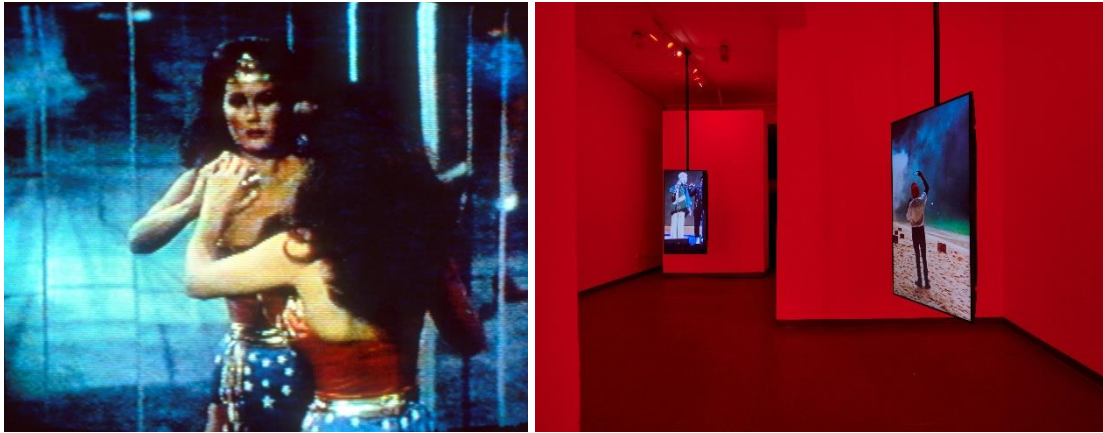




**Two Generations of Groundbreaking Video Artists
Spotlighted in Major Exhibitions Opening This June at
CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art**

**First U.S. Retrospective of Dara Birnbaum Surveys Artist's Influential Career,
From the Emergence of Video Art in the 1970s Through Four Decades of Creative Practice**

**New and Recent Works by Martine Syms Explore Systems of Representation
and the Role of Digital Media in Shaping Culture Today**



Images (from left to right): Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978/79; Martine Syms, *Ugly Plymouths*, 2020.

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (June 15, 2022)—This June, CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art will present major solo exhibitions of **Dara Birnbaum** (born 1946) and **Martine Syms** (born 1988), providing audiences a rare opportunity to experience the work of two artists who have made a significant impact on the development of video art. *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction*, the artist's first retrospective in the United States, is an in-depth examination of Birnbaum's influential contributions in video throughout a multifaceted career that both responds to and anticipates the development of popular culture. *Martine Syms: Grio College* highlights recent and never-before-seen works that interrogate digital media's influence on our lives and explore representations of Blackness and its relationship to vernacular, feminist thought, and radical traditions. Both exhibitions are on view from June 25 through November 27, 2022.

"The Hessel Museum of Art provides a platform for new discourses in contemporary art and culture. This season, we focus on the work of two pioneering artists who share a basic impulse to leverage media as a tool for revealing fundamental truths about society, identity, and politics," said Tom Eccles, Executive Director of the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and Founding Director of the Hessel Museum of Art. "Conceived separately and yet presented concurrently, these exhibitions collectively encourage the viewer to question the evolving role of technology and media in our lives—beginning with Birnbaum, one the first artists to experiment in video art in the 1970s and the first to focus on the systems of power inherent in television and mass media, to Syms, who carries forward a similar ethos of experimentation

and criticality into new digital platforms, including the web and AI, to offer comment on experiences that are both deeply personal and broadly shared.”

Dara Birnbaum: Reaction

Reaction charts a wide and in-depth view of Dara Birnbaum’s extraordinary and influential practice, marking the indelible contribution she has made not only to American art but to the global histories of video, Conceptual, performance, and appropriation art. Organized chronologically and marking the first U.S. retrospective of the artist’s work to date, the exhibition surveys works from 1975 to 2011 with a focus on key single-channel videos and major installations, many not seen in the United States for years. An accompanying presentation of archival material will illustrate her rigorous and interdisciplinary method, while illuminating the varied contexts of her work in art, music, and politics.

“Many techniques that Birnbaum first tested—re-editing found footage and inserting remixed footage back into public networks—prefigure the operations of popular media culture today,” said Lauren Cornell, Director of the Graduate Program and Chief Curator at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. “Yet what is truly Birnbaum’s legacy, beyond these direct formal antecedents, is her systems analysis and her insistence on engaging media on her own terms.”

