



3 NEW FILMS

KEN OKIISHI

IN CONVERSATION
WITH
FELIX BERNSTEIN



Brian at Home (2025)

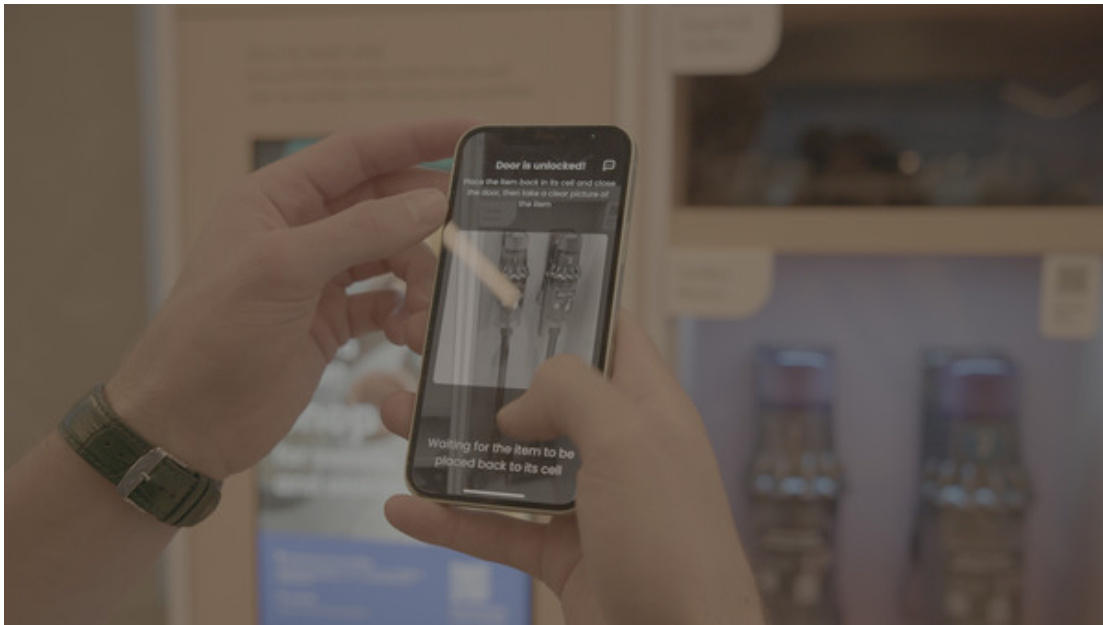
Felix Bernstein: So you made a sequel to *Vital Behaviors* (2019) where you follow-up on Brian during the Covid years until now (2020-2025). Now he's in his mid twenties (he was 21 years old in *Behaviors*) and he's become a bit more jaded and ironic about the social media NYC dream. What was striking about him in *Behaviors* was his optimism: he was an ultimately sincere version of Gen-Z "performative masculinity," who invoked queer pride, wellness, and influencer culture with unambiguous enthusiasm. And there's you adjusting your lens to try and focalize this new kind of (heterosexual) masculinity, which has none of the edge and overt cruelty of the 90s-00s. But in *Brian at Home*, he is disillusioned, maybe catching up with your disillusionment. I remember in *Behaviors* he says "I've lost the light behind my eyes," which is a still kind of sweet way to describe coming of age. But here, in *Brian at Home*, he is much more ironic and distant about it all.

His jadedness is most apparent in his "tour" of the simulacral highrise in Bushwick, where he now lives. Not only is he parodying the *Selling Sunset* style of affirming consciously decked out real estate, but he also has a satirical edge about the "immediacy" of the building, which provides for everything, and lacks lack — anything you need can be purchased with a "Tulu app" and delivered through a vending machine. Any outdoors experience you want, you can have indoors, on the roof — a place to stroll and meditate in the vein of the high-line. He says something like — "There's lots of greenery here, most of it fake, but it gives the sense of being in a park or jungle" — there is a vibe or ambience of the outside but of course the outside is foreclosed here. The city is reduced to a skyline vista seen from the rooftop. And this tour of his new "home" is intercut with your zoom conversations during Covid where the outside was also foreclosed.



During Covid, he earnestly discusses the plummet into loneliness — he misses the incidental meeting of “strangers,” which he now realizes was crucial, since meeting strangers “makes you feel some certain way.”

