The Piano

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Patrick Bernatchez
Stan Douglas
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Foreword

The history of contemporary art has been witness to an astonishing range of works that involve the piano. From the 1960s on, the piano has figured in performances, videos, sculptures and installations, in works that are part of the iconoclastic and experimental tendencies of the post-war avant-garde. Featuring the work of 13 artists, the exhibition The Piano examines the image of the pianist, from the virtuoso to the DIY amateur, and the role of the piano, from a hub of bar room entertainment to an instrument of reverie and personal salvation. First presented as a one-night project by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House for Nuit Blanche (2012) in Toronto, the project was expanded into a larger exhibition for presentation at the Art Gallery of Alberta in the summer of 2013.

We would like to express sincere thanks to each of the artists who contributed to this exhibition project, and to the lenders to the exhibition: the George Maciunas Foundation, Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario and the Paula Cooper Gallery (NYC).

Our sincere appreciation is also extended to Diedrich Diederichsen and William Wood for their insights into the cultural history of the piano and the works in this exhibition, and to Charles Cousins for overseeing the design and production of this publication.

Thanks are also due to the staff of the Art Gallery of Alberta, particularly Rochelle Ball, Dani Rice, Laura Ritchie, Jordan Rule and Clint Wilson; the exhibition would not have been realized without their dedicated efforts. As well, sincere thanks to staff of Hart House and the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, who contributed to the research and production of The Piano, especially Rebecca Gimmi, Christopher Regimbal, Su-Ying Lee and Sarah Zabrodski.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge the Ontario Arts Council and the University of Toronto Arts Council, which provided seed funding for the project, and the Canada Council for the Arts, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Arts Council whose ongoing support made the presentation of The Piano at the Art Gallery of Alberta possible.

Catherine Crowston
Executive Director / Chief Curator
Art Gallery of Alberta

Barbara Fischer
Executive Director / Chief Curator
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Introduction

The piano’s ascendance as the most formidable of musical instruments of Western civilization from the late 18th century on coincides with the era of Romanticism – a historical moment that saw successive, tempestuous waves of revolution against feudal regimes and the rule of aristocratic courts, with the concomitant birth of republics and the modern nation state. The history of the piano is inextricably intertwined with the cultural aspirations of the Western bourgeoisie and its modernity – the quest for self-expression and its possessive individualism, unfettered entrepreneurship and upward mobility and, ultimately, hegemonic social, cultural, economic and political powers. From the mid-20th century on, however, as the artists’ works in this exhibition and the accompanying essays by Diedrich Diederichsen and William Wood suggest, the piano’s central place has been subject to contestation: if implicit in the avant-garde’s attack on the hallowed forms of high art in the early 20th century, then explicitly in the repercussive destructions of the countercultural neo-avant-garde and popular culture from the late 1950s on, and most recently through the socio-cultural pressures and effects of present day electronic-digital revolutions.

The piano’s attraction is accounted for by the limits of its precursors to impact the historical transformation of the social sphere: the harpsichord could produce loud but limited expressive control over each note; the hammered dulcimer and struck strings of the clavichord, while allowing expressive control and the sustaining of volume, were too quiet for larger audiences. The invention of the modern piano, which dates back to 1700 in Italy, is distinguished by its capacity to produce and sustain pianoforte, the control of ‘soft’ and ‘loud,’ as its original name suggests. Further technical inventions over the course of the industrial revolution—the casting of robust iron frames to sustain the tension of higher quality piano wire and lengthening strings, the action of up to three soft, practice and sustaining pedals, repetition levers and felt hammers—gave rise to the piano as it is known today: an instrument with the singular capacity to translate a performer-composer’s expression—from the extremes of emotive exertion to its withdrawal into resonant silence, and from rapid fire staccato to softest touch. Distinguished by the responsive relay between the mechanics of ‘fingering’ to the strings, and from the foot pedal actions to the auditory perceptions and empathetic projections of the audience, its physical scale would flourish into the grandest of proportions: the concert-hall grand, appearing in its contemporary shape as early as 1777, would grow to a keyboard of 88 keys or even more, amassing in its form over 9,000 constitutive parts, and reaching up to ten feet in length with concomitant girth and weight.