The exhibition begins with her first video exercises and earliest surviving installation *Attack Piece* (1975), in which she is seen to think through ideas—for instance, the gendered violence implicit in mass media and the ambivalent ethics of the viewer—that reappear throughout her work. The exhibition then proceeds through a defining period in which Birnbaum begins to articulate her concept of “talking back to the media,” or countering the passive reception of TV and popular culture, which would become a touchstone throughout her career. Exemplifying this period is *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978/79), considered an iconic work in the history of video and feminist art for her use of appropriated imagery to deconstruct the codes and structures of television.

Reaction expands to explore the ever-evolving nature of her practice over nearly four decades. Works from the early 1980s give insight into her deep engagement with New York’s new wave and post-punk music scene and the way she and her peers anticipated the emergence of the music video. Included are *New Music Shorts* (1981), in which she captures the band Radio Fire Fight playing at Tribeca’s legendary Mudd Club as well as avant-garde composer Glenn Branca at the Performing Garage in Soho. In the rarely seen, ambitious installation *PM Magazine* (1982), Birnbaum illuminates television’s coding of gender through remixed footage featuring clichéd images of women in acts of leisure and consumerism, all set to the beat of an original No Wave cover, sung by Shauna D’Larson, of the Doors’ “L.A. Woman.” Also on view are pivotal installations from the mid-1980s: *Damnation of Faust* (1984) and *Will-O’-the-Wisp* (1985), part of a series of Faust-inspired works that haven’t been seen in the U.S. in decades. These represent a leap for the artist in that she created her own images and narratives, instead of employing found sources, and spatialized them in large-scale and dynamic installations.

Birnbaum’s work of the late 1980s and 90s show her increased interest in activism and the ways that domestic and foreign conflicts were mediated for a U.S. audience. Commissioned for Documenta IX in Kassel, *Transmission Tower: Sentinel* (1992) demonstrates Birnbaum’s incisive engagement with coverage of the Gulf War and subsequently became an emblem of U.S.-based war resistance. In the work, eight monitors are arranged vertically on a custom-built Rohn telecommunications tower; moving rhythmically down the screens is footage of Beat poet Allen Ginsberg reading his poem “Hum Bom!” (1971) at the opening of the 1988 National Student Convention. A smaller frame of video, featuring President George H. W. Bush giving his acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention, is inset into the

Ginsberg footage, while a third video stream, tinted green and moving up the monitors, documents excerpts of boisterous meetings during the student convention. The jarring combination of images amounts to an impassioned indictment of war and state-sanctioned violence as conveyed via the news—a commitment that carries through successive works such as *Hostage* (1994), also on view.

The evolution of Birnbaum's practice in her later works follows the profound paradigm shift that took place in mass media over the course of her career. The concluding work in the retrospective, titled *Arabesque* (2011), mines material from YouTube and remixes it with clips from the 1947 film *Song of Love* to explore the unequal legacies of married composers Robert and Clara Schumann.

Exhibition Credits, Sponsorship, and Catalogue

Dara Birnbaum: Reaction is curated by Lauren Cornell, Chief Curator of the Hessel Museum of Art and Director of the Graduate Program at CCS Bard.

The exhibition was designed to accompany a significant thematic survey of Birnbaum's works opening this August at the Miller ICA at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where Birnbaum graduated from the School of Architecture in 1969. Organized by Elizabeth Chodos, the director of the Miller ICA and professor of curatorial practice in the School of Art, *Dara Birnbaum: Journeys* focuses on three recent immersive installations, including a new commission set to premiere at the exhibition.

Dara Birnbaum: Reaction will be accompanied by a forthcoming catalogue, published by Dancing Foxes and CCS Bard with the Miller ICA, with contributors including: Alex Kitnick, Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at Bard College; Jordan Carter, Dia Art Foundation curator; Erika Balsom, media scholar and critic; Giampaolo Bianconi, Museum Brandhorst curator and writer; and Legacy Russell, The Kitchen's Executive Director and Chief Curator, in conversation with Elizabeth Chodos, and Lauren Cornell.

Dara Birnbaum: Reaction is generously supported by Lonti Ebers. Major additional support is provided by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. *Dara Birnbaum: Reaction* is also made possible through the generous support of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation.

Martine Syms: Grio College

The heart of higher education is traditionally understood to beat through its curriculum: an immersive experience largely framed by courses, tied to a required number of credits, that crystallizes a student's broader interests into a degree. Martine Syms' *Grio College*, on the other hand, expands the notion of a "curriculum" into something far more manifold: a ceaseless and itinerant education that encompasses our whole intellectual life, one built from the theories, thinkers, culture, music, ideas, and teachers that influence us, formally and informally, over time. *Grio College* is the fictional school in Syms' feature film *The African Desperate* (2022), in which an artist attends a heady and heated MFA program in a pastoral setting (much like Syms did herself). Lending this exhibition its title, *Grio College* here serves as the context for this staging of the artist's work from the past five years (2017–2022), a prolific period of activity and development.

