



Dara Birnbaum Artforum August 2011



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Dara Birnbaum

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

24 West 57th Street

June 28–August 26

"It is true that my health would be better if I exerted myself less, but after all does not every man, who is worthy of the name, give his life for his calling?" These words, drawn from the diary of Clara Schumann—the wife of Robert, the composer—are superimposed over her journal in Dara Birnbaum's new multichannel video installation *Arabesque*, 2011. That a woman is behind "every man" is telling, given that Clara often supported the whole Schumann family, including her sometimes mentally ill spouse and their eight children, with her musical practice. Although she was a gifted composer and pianist, dedicating a critically acclaimed piece to her husband, it is Robert Schumann's *Arabesque*, op. 18 (1839), written for Clara, whose place in the canon of Romanticism is undisputed.



Dara Birnbaum, *Arabesque*, 2011, four channel video installation, 4 stereo audio, 6 minutes 30 seconds.

Testifying to the propensity for incommensurate historical amnesia and its continued repercussions, Birnbaum's piece also features numerous YouTube videos of female pianists practicing and playing the *Arabesque*. These are juxtaposed with clips from the 1947 film *Song of Love* in which Katharine Hepburn, as the composer's wife, weeps and throws herself at her husband, among other melodramatic antics. Here, the performances of the pianists and the actress alike seem to function as by-products of patriarchal conditioning.

A broad, newly restored selection of the artist's earliest videos are also included in the exhibition. In tandem with concurrent experiments by Vito Acconci and Dan Graham, Birnbaum's *Control Piece*, *Mirroring*, and *Bar(red)*, all 1975, show the artist operating a Portapak camera while simultaneously acting before it or alongside it. When performed by a woman, the narcissistic exercise of looking and being looked at is destined to be different from every man's performance, regardless of content or technical proficiency. Birnbaum's ongoing feminist exploration of video—especially in the context of the medium's massive online expansion—elucidates that it is not enough for women to simply operate the instrument; the very structures of recognition and representation demand recomposition.

— Sarah Lookofsky