Over the course of its development, the instrument’s capacity—of simultaneous emittance of ten if not more distinct notes, as well as the range of octaves of the keyboard within physical reach—permitted a historically singular, instrumental range of volume and tone. Offering
dynamic control, the piano flourished under the hands and in the demanding compositions of 18th and 19th century performer-composers, from Beethoven through to Debussy and beyond, as the instrument transitioned from exclusive, aristocratic patronage and gatherings held in intimate salons to unprecedented reach and cultural identifications amongst a rising middle class audience, with its craving for new sensations, emotive power, dazzling technical display and charismatic performance. Over the course of the 19th century, and expedited by mass production processes, the instrument was further popularized, as accompaniment for motion pictures and amongst ever greater audiences in small clubs and bars, following especially African-American composers such as Scott Joplin, and new musical genres such as ragtime and jazz.

If the acoustic piano’s ‘instrumental’ pedagogy came to suffuse the cultural sphere—from the haute-bourgeois parlour and burgeoning middle class households to working class bars—industrial manufacture undermined and ultimately contested its reign. The player piano, first appearing in the 1860s, was predicated on the punch card that had already ushered in the automation of industrialized weaving looms and delinked the hand as primordial tool of artisanal production, as delineated in Stan Douglas’ seminal, sharply analytical slide-projection and player piano installation Onomatopoeia (1985-1986), which is included in the exhibition. Just over a decade later, in 1877, the invention of the gramophone enabled the reproduction of music, ultimately impacting the once exclusive role of live musical performance. Consequential for all music production, the reproduction of sound would finally bring an unprecedented convergence between producer and consumer—with newly emerging paradigms of music production evolving from scratch and DJ sampling, to the home-based digital music studio, file sharing and beyond.

The exhibition The Piano plays tribute to the remarkably prolific presence of the piano in contemporary art. Taking the form of video projections, performances and sculptural installations, the works in the exhibition position the piano as an object, icon and musical instrument caught in the storm of its historical transformation. Initially staged at Hart House, the project took its cue from the neo-gothic building’s context and historic role. A student-focused cultural centre, Hart House was gifted by one of Canada’s foremost cultural ambassadors, Vincent Massey, to the University of Toronto in the early 20th century. Funded by the Massey-Harris agricultural equipment manufacturer, it was built upon the legacy of industrializing agriculture as much as it was dedicated to building cultural history: its hallowed, art-bestowed spaces contain grand and upright pianos which, after having played their part in students’ induction into a European legacy of culture, continue to offer extracurricular play and co-curricular practice to this day.

Within this context, the exhibition opened with the agonistic destruction of a piano: a restaging of Fluxus artist George Maciunas’ 1962 Piano Piece #13, in which a pianist nails the keyboard of an upright shut. Together with Gordon Monahan’s video documentary Piano Airlift, in which
a piano is pushed over a cliff to crash into smithereens, the project invoked the ‘oedipal attack’ that Diedrich Diederichsen analyses in the numerous destructions of the piano by artists in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Also featuring works by Dean Baldwin, Patrick Bernatchez, Tim Lee, Euan Macdonald and Michael Snow, the project was presented in greatly expanded form at the Art Gallery of Alberta, with the addition of works by Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Carol Itter, Katie Paterson, Rober Racine and Charles Stankievech.