Which also made me think of the way that our New York (and the art world) is now sort of stripped of strangeness and strangers, since it is an entirely pay-to-play economy.



The reality-effect in "Brian at Home" is very stark — instead of the glossy influencer instagram feed, we get Brian repeatedly stating "Welcome to the Denzien Bushwick, where your New York City dreams can come true." His dispassion is overt — and you relate this to him losing his sense of specialness. And then there's the slightly mocking tone when he talks about his friend "he's a model slash photograph slash beauty brand all in a nutshell." Or maybe it's not mocking, it's not ironic disdain, but it is a kind of fatigue, a tiredness in having to list all the roles wrapped up in the multi-hyphenate persona?

Ken Okiishi: Please, keep talking. I like listening to you talk.

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RECORDING LES NATIONS

FB: In *Recording Les Nations*, we get another kind of reality-effect, this time the way that a recording session for a new album of Baroque is interrupted by asynchronous delays and negotiations — which is where the Baroque comes in, not just in the genre of music, but also in

the way that the style is pulled apart, so that it can be, as you say, “rough around the edges,” and “full of jagged ornaments.” What I call in “[Conchomania](#)” the Barococo (the lumpy pearl, the jagged rock) and which in “baroque” writing figures as a kind of labyrinth of extensive run-ons broken by ornamental punctuation. Watching the rehearsal footage, I also think of D.A. Pennebaker’s film *Original Cast Album: Company*—the way we see the kind of insanity of Elaine Stritch singing “Ladies Who Lunch” over and over. The way each iteration is absolutely fresh to an almost psychotic degree.

KO: I was definitely thinking of that film. We get to know each musician, there is this incredible atmosphere because making a recording is the most intense thing a musician does, because the microphone hears from the point of view of the eternal, and there are cables everywhere, everyone is dressed the way a musician dresses when they have to feel both absolutely physically free while being horrendously self-critical—but in this case, with *Les Nations*, it is through how they listen (or don’t listen) to each other, since it is not a piece of solos, but of densely intertwined instrumental playing. We witness, over take after take, how they criticize each other, implicitly and explicitly. It is less polar and more multivocal than the conductor/singer dual tension of the *Company* film. One of my favorite parts of *Recording Les Nations* involves one musician scolding another, imploring that he should not copy her as he mirrors a phrase, but embellish on how she plays it, like how social dance gains flourishes and different kinds of affective emphasis as it passes from body to body. When he says it sounds bizarre that way, she screams, “Baroque! That is Baroque!”

FB: You and Nick filmed the recording sessions, two out of eight sessions I believe. And your collaboration reminds me of your show together last Spring — the way your works produce an “interference beating” pattern, two pitches edging in and out of sync. And this of course is a kind of Baroque style — the bleating and riffing and trilling of grace notes and ornamentations—that ever-morphing on each iteration.



Even though you are dealing with Baroque style, there’s a kind of contrast, since there’s also a no-frills ambience to your work and also the performances.

KO: I film in a way, and edit in a way, so it can appear as if there is no editing. And this works because I am always working with tensions fully conflictual—it doesn’t feel removed. I am also allergic to voice-overs—that exterior voice that substitutes your own thoughts with what you are supposed to think. So I rely on a viewer to let themselves become sensitized. It comes out of watching Warhol, out of growing up with the films of Chantal Akerman—but it is something else entirely. Akerman loves voice overs.

With my new films related to Baroque music, I can use the following analogy, in terms of how the

music is performed by the most recent generation of historically informed performers. In the 1960s, when a post-war generation of musicians in Europe was looking for ways of stripping the 19th century Romantic inheritance from their playing (they saw this lineage as related to fascism), they used historiographic methods to rebuild how they approached interpretation and performance. This first generation often ended up with a style that was sometimes a bit wooden, with uneven flashes of brilliance—almost like historical re-enactment. The newest generation, especially in France, where the musical formation is not only a part of free public education, but where the teachers (even for children) are also the best performing musicians, have this incredibly free and sensuous way of using historiography inside rigorously formed technical capacities. These close readings now produce, or more like it, shed or crack open preconceived ideas of interpretation and performance, and we end up with the full erotic complexity of the Baroque, with, for example, its sado-masochistic political discourses fully intact and unresolved.

