

Meade, Fionn, "There Are Many Ways to Destroy a Piano," *WalkerArt.org*, March 2, 2016

WALKER ART CENTER

There Are Many Ways to Destroy a Piano

Gender, Class, and Andrea Büttner's *Piano Destruction* (2014)

BY FIONN MEADE

March 2, 2016

"There are many different ways to destroy a piano," says Andrea Büttner. Burning, toppling, jackhammering, sawing, painting, drenching in milk, and pounding (with axes, sledgehammers, and pickaxes), to name but a few—all of which Büttner documents in *Piano Destructions* (2014), an immersive video installation that presents, silently on four screens, interventions by (predominantly male) artists, including Raphael Ortiz, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, and Ben Vautier. A fifth screen offers a powerful counterpoint—and a soundtrack: nine women pianists, orchestrated by Büttner, perform works by Chopin, Schumann, and Monteverdi in tandem. A meditation on art history and gender, the work counterbalances versions of a seemingly heroic gesture of male aggression with seemingly fastidious acts of female beauty, complicating the notion of the male individual as the presumed artistic iconoclast, while demonstrating the destruction of an instrument traditionally associated in part with the strictures of bourgeois education for women.

Presented as part of *Andrea Büttner*, the artist's first US solo exhibition, *Piano Destructions* is on view in the Walker's Medtronic Gallery. In a recent conversation, exhibition curator Fionn Meade discussed the work with Büttner.

Fionn Meade

Can you give us a brief introduction to this layered work?

Andrea Büttner

I sourced all the filmic documentation of historic piano destructions within the arts that I could find, beginning with the famous Fluxus Festival in Wiesbaden in the early 1960s. I combined these historic piano destructions, which you see on four screens, with a concert that I organized at the Banff Centre in Canada. During this concert, nine female pianists play a concert in one voice in so far as they are playing in tandem. They play a romantic piano concert, and they play Monteverdi—a composition that was composed for two choirs by Monteverdi, so it has nine voices. It has four voices for each choir, plus basso continuo. In this section of the concert, each pianist plays their own voice. So in this installation, mostly male artists destroying pianos is juxtaposed with nine female pianists performing a piano concert. One interesting aspect is the aspect of repetition. Because obviously with each piano destruction, the piano is destroyed, bourgeois culture is supposedly put to its end. And this gesture that puts an end to something—to a specific cultural history—has been repeated by several artists over decades. This repetition changes the perception of the piano destruction. And the repetition also speaks to another kind of repetition that's necessary when you want to learn an instrument—the repetition of practicing an instrument.

Meade

In the film footage we see gestural acts from Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, George Maciunas, Benjamin Patterson, Emmett Williams, Philip Corner—artists associated with Fluxus and a branching off from Fluxus into other kinds of artistic practices in the '50s, '60s and '70s. Can you talk about the critique embedded within your framing of the piano destructions, in terms of it as an anti-artwork performance or anti-object—going against the idea of the artwork, or in this case, the piano—as a representative object of the bourgeoisie? Why do you seem to critique here the artistic gesture of upending bourgeoisie culture? Why reverse the critique?

Büttner

I'm gathering this kind of art history of the piano destruction as a trope. And it becomes very visible that it is a kind of a trope, which strangely contrasts the act of violence—the whole choreography of it. But I'm not critiquing it. I'm gathering it, and I really enjoy watching it. There are many different ways to destroy a piano. And you see a whole variety of possibilities of piano destruction. I think one aspect that becomes apparent when you see this gathering of piano destructions is the sheer masculinity of the history of piano destruction within art—a masculinity that's very, well, straightforward. I answer with a very straightforward femininity that has to do with also a repressive history of the education of females. It's not that I celebrate feminine pianists. I just show how female education was also conceptualized.

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Meade

The Nam June Paik performance is particularly unforgettable. He asks his attendants to pick the piano up and drop it, and pick it up and drop it, and pick it up and drop it, until it breaks apart. In doing so, he holds the gestural position of the conductor; he doesn't touch it himself. And there's something powerful about his version of a piano destruction that speaks to what you were saying about learning an instrument, and the discipline of practicing scales, how the instrument becomes an extension of the expressive or coerced body.

Büttner

I also think at this moment in time, with iconoclasm being an important political tool again, we see the destruction of culture totally differently than we did back then in the 1960s. This is also something that's very interesting.

Nam June Paik was elderly and ill, and he needed in his late age he needed assistance to destroy the piano. He smashes the piano onto eggs he lays on the floor. And this was particularly distressing to the pianists who performed the concert in Banff. The eggs being destroyed, and the milk being used to destroy a piano by Wolf Vostell in one of his performances, they really both speak about the female body. And this is something about this instrument that is also speaking about the female body, perhaps.

Meade

How did you choose the music that you excerpted?

Büttner

One reason I became interested in this project was a certain envy of pianists. Think of Glenn Gould: he was free to choose to only play Bach, and didn't have to compose his own music. He could just lean into this kind of beauty that was created for him centuries before he even came to this earth. And this is something we visual artists are not allowed to do. We can't choose Bach to be our language, and try to play it better and better and better. There's such a demand for invention within visual art, as opposed to what musicians do. So it was quite natural to choose pieces that I like, because it was really about this kind of choice that musicians can make: loving other artists, basically. But we also chose pieces that are easy to play as a choir, that aren't so demanding. In a way the romantic piano concert speaks about a very skilled artist and demands the genius of a pianist, but, on the other hand, these pieces we chose are also for youth—pieces that are easier to play—so the choir could stay together.

Meade

Stay in concert?

Büttner

Yeah, stay in tune. I chose Monteverdi because in Jonas Mekas's film on the life of George Maciunas, *Zefiro Torna, or Scenes From the Life of George Maciunas* (1992), the end shows the funeral of George Maciunas, and we learn that Monteverdi was his favorite composer. I think there's also some Monteverdi being played at his funeral in the film, and George Maciunas being the founding father of Fluxus, loving a composer—and I share this love—who composed before the invention of the piano. It's just an interesting angle.