Together the works by these artists mark a bygone epoch, in which the piano surfaces as a symbol of its aspirations, a cypher for its rituals of culture and a persistent archive commemorated and mined in the present. Tracing its transformation, the artists conjure some of the piano’s particular powers while also recognizing within it the inherent technical aspirations that would become the subversion of its principle, in the rise and transformation of the instrument through industrialization and the postindustrial era of culture—in which music is amongst its most powerful persuasions. The works pay homage to the instrument, as much as they play out its haunting of the present: quite literally as in Carole Itter’s skeletal homage to the grand piano, which is made from hundreds of found bits of wood and scraps of metal to rattle the present forever; or in Rodney Graham’s work where, as a shackled prisoner, he is condemned to playing the upright under the prison guard’s watch, like a cypher of the superego that rules over the ego, or the ego over the id—a parable of bourgeois subjectivity and neurosis as analyzed by Sigmund Freud. His looping video makes no light of the ritual of culture, whose force continues to be remembered as much as it continues to be lived. Against such a punishing scenario, however, some of the works in the exhibition offer respite, such as Charles Stankievech’s homage, in which the repetition of a single note, in severe reduction of all emotional expression, becomes a way out of mental distress.

If the acoustic piano as a cultural form, with its furnished weight and iconic sonic action, is coming to an end due to its technical obsolescence—such as Dean Baldwin suggests with his retrofitted, gutted baby grand turned Bar Piano, from which he serves his guests cocktails and canned piano music—some of the artists exacerbate the virtuoso aspect of performance. When Rober Racine performs Eric Satie’s Vexations (1893) in a marathon of endurance that follows the composer’s instructions “to play the theme 840 times” in succession, it is not least of all as a figure haunted by the idea of the piano lesson as instrument of cultural patrimony. But such is the instrument’s power that it continues to provoke tours de force, asking for a test of the limits of both the human and instrument’s capacity. This, in the immersive, dazzling volume of Michael Snow’s Piano Sculpture, a surround assembly of video, sculpture and jazz; in Euan Macdonald’s surgical montage of factory testing machines playing the piano to the ends of its endurance; and in Patrick Bernatchez’s improbable pianist who plays the piano upside down in this erudite commentary on the acrobatics of spectacle production.
In a number of works, the piano serves as a foil to explore the effects of the principles of reproduction, under the sign of which the entire exhibition must also be understood. As explored in depth in William Wood’s contribution to this publication, the story unfolding here is from the piano as object, furniture and fetish to destroyed and gutted presence; from virtuoso performance into the rise of amateurism; and from unfettered individual expression into technical mediation. The latter is made visible in the exhibition by works that absent the performer—in Stan Douglas and in Katie Paterson’s work—but also witness the performer’s return through digital reproduction, as seen in Tim Lee’s work. Emulating the performance of a pianist by learning segments of J.S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations for a single hand at a time, Lee’s final manifestation reconstitutes—via digital editing and reproduction—a notably awkward Goldberg Variation; it illuminates at once the status of composition, as it does the status of the amateur, in the burgeoning culture industry of the electronic-digital age.

The works in the exhibition touch upon multiple points in the history of the piano to highlight present-day, altered conditions of music production, circulation and dissemination. Their references span over two centuries, connecting chords first struck in the late 18th century to the altered sonority of culture-reproduction of the present. In a particularly poignant way, Katie Paterson’s Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon), (2007) brackets the cultural era that the piano signifies and that constitutes the overarching subject of the exhibition. Taking as her point of departure one of the most well-known works in the repertoire of 19th century romanticism—Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor “Quasi una fantasia,” Op. 27, No. 2, completed in 1801 and commonly known as the Moonlight Sonata—Paterson’s work inscribes its surging longing and imagistic desire into Earth-Moon-Earth (E.M.E) radio transmission technology. Sending Morse-coded messages from Earth to the Moon where they reflect back to Earth and are played back by the disklavier player piano, the messages’ fragmented reception arcs across the history of the piano. Its romantic aspirations, harkening from the late 18th century, are here transposed into the noise of contemporary communication technologies—the burgeoning force-field in which music and its powers are reconfigured in altered form, ushered in by another phase of human communication and contemporary multiplications in which music is an elemental, if uncertain bond.

