



Joachim 'YoYo' Friedrich
(see *Can I Get a Witness?*)
Untitled, 1976, oil pastel on paper,
100 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artist



Dara Birnbaum
Still from *Arabesque*, 2011,
4-channel video installation,
4 stereo audio, 6 min 30 sec.
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery,
New York

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

Can I Get a Witness?
Produced by Ah Hole Ah Hole
Art Blog Art Blog, New York
14-30 July

'What, exactly, is a blog?' This question is our contemporary moment's shibboleth. If you have to ask it, it's likely that you're collecting government pension payments and getting into the movies at a discount. Nevertheless, it's a valid existential question too, because a blog is the quickest and most ubiquitous way to gain an independent 'presence' online (ie, one not tethered to Facebook or Google).

And though blogs have been around since the early days of the web browser, their ubiquity belongs to the past decade; which is nevertheless a significant enough period of time that the form has begun to feed back into the way we look at and think about and do things offline.

Can I Get a Witness?, curated – or posted, we might say – by Tisch Abelow, Jashin Friedrich and Dakotah Savage, is the first exhibition I have seen that manages to translate – remediate? – the form and sensibility of the blog. And when I say 'the blog', I'm really talking about a specific blog – Art Blog Art Blog, the blog of Joshua Abelow, one of the artists in the show and older brother to Tisch – that has lent its name to the space (artist Ross Bleckner's studio, in fact) in which *Can I Get a Witness?* was 'posted'. There is another blog too, Ah Hole Ah Hole, which is Tisch Abelow and Dakotah Savage's, and which does much of what the elder Abelow's does: array – for this is what blogs do, array things, consecutively, most often vertically, but sometimes horizontally too; it is the blog's form – images and videos and short tweet-worthy statements and questions and announcements and, of course, links, all of which have been put there by the blogger(s).

The sensibility of blogs could be boiled down to: 'I take this thing and make it mine and share it with you', but the taking and making and sharing are lightly done. 'Ownership' and 'authorship' and 'appropriation' are not apropos. Such lightness is best illustrated by the older Abelow's art itself. For example, *Mystic Truths* (2007), a chequerboard grid of 40 x 30 cm multicoloured canvases painted with the words 'hangme' and 'har/der/fas/ter', no doubt takes from Mel Bochner, while the confident pencil drawings *Big Baby* and *Self-Portrait* (both 2010)

take from Matisse. This is all very far from what the work might be *about*, though; it's simply where it began.

Can I Get a Witness?'s two other artists, Matt Connolly and Joachim 'YoYo' Friedrich, both exhibit an equally light touch. Connolly's *Piles* (2011), stacks of printed-on, written-on and painted-on card stock, are there for the audience to browse or 'surf'; Friedrich's *Newspaper Pieces* and oil-crayon works from the 1970s claim the simple dignity of daily making and sharing – a gesture. But all three artists call to my mind two loose commands: the old crusty Apelles's '*Nulla dies sine linea*' ('no day without a line'); and no-one-in-particular's 'Bear with me while I work this out.' Thank you, I think I will.

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

DARA BIRNBAUM

Dara Birnbaum: Arabesque
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
28 June – 26 August

With shows of new media stars Cory Archangel and Ryan Trecartin running coincidentally at the Whitney and MoMA PS1, respectively, it's tonic to see this exhibition of Dara Birnbaum (her first in New York since 2001), a pioneer of appropriation and media critique whose mix of popular imagery, social analysis and collagelike jump cuts provides a foundation for much of today's technically and conceptually savvy moving-image work. Paired with Birnbaum's newest piece is a survey of her first experiments in video. Spare and homemade in feel, these early essays show her probing the medium's possibilities. She used it to record tourists bound for the Statue of Liberty, whom she interviewed about their age, ethnicity, hair colour and height; to combine news imagery of Jackie and JFK with tart editorial comment about

social hypocrisy and presidential peccadilloes; and to document performances in her studio. In *Addendum: Autism* (1976), for example, she effects a feminist takedown of Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1971) by rocking back and forth in an obsessive, knowingly mindless trance.

Much of this work was influenced by Italian architect Manfredo Tafuri's assertion that, in Birnbaum's words, 'television was the real architecture of the time' and by Lacan's theories about how an infant's mirror reflection impacts the development of self-awareness. It's clear here that as Birnbaum began to question the artificiality of filmed representation, she was also demonstrating how the medium and the media's representation of gender, ethnicity, sexual identity and class affected individual conceptions of identity – that is, how they functioned both as structuring principles in an architectural sense and as a reflection in the way Lacan theorised. These were complex epiphanies which have come to seem common, and are now often the basis of a conceptual dogmatism; but the rough, low-budget quality of Birnbaum's early pieces communicate the freshness of their genesis.

It's a verve that her latest piece, *Arabesque* (2011), lacks. A multichannel video, it pairs YouTube clips of women playing Robert Schumann's eponymous ode to his wife, Clara, with stills and printed dialogue from *Song of Love*, a 1947 film about their relationship. This alternates with footage of a lone woman playing Clara Schumann's less well known – but according to Birnbaum, arguably equal – paean to her husband, *Romanze I* (1839) paired with quotes based on her diary and letters. While she comes off as a naïf in the film, her own writings indicate that she was keenly insightful and resilient; although she clearly internalised a sense of socially imposed feminine meekness, claiming, for example, that she has 'little power of expression'.

These various juxtapositions imply that gender stereotyping has affected the historical reception of the Schumanns' respective compositions, and indicates that the female players are complicit, however unwittingly, in the dynamic. But the message comes across with the same plodding feel the amateur pianists bring to the compositions they play, stripping away the beauty which might render the content truly potent.

JOSHUA MACK