

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Dara Birnbaum

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY | NEW YORK

By Eva Díaz (October 2011)



Dara Birnbaum, *Chaired Anxieties: Abandoned*, 1975, still from a black-and-white video, 5 minutes 15 seconds.

How often has one sat on a subway next to a man sitting with legs spread wide enough to occupy two seats? He commands space by physical gesture alone—and women rarely adopt a similarly dominating pose. In Dara Birnbaum’s mid-1970s video explorations of social conventions surrounding women’s postures and self-presentation, she tests the long-accepted custom of “being a good girl and keeping your legs crossed.” Demure Birnbaum is not, in *Chaired Anxieties: Abandoned*, 1975, as she performs a sequence of movements in a simple wooden folding chair. With a fixed camera setup, the five-plus-minute work captures the artist entering a pose—presenting her crotch to the camera in a wide straddle so that it is centered in the frame, for example—and holding the position for an uncomfortably long moment. The effect is shocking.

What men can get away with, and women can’t, is the subject of many of the works in the exhibition, including the most recent. *Arabesque*, 2011, is a four-channel video installation exploring the lopsided legacies of two virtuoso piano compositions: *Romanze 1*, Opus 11, by Clara Schumann, and, *Arabesque Opus 18*, by her husband, Robert. Birnbaum appropriates footage from YouTube of performances of each, and juxtaposes them with stills from *Song of Love*, a 1947 Hollywood biopic about the couple. It is no surprise that Robert’s composition, featured in the film’s sound track, outnumbers Clara’s one hundred to one in contemporary online clips. As Birnbaum writes in the press release, “One could argue that the ‘Arabesque’ and ‘Romanze 1’ are equally excellent compositions.” Yet Robert’s is hailed as a “masterpiece.” Why

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is this the case? Birnbaum goes on to expose the double shift that women artists, such as Clara Schumann, have frequently worked. “It was Clara who had to carry on when Robert went through his periods of depression and madness and eventually died,” Birnbaum points out. “She took care of the family (they had eight children) and supported them through her playing.” Clara was a roadie on Robert’s gigs, while having to play her own shows and raise the kids too. With so much on her plate, she could not embody the role of tortured genius to which that era of Romantic music was so inextricably linked. Comparing Clara’s neglected career to Robert’s valorized one reveals the mechanisms by which women are traditionally excluded from the canon of historical value, and the logistics of caregiving and child care that make that devaluation so easy.

To counter these kinds of omissions, Birnbaum, in her early work, literally put herself back in the picture. In *Attack Piece*, 1975, she puns on the military lingo of “capturing” someone—in this case, capturing their image—by orchestrating a complex circuit of representation in which her own image is duplicated. The work consists of two facing projections of Birnbaum, filmed by male collaborators in 16 mm as she shot them with a still camera. The moving images depict her seated cross-legged on a grassy lawn, holding the camera to her eye, checking the settings, shooting and advancing the film. The still images from that camera are shown as a succession of slides. In her refusal to be the passive subject of the image—the model, gazed upon by men—she inverts traditional gender roles. She also adopts the role of artist twofold: as the producer of her own image—the motion pictures she asked to have made—and as the author of the photographs she produced in the process.

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