Barbara Fischer and Catherine Crowston

2  Ibid.
3  Apparently, the world’s largest functioning piano can be found in Szymbark, Poland. It is over nineteen feet long. http://cepr.pl/index.php/en/zobacz-obiekty/43-the-worlds-largest-piano.
Mostly well-tempered, but often attacked, sometimes inebriated

Diedrich Diederichsen

A scene from 1968: a clearly enthused and unbridled but also angry and even violent man is running around an upright keyboard instrument. With one hand, he is holding a chord and letting it swell and ebb. With the other, he picks up various knives and rams them between the keys. He pulls them back and forth, as if trying to deepen the wound and inflict even greater pain on the injured creature; or perhaps he is just making the chord swell further. It isn’t entirely clear if the violence is affecting the note or perhaps even causing it, at least for those not familiar with the workings of the Hammond organ and other electronic keyboards. What is clear, however, is the target of this aggression: the piece the keyboardist played in the opening minutes of his performance, before lapsing into his Dionysian delirium, was a version of the classic song “America” from Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*, with which Trini Lopez had an international hit in the early 1960s and whose pro-US lyrics were read by the anti-Vietnam generation as the credo of an imperialist superpower. Keith Emerson, performing here with The Nice, is thus attacking the global US superpower by stabbing a keyboard instrument. Does it feel these jabs and cuts? How do things actually stand in terms of its responsibility for domination and subjugation? Is this treatment deserved?

Against the piano and the other members of its musical family, from the harpsichord to the Hammond organ, the spinet to the Fender Rhodes, artistic aggression breaks and experiences the principles of cultural institutions. As a proxy for people, hierarchies, architectures of the social, inclusions and exclusions, it is attacked but also disguised, displaced, and wrapped in felt (as by Joseph Beuys). It is a piece of furniture, a

Keith Emerson of The Nice, Copenhagen, May 1968.

(Photo by Jan Persson/Getty Images)
medium, an animist being endowed with a soul, a reproduction machine, a totem, and much more—as well as a musical instrument, one valued less because of the specific sound it produces than because it regulates the organization of sounds in Western music by means of a universalizing key. A key that is embodied in its keyboard and transferable, like the alphanumeric character set or the binary system: it pretends to be naturally existing but is really a product of Western modernization and standardization. It is safe to assume that this is at least one of the reasons why Emerson was stabbing his keyboard on this particular evening.

Emerson gave this performance all over the world more than a year before Jimi Hendrix musically attacked the US national anthem at Woodstock (August 1969) but one year after he set his guitar on fire while playing “Wild Thing” in Monterey and elsewhere (summer of 1967). Even earlier, the former art student Pete Townshend, who had studied with Gustav Metzger at Ealing Art School in the early 1960s and been initiated into his “auto-destructive art,” began ritually smashing his guitar on stage at the end of his concerts. The difference, however, between these smashed guitars and the organs that Emerson attacked with knives and finally the many smashed pianos in the history of the avant-garde that I will discuss later on is this: the death of the electric guitar seemed presaged by its sound. While in the case of keyboards, the act of aggression impinges from without on the orderly inner workings of a systematic music, the electric guitar was distinguished by a sound of disintegration and anarchy that appeared in the fetishized feedback noises, the sounds of distortion modules, manipulated pickups, and numerous effects pedals that emerged in the 1960s and seemed logically to culminate in the instrument’s destruction. But the piano and its keyboard represent order. It was Emerson who saw a musical as well as a political opening in acts of aggression against it. Only shortly thereafter did Hendrix recognize the possibility of a political aggression. Townshend left the political reading to his teacher.

Already recognizable here, in the two strands of the recent history of the destruction of musical instruments in pop and avant-garde, are two of the primary approaches that the visual arts of the twentieth century have taken to the piano: destructive and/or constructive, or in the
language of the Hegelian philosophy of history, abstract and concrete negation. Anarchistic or musical—and if the latter—then rooted in a different musicality. In addition, there is a third perspective that does not necessarily have anything to do with the first two. This is the sculptural dimension of a piece of furniture that has adorned the bourgeois living room for decades, indeed for centuries. A piece of furniture that not only signified a certain level of education and the social status that went with it but also played an important role in the gender constructions of bourgeois sentimentality. At the piano, it was precisely the daughters of the house who were permitted (and obliged) to exhibit their sensitive feminine
emotional life and demonstrate that it was under control. Accomplished singers, they nestled up against the piano’s curves, accompanied by elegant gentlemen.