My visual analogy is that for much of the 20th century, it was like musicians were playing a Fragonard or Watteau painting through a Caspar David Friedrich painting—and we did have these same traces in art history, where people were educated to look at Watteau, or anything else, and describe the feelings of a Caspar David Friedrich: Romanticism still lingered as the penultimate mode of feeling/thinking. And then, certain musicians in the 1960s (I am simplifying here—we could wrinkle this timeline with Nadia Boulanger, Marcelle Meyer, and other lesser known early 20th century figures...but we will save that for a future conversation) started suggesting that filtering everything through the Romantic was a ridiculous way to interpret the music, and we ended up with a fetish for dustiness as authenticity—the visual equivalent being strict anti-intervention art conservation. And then the Sistine Chapel comes back in its full sparkly, vibrant splendor at the turn of the 21st century. This fullness—as in, a fully restored sense of conservation—is the basis for the rigorous freedom of how Baroque music is played now by vanguard musicians.

When I started working on *A Chronicle of A.M. Bach*, I was thinking how the stodginess of the Straub-Huillet film (starring one of historically informed performance practice's best musicians of the 1960s, Gustav Leonhardt) was the perfect thing to break. This is the implicit way I am hoping these films affect the viewer: a shattering of ideas of biography, of relationships between history and the present, of how reading and performing happen, and what music and musical interpretation (and its most directly responsive form, dance) can do when watched in live interpretation.



FB: Jean-Luc's style reminds me of the way we've been talking about the non-digital, the more-than-2. The use of an analog continuum to contrast digital binary code.

KO: For me, again, this goes back to Friedrich Kittler and his notion of fingering the earliest forms of musical instruments, bone flutes, as the first technological relation between mathematics and language (speaking).

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THE CHRONICLE OF AM BACH

FB: *The Chronicle of A.M. Bach* starts with Jeanne Graff (cast in the role, that is not a role, of Anna Magdalena Bach) breastfeeding her daughter Sylvère. And I'm struck by the barococo nature of the scene since we have a kind of baroque theatricality in the staged nature of the scene but also a rococo sensuality and immersion — an absorption in the mother-infant bond. And then when we see Sylvère soon after playing with her food, yogurt I think, it is almost like a Fragonard boy playing with bubbles, which Michael Fried famously valorized as a scene of maximum absorption. Though I'm also thinking of the early Edison footage, the reality-effect of people just barely figuring out the camera — since Jeanne and Sylvère are in no way "camera-ready" performers.

KO: Jeanne says it is like a silent film: image and music. It is somehow refreshing and engaging to experience these long takes of looking and listening. Many people have commented on how watchable my relatively long films are in the gallery—that you want to keep watching something that could be boring but is not boring at all. It is not in-your-face, it doesn't demand attention—but then, when you do pay attention, it offers a kind of companionship. Which is how the best musicians play—like Jean-Luc. They could disappear if you don't pay attention—but when you do pay attention, you can't get enough. It reminds me a bit of you, the way you approach your work with deliberate and long, baroque sentences, holding back on a punchline, in opposition to the kind of flashy shortness of what gets circulated to be read—and forgotten—as quickly as possible.



- It's not something I can talk about.
- It's the body.

FB: A lot of the humor of the *Bach* film is the way that Jeanne and Jean-Luc resist reenacting the Baroque era. You dress him in a lacy hat, which stands in for the Baroque wig, but he never really takes on a persona, or even reacts to this costume.



KO: Yes, the "wig" is Courrèges from the 1970s. I like that it is flimsy and voluminous, that it blows in the wind, and flows around with its own kind of weightlessness when Gabriel is dancing or Jean-Luc twitches his head while playing. But like fashion, you don't really acknowledge it as content—you simply wear it. It makes you look good. It is related to this anti-biographical view of historical transmission and interpretation. That what we inherit from histories—but can also reject—comes through texts, scores, gestures, narratives that can be interpreted, and that performance (habits, speaking, doing, etc.) is an active practice of interpretation, and does not have to be limited to reenactment or unconscious repetition/rehearsal.

FB: You shuttle between video of Jean-Luc's final performance of his concert, a rehearsal where he wears the wig, and then footage of a Gabriel Schenker dancing shirtless, in a the same wig, and there is a sense that this intercutting involves a kind of sensuous psychic transmission between worlds — since they are all set to the live music from the concert.



