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## THE BOX

August 1–31, 2016

### Dara Birnbaum

*Technology/Transformation:  
Wonder Woman (1978)*

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Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978. © Dara Birnbaum. Courtesy: Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org).

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#### Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman

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Opening with a series of fiery explosions, Dara Birnbaum's landmark video *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* takes on new relevance today, when the popularity of superheroes and fantastical characters has seemingly reached its zenith. In a world marked by political uncertainty and all-too-common violence, it is perhaps unsurprising that the public would turn to characters with inhuman powers and unassailable virtue to fill the media landscape. But as Birnbaum's striking work reveals, behind the narratives of strength, honor, and courage hide damaging and lingering stereotypes and the grip of the media machine.

#### Technology

On its initial reception, *Technology/Transformation* was hailed as a milestone of feminist critique and Birnbaum (b. 1946) as a cunning media analyst. Taking scenes from the television program *Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum employed some of the popular techniques of the day—appropriation and repetition—to call attention not only to the damaging mass media stereotypes of femininity but also the heavily constructed nature of media icons. Diana Prince, unassuming secretary, spins and spins, finally exploding into her statuesque alter ego, the ageless Amazon Wonder Woman. Birnbaum edits the footage carefully, and with each repetition of the movement, the viewer is led farther from the narrative context of the original work to the critical possibilities of video. By the late 1970s, video had been established as the medium for artists to take on the constantly expanding mass media behemoth. By excluding the standard techniques of narrative and sequentiality, Birnbaum reveals how television itself conveys ideological messages through standard strategies of manipulation.

Birnbaum's selection of the female superhero as the focus for her critique placed her squarely among other feminist film and video artists, including Chantal Akerman, Laura Mulvey, and Martha Rosler. For although *Wonder Woman* is true hero, she nonetheless reinforces damaging stereotypes of femininity. We see her in a mirrored room, her reflection calling attention to the source of her abilities: a belt, bracelets, and a tiara. Where her male counterparts are equipped with superhuman strength or speed or weapons like enchanted swords or hammers, *Wonder Woman* draws her skills from traditionally feminine accessories. She spins like a dancer to change from her day-to-day identity into a superhero. Her belt lends her strength, and affixed to it is her Lasso of Truth. Her tiara is a razor-edged throwing weapon, which returns to her like a boomerang. Her bracelets deflect bullets and can cut through any material. *Wonder Woman* may be powerful, but Birnbaum highlights that her power is derived from beauty and adornment, much the same dilemma that women face on a daily, though less dramatic, basis. As if to emphasize her distaste for such a contradictory figure, Birnbaum focuses on the moment when *Wonder Woman* cuts through her own reflection, slicing delicately and repeatedly at her throat, a look of single-minded determination on her face.

#### Transformation

The real strength of Birnbaum's work is its shifting adaptability. Whereas at its first presentation it was heralded as a biting feminist critique, *Technology/Transformation* nonetheless retains its significance nearly 40 years later in a 'post-feminist' landscape. At the video's conclusion, the song "Wonder Woman in Discoland" plays while the lyrics scroll up across a blue screen. The husky sensuality of the singer's voice and the words themselves suggest that *Wonder Woman* draws power in large part from her sexuality (or her "wonder maker"). Although second-wave feminism bristled at what it identified as the reduction of women's value, today the discussion encompasses the ways in which empowered sexuality is seen as a strength rather than a weakness or a concession to patriarchal control. What better figure to represent this stunning transformation of feminist values than *Wonder Woman*, who herself has evolved and maintained a critical presence in the media landscape since her arrival on the scene in the 1940s. Birnbaum's appropriation of this complex icon captures not only the artist's deft hand at critique that remains relevant today, but also the continued importance of the figure of *Wonder Woman* herself. And on the verge of yet another reimagining (the fourth film installment in the DC Extended Universe set to be released in 2017), there is no better time to revisit Birnbaum's video.

—Annie Jacobson  
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*Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* is on view as part of our summer film series *Don't Call Me Honey: Fierce Women of Film*, which highlights cinematic contributions by women across genres and eras while considering the idea of "fierce" in all forms—from trailblazing filmmakers to kick-ass performances.

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**Dara Birnbaum**  
*Technology/Transformation, 1978*  
5:45 mins., video

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