This third attribute leads to a fourth: in the bourgeois musical culture that grew up around the piano in this way, a transition occurred in the instrument’s function. For the early music industry, pianos were not so much instruments of musical production but belonged at least as much to the sphere of reproduction. The music trade boomed thanks to sales of piano reductions; for a long time, these were precisely the versions through which bourgeois households participated in the general musical life of the society. People who could play the piano in a household or milieu played piano transcriptions of symphonies and other orchestral works. Piano transcriptions informed the public of new developments, functioning in roughly the same way that, in the visual arts, copper engravings informed educated households about the collections of European museums. In the US, toward the end of the nineteenth century, there was a tremendous boom in the dissemination of pianos as universal music machines that not only reproduced the contents of the bourgeois cultural canon but also served the purpose of entertainment. Sales of sheet music and the demand for new, often popular and danceable music fostered the emergence of new working conditions for composers and songwriters, a development whose most famous result is surely the concentration of assembly-line-like music production on 28th Street in Manhattan known as Tin Pan Alley.

This function of disseminating music through massive sheet music sales is then followed by the next rationalization, the spread of playerless automatic pianos, the electric so-called “player pianos” controlled by rolls of famous and popular music, which worked like the earlier mechanical music boxes, musical toys, etc., but now took advantage of the full range and resonance of an actual piano. Technologically, the player pianos were gradually superseded by the first phonograph records. But they continued

to constitute an aesthetic challenge, not just for the US-Mexican composer Conlon Nancarrow, who wrote what is effectively impossible, primarily blues- and boogie-based music for player pianos that was rhythmically so complex and involved that no one could play it, but later also for Iannis Xenakis, who was inspired by the playability of the unplayable on player pianos to compose a series of piano works rendered by computer-controlled pianos.

But all four of these strands—abstract and concrete negation, furniture for the educated, and precursor of music reproduction machines—are based on a single attribute: the complex of standardization. The keyboard, the piano stands for the incursion of the technical and mechanical as well as of the capitalist dominance of exchange value into the realm of music-making. The well-tempered piano converts the variety of sounds and voices into a system of equivalences in the same way that money makes the products of the various markets exchangeable in one great marketplace. Of course, this is more a notion of the impact of the piano than a statement of historical fact. The road leading to instruments that, through a keyboard of equal intervals, regulated and standardized sonic proportions as irregular and complex as those of vibrating lengths of string or columns of air is a long one. Johann Sebastian Bach’s famous work The Well-Tempered Clavier, which presents all twenty-four keys of the Western system, was precisely not yet geared toward the mutual translatability of all keys but sought to celebrate their differences, albeit within the unified sonic universe of the keyboard.

Gradually, however, the system of equal temperament (in German “Gleichstufigkeit” or “equal spacing”) arose, which is used to tune contemporary pianos. Equal temperament in turn was opposed by “just intonation,” which became so important for musicians like La Monte Young and Tony Conrad in the early 1960s, when, at first in little ensembles like the Theatre of Eternal Music or the Dream Syndicate, they worked on a type of music directed against equal temperament—and this on the basis of different arguments. Young argues that the equal spacing of all twelve tones leads to intervals which can never be precisely notated. Because they yield infinite fractions, the listener will never hear exactly the same wave form twice when a given note or interval is played. The result, according to
Young, is that the proper relationship between intervals and feelings cannot develop. Just intonation, by contrast, makes possible the introduction and exact repetition of intervals that go far beyond the twelve tones. Since 1964, Young has been working on his Well-Tuned Piano, which was released in 1987 in a box set of five LPs. He preserves this—in terms of his intentions—ideally tuned piano like a sculpture, but one that cannot be appreciated by looking at it. In this sense, the well-tuned piano also belongs to that class of objects known today as sound art: sculptural projects and installations that cannot, or can only partially, be appreciated visually.