KO: Gabriel and I met while taking seminars with Catherine Malabou in 2011, both of us coming from practice-based fields rooted in strong formal and theoretical training (me, from late-90s Cooper Union in NYC; Gabriel, from P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels in the 2000s. In 2011, he was collaborating in Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's company *Rosas* on the dance *Cesena*—but many people in NYC will recognize him from *Work/Travail/Arbeid* at MoMA in 2017.) We shot his dance scenes at this mind-blowing architecture by SANAA in Lausanne, where none of the floors are parallel with the surface of the earth—or, the entire building has the sense of walking in the mountains made interior.



Constantly destabilizing the center of gravity is incredibly difficult for a dancer to handle—and this incites the beautifully unstable sense of forming / de-forming and multiplicity to how Gabriel interprets Jean-Luc's interpretations of Bach. But it is also like how Jean-Luc performs with the concept of center voided out—there is no modernist notion of coherence in his playing. I know this is getting complicated sounding—but it is not as a filmic experience. It transmits directly, you feel these levels and distances as pleasure. It's a bit like this organ that Jean-Luc frequently plays in Dole (France)--where the core of the organ has never been modified (not even cleaned) since it was built for this particular church with these particular acoustics (also unmodified) in 1754. This is extremely rare with keyboard instruments—as most organs were grossly modified as musical playing/tastes changed, and most organs have either been moved or had the room altered in ways that have nothing to do with the original acoustics. Or, in the case of harpsichords, the instruments were often completely destroyed after the French revolution, since harpsichords were a signifier of the aristocracy. They were made into appropriate bourgeois objects, such as dining tables, things like that. The organ in Dole that Jean-Luc plays is also a bit of a beautiful disaster—the keys are uneven, it is a challenge to play, it is ultra sensitive to changes in weather. But the sound is indescribable when it is in good shape. Touching history directly.

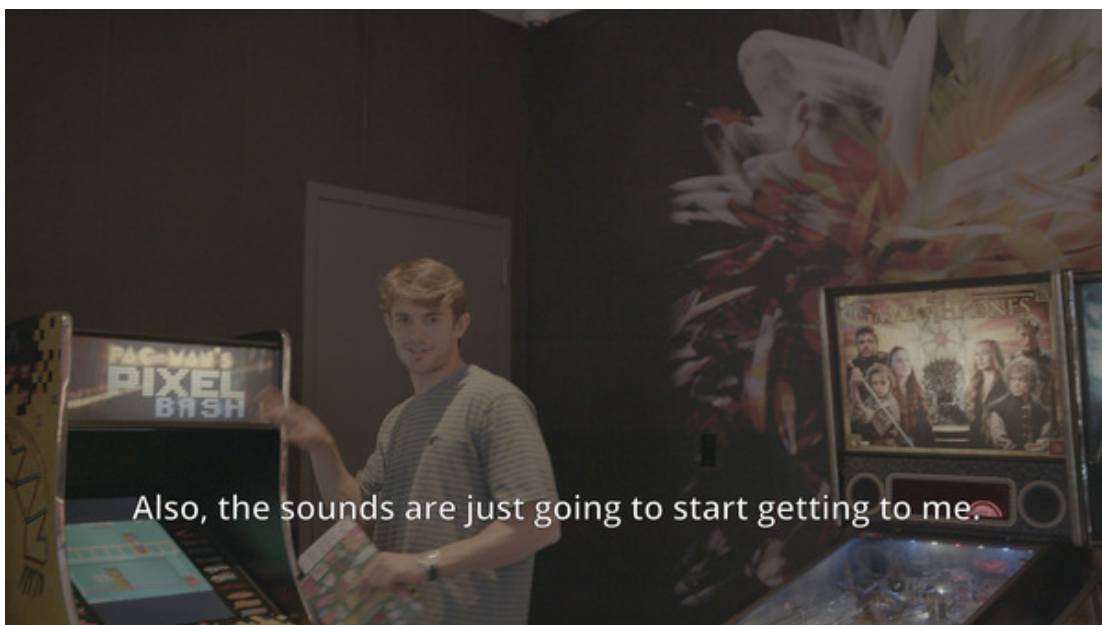
FB: I always associate the harpsichord with a kind of stiffness since there are no volume dynamics, is that right? But Jean-Luc produces a strange vibrancy that seems unusual for the instrument.

