds in locating in the hostage taking crisis of 1977 a collapse of the nervous system upon itself. It pinpoints an historical moment in which the interface of the screen and the image bled over into the social body to entangle image and response, terror and repression. Holding up a mirror of the nervous system to itself, Birnbaum reveals behind an ordered system of representation a deadly embrace of appearances, in which the Baader Meinhof group and the German state are caught into a game of mimicry in which each imitates the other in a constant escalation of violence. Conjuring image phantoms from history to reveal the internal logic of the nervous system, she escalates a nervous flow of images to the point where the interface of the screen becomes a death space in which the copies of the simulacra stare down upon each other. For like the ancient Aztec god of sorcery, Tezcatlipoca, whose allusive smoking mirror revealed behind the chimera of the image the raw face of power, Birnbaum points in *Hostage* to the coercive mechanisms of image control that underlie an image proliferation. And as a sorcerer, Birnbaum also uses *Hostage* to reinvest the images of history with meaning. Reordering images through the simulation of an historical moment, Birnbaum mimics the constant movement of the nervous system to fracture the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision into a "profane illumination" of discordance. In so doing, Birnbaum points to the potential of re-enchanting history through the image phantasms that lurk beneath the smooth surface of the simulacrum: embracing the strategy of a roving reporter who sifts through image banks to discover the ghosts of ideology that haunt the interfaces of a global feedback system.

Perhaps what is most fascinating in Birnbaum's *Hostage* is the inability of the mass media coverage that inundates the viewer on the sixth monitor to offer a cogent analysis of the system's sudden nervousness, outside, of- course, an interpretation of women guerrillas as the unfortunate by-product of female emancipation. *Time* and *Newsweek* coverage of the event in 1977 offer 'no ready explanation to the terrorist movement except that it grew out of the Vietnam War,' noting that the 'emergence of a fanatical minority has baffled analysts. Such bafflement was not ingenuous. Attempts by leading European theorists in Semiotext(e)'s German Issue to disentangle the ideological and technological strands that wove the mimetic

escalation of violence in Germany, a sense of unease and confusion ensues compounded by division of the pages of the journal to mimic the division of the Berlin Wall (18). At the same time, it was here that Paul Virilio first published *Pure War* and Jean Baudrillard began his slippery theoretical slide towards the hyperreal. In this light, it is interesting to note that in Paul Virilio's *L'Espace Critique*, published in 1984, he contextualizes his analysis of the ubiquitousness of contemporary vision by arguing that the architecture of a global system is generated as a response to the euroterrorism of the late 1970s whereby the 'screen interface of computers, televisions, and teleconference, the surface of inscriptions, hitherto devoid of depth, becomes a kind of *distance*, a depth of field of a new kind of representation, a visibility without any face-to-face encounter' (19). In linking the image proliferations of the simulacrum to the defensive responses of a multinational capitalism and to the material traces of architecture, Virilio's analysis, like Birnbaum's *Hostage*, not only isolates the nervous system at its most nervous, but points to the ways in which economic, political, and military power is reformatted upon an image plane of information. For as a strategic focal point of a multinational capitalism's bid for global hegemony, the screen interface has not denuded representation of its power to influence the lived realities and productive forces of society, but paradoxically, doubled the stakes of representation's power to influence the global course of politics and economics. From the televised simulations of the Gulf War to the frenzied trading of international money markets, the capitalist infrastructure that the students of May 1968 sought so idealistically to overthrow holds post-industrial society captive to what Michael Taussig has termed 'the visual contract with reality,' (21) in which a mimetic structure of mediation accords the copy the power to affect the original. For in 1995, the ideological bipolarity that was unravelling in a still divided Germany's confrontation with the Baader Meinhof has collapsed into a global embrace of technology as an tool of enhancement, offering up the utopian fantasies of a cyberspace future as a salve for the violence that an Information Revolution enacts upon the social body.

In response to this increasing abstraction of technology and increasing power of the simulacrum, Birnbaum's work deploys the screen interface as a mirror to disrupt a mimetic structure of mediation: reflecting back and destabilising the entanglements of ideology and identity, of politics and the social body within a global feedback system. As such, Birnbaum's artistic interventions upon the smooth space of the simulacrum become highly political in intent. Rather than accord art the status of a pale and ineffective shadow of mass media, she points to its potential to function to render the internal logic of a global nervous system transparent, to conjure up the image phantoms of history embedded in a proliferation of images as material adversaries in a border war between ideology and identity. Here the seemingly irreconcilable opposites of art and action in May 1968 are reconfigured to point to the importance of art as an act of political intervention. For, to paraphrase Mark

Weisner's claim that the 'most profound technologies are those that disappear', the most profound ideologies are also those that disappear through technology's invisible economies of domination. To challenge these invisible economies of domination as Birnbaum does in her work is to locate within the simulacrum not only a site of contestation but resistance: excavating from the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision the power copies have to interrogate an ordered hierarchy of representation, to undermine the ideological underpinnings of a global nervous system.

Notes

1. May 1968 document reproduced in *Ken Knabb (ed. and trans.) The Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) p. 344
2. Anonymous author, reproduced in Dara Birnbaum's *Canon: Taking to the Street*, 1990
3. Paul Virilio *War and Cinema* Translation by Patrick Camiller. (New York: Verso, 1989) p. 71
4. Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1964) p. 3
5. Jean Baudrillard 'The Precession of Simulacra' in Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (eds) *Simulations. Translation* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) p. 2
6. I would like to acknowledge Paul Patton's superb synthesis of Gilles Deleuze's critique of Plato and Seth Benardete's commentary on Plato in formulating my summary of Deleuze's theory. See Paul Patton, 'AntiPlatonism and Art' in Constantin V. Boundas & Dorothea Olkowski (eds) *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Seth Benardete *Plato's Sophist*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)
7. Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* Translation by Paul Patton. (London: Athlone Press, 1 (1994) p. 265
8. Cited by Paul Patton in 'Anti-Platonism and Art' in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy* op. cit, p. 152
9. Dara Birnbaum, 'Author's Introduction' in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (ed) *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980*. (Halifax: Nova Scotia pamphlets 4, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987) p. 13
10. Mary Jane Jacob cited by Jo Ann Hanley in *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75* (New York, Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993) p. 10. Exhibition Catalogue.
11. Martha Gever cited by Jo Ann Hanley *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75* p. 14
12. This phrase was coined by Rosalind Krauss in "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *New Artists Video*, ed. Gregory Batcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978) p. 43
13. Cited in Graham Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution: The Feminization of Clerical Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) p. 75
14. Cited in Michele Martin, 'Hello Central?' in *Gender, Technology and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), p.59
15. Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* op cit., p. 266

16. Mark Weisner 'The Computer for the 21st Century' in *Scientific America* (Vol. 265, No. 3, September 1991) p. 94
17. Paul Virilio *The Lost Dimension*. Translated by Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991) p. 25
18. Michael Taussig *The Nervous System* (New York ; Routledge, 1992)p. 21
19. Paul Virilio *L'espace Critique* (1984)
20. Paul Virilio *The Lost Dimension* p12

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