The practice of Martine Syms (Bard College, MFA '17) is distinguished by its boundlessness: her subjects move across media—print and web publishing, moving image, photography, installation, AI, software—dissolving the lines between them. One of the most insightful and important artists to show how digital

media operates and shapes our culture, Syms examines representations of Blackness and its relationship to vernacular, feminist thought, and radical traditions.

“Syms is a prolific artist who is rigorous in both media and method: she is an astute listener to language and a deep researcher of visual patterns and representation,” said Cornell. “*Grio College* highlights the range of her production since 2017, and, on the heels of her first feature film, the exhibition also seeks to emphasize her versatile approach to photography, highlighting the many scales and methods through which she approaches image-making.”

Grio College features major new and recent work by Syms in video, photography, and installation. A focal point of the exhibition is her now iconic installation on gesture and femininity *Borrowed Lady* (2016), which was recently acquired by the Marieluise Hessel Collection. The multifaceted work takes a cue from writer Samuel R. Delany’s explorations of how feminine characters are constructed through the compositing of ideal physiological and psychological features, and draws from Syms’ own archives to speculate on the influences on her actor’s gestures. Other installations include *Ugly Plymouths* (2020), an immersive one-act play across three screens each representing a different character, and *DED* (2021), a gripping digital animation in which an avatar of the artist—wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the phrase: “To hell with my suffering”—moves through a digital netherworld, repeatedly committing suicide and then resuscitating to a soundtrack of her own music and voice.

Syms’ research-based practice frequently references and incorporates theoretical models concerning performed or imposed identities, the power of the gesture, and embedded assumptions concerning gender and racial inequalities. Installations such as *Misdirected Kiss* (2016), *Threat Model* (2018), and *Relax Your Jaw* (2018), the latter two never before seen in the U.S., demonstrate how her research-based projects come to build entire environments, with photographs placed on the floor, walls, and interwoven into layered collages. In *Misdirected Kiss*, Syms compiles representations of Black women in cinema to reveal contradictory messages of desire and negation. Ideas of self and identity are further explored in the works *Threat Model* (2018) and *Relax Your Jaw* (2018), an installation that serves as a map of the artist’s unfiltered thoughts and a reflection on the universal condition of being human in the face of criticism, injustice, and self-doubt.

Newly commissioned sculptures—sweatshirts with the Grio College logo—are embedded with videos from her work *Lessons*, an epic film poem composed of 180 visual cantos, a format inspired by Kevin Young’s book *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, in which the writer theorizes the passing down of Black cultural traditions as “lessons” to which the artist devises her own powerful response.

The exhibition is accompanied by a screening of Syms’ first feature film *The African Desperate* (2022), and premieres related photographic works and drawings. The script of *The African Desperate*, co-written by Syms and Rocket Caleshu, will be published by Nightboat Books and available in conjunction with the exhibition.

Martine Syms: Grio College is curated by Lauren Cornell, Chief Curator of the Hessel Museum of Art and Director of the Graduate Program at CCS Bard.

About the Hessel Museum of Art

CCS Bard’s Hessel Museum of Art advances experimentation and innovation in contemporary art through its dynamic exhibitions and programs. Located on the campus of Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, the Hessel organizes and presents group exhibitions and thematic surveys, monographic presentations,

traveling exhibitions, as well as student-curated shows that are free and open to the public. The museum's program draws inspiration from its unparalleled collection of contemporary art, which features the Marieluise Hessel Collection at its core and comprises more than 3,000 objects collected contemporaneously from the 1960s through the present day.

The Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College

The Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (CCS Bard) is the leading institution dedicated to curatorial studies, a field exploring the conditions that inform contemporary exhibition-making and artistic practice. Through its Graduate Program, Library and Archives, and the Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard serves as an incubator for interdisciplinary practices, advances new and underrepresented perspectives in contemporary art, and cultivates a student body from diverse backgrounds in a broad effort to transform the curatorial field. CCS Bard's dynamic and multifaceted program includes exhibitions, symposia, publications, and public events, which explore the critical potential of the practice of exhibition-making.

Exhibitions at CCS Bard are made possible with support from the Marieluise Hessel Foundation, the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Foundation, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, the Board of Governors of the Center for Curatorial Studies, the CCS Bard Arts Council, and the Center's Patrons, Supporters, and Friends.

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