KO: On the clavichord, which has a direct action, where the key is a simple lever with a piece of metal that hits the string, as it is written in historical documents from Bach's era, the player can hold the key, vibrate the string with the finger, create shifts in dynamics and color depending on how the musician touches and holds the pressure of the key. Jean-Luc transfers his incredibly lyrical way of playing the clavichord to how he plays the harpsichord (which has a more complex action, where the key is attached to a rod that plucks the string with a bird quill), and is able to activate shifts and layers of color that few other harpsichordists are able to produce. He also does incredibly sensitive registrations (how the harpsichord is set to pluck different strings). These are very subtle shifts to ears trained on modern instruments and recordings—but you can learn to hear this if you learn to pay attention. You become more sensitized as you listen. There are of course no recordings from the Baroque era, but careful research reveals contradictions in how people say a piece should be played, and comparison reveals a wide range of interpretive possibilities, and that spontaneous improvisation and embellishment was the norm. To get back to your lumpy pearl / jagged rock, your idea of Barococo.



FB: So when you see the three films together, there is both a flow state, but also competing temporalities that you have to adjust to. There's the kind of absorptive scenes of breastfeeding, the churchly flowery baroque music, and then the jaded hyper-contemporary world of Brian. And sometimes Brian's monologues and the dance music he's playing are drowned out by harpsichord from the other film, like a return of the repressed non-verbal past is kind of haunting him. And then there's the Brian is reading all these theory texts which are kind of alien to him and that you've asked him to read cold.

KO: Yes.



FB: I'm wondering how you are able to keep your focus on these different modes of time without being pulled into the monopoly of the 24/7 doomscroll speed off the present? I'm wondering how you do this almost at a practical day-to-day level?

KO: I did all of the editing on my laptop in Genova, Italy, over the summer, with all of the shutters shut—in my studio there, in one of these kind of Palazzo rooms, with baby-angel faces all over the ceiling. 16 hours a day, with little breaks for a walk, where the sun would suddenly appear in my eyes, and the sea, and the sky. And then I would go up these kind of very steep, small foot passages, past a church I love that you can only get to by walking hundreds of stairs, straight up—a church that is almost always closed, but they have concerts sometimes, if you are lucky enough to see the poster on the door, and it is unexpectedly ornate inside, with all of these incredible reliquaries with entire dead bodies surrounded by black and pink and gold—but Genova is also such an architecturally dense city with a Matrix-like circulation, so you can very quickly go down into the historical center, with all of this port-city migration and activity in a maze of streets, as if biblical times continued into the present without rupture, with everything from then until now jammed together without order.

FB: In terms of time — it is like Jean-Luc is invested in the past-present continuum, making the past ever renewed, while Brian is invested in the present-future continuum. Brian looks forwards to find novelty and contrast with the present; Jean-Luc looks backwards. Maybe there is something of Klee's angel of history at work here?



KO: I think bracketing myself in a physical space that spans an even much wider range of time, with architectures and continuations of gestures in highly mixed cultural environments is what makes it possible to think this. It's something I love about NYC too—if you can start to see the sun and the curve of the landscape while walking up Broadway from downtown to uptown. Broadway actually follows an ancient path on the island of Manhattan up to the summer retreat area of the island, which is on a hill by the water (Hudson River), by where I live uptown. You can think this while still noticing all of the different people and buildings and vehicles and activities—of seeing everything.



FB: Bracketing yea you are making a cut in what takes up too much space. And inverting, or respacing, the doomscroll speed we are mostly living in. It is not just like "slow down the influencer" and affirm durational ambience – but heighten certain tensions that are not obvious, that are more indirectly sensuous.

KO: I had hoped that people would come to the gallery, look at the films, stay awhile, and come back again to see other parts of the films. To see everything individually and together in different ways. To experience the show rather than to have the completed feeling, the feeling of "Yes, I have seen that show." It is basically impossible to "see" the entire show—but that is the way I think about paintings, about artworks. That you never really see them entirely—that you have to revisit. I wanted to give people the opportunity to revisit—to have different thoughts and feelings. It seems to be working.

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