Tony Conrad, however, who collaborated with Young for a number of years and has a mathematical background, argues quite differently, not in terms of the mathematical properties of tones with respect to an ideal musical character but politically, against the idea that there is such a thing as a right relationship of tones to one another in a concept of harmony. For Conrad, the very development of the concept of harmony, which he attributes to Pythagoras, is an antidemocratic act of normativity against the unregulated sonic and representational relationships in original Greek culture and its democratic relations. Hence after his period of collaboration with Young, Conrad did not work on improving the piano’s tuning—that is, on reconstructing harmony on the basis of a different mathematical foundation—but on developing musical practices that could dispense with that notion altogether. In doing so, he did not employ the piano. If he had, it would have been possible to introduce Young and Conrad as two rival brothers who effectively embodied the concrete and abstract negation of the piano; but Conrad’s negation goes beyond the piano.

The period when the two began to generate public attention (around 1960) was also the period of other attacks on the piano. As with so many innovations of the postwar years, news of similar ideas in different places didn’t travel particularly fast in the case of these attacks on the piano. Nevertheless, the first Wiener Gruppe, an aggressive cabaret-like performance quartet of writers and artists (Oswald Wiener, Gerhard Rühm, Konrad Bayer, Friedrich Achleitner and H. C. Artmann) is generally regarded as the author of the first modern act of destruction of a piano—predating Fluxus, Uecker, Al Hansen, etc. Oswald Wiener recalls the
performance of April 15, 1959, in Vienna: “a grand piano was pushed onto
the stage, and i started to sing a chanson in viennese dialect, ‘bye-bye,
old toad,’ playing the piano in order to show that it was in perfect shape.
konrad entered and read me some lines from a book on indian brothels.
i rose and countered with ‘l'être et le néant’ (‘why—what do you have on
page 73?’). in the background of the auditorium achi started his motor-
scooter, driving, with rühm on the pillion, through the centre aisle toward
the stage. both jumped off, opened suitcases they had brought along,
put on fencing masks, and smashed the piano with hatchets. a penniless
music student in the audience burst into a fit of crying, as so far she had
been unable to afford such a piano. we liked this very much.”6

This particular act of grand piano destruction was directed against
bourgeois musical life and bourgeois culture and their principal
“appliance.” What did it sound like when the piano was chopped up?
Wiener doesn’t mention the specific sound of its destruction; it isn’t
important. However, the staging with the motor-scooter racing down the
centre aisle directly toward the piano, and the poor music student who
burst into tears and clearly believes deeply in this bourgeois musical
life, are mentioned. In the mind of the Wiener Gruppe, this was more a
“poetical act” in the sense of a manifesto published in 1953 by its former
member H. C. Artmann,7 an act carried out without warning or explanation,
“the pose in its most noble form,” and one that was guaranteed to be
materially useless and was therefore never in danger of prostituting itself;
in this regard the aspect of destruction was helpful.

But when a piano was destroyed in 1962 at the Wiesbaden Fluxus
Festival, it was not an abstract negation of bourgeois cultural life but
a concrete musical action by a composer. It occurred in the context
of a performance of Philip Corner’s Piano Activities in the auditorium
of Museum Wiesbaden on September 16, 1962, presented as part of
Fluxus: Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik (Fluxus: International
Festival of New Music), which took place from September 1 to 23, 1962.8
This extensively photographed event, in which many of the group’s
key figures were involved, including Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams,
George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, Alison Knowles, Wolf
Vostell and Benjamin Patterson, was the opening signal for a host of piano-related activities on the part of the Fluxus circle. The piano was mishandled and dismembered; its strings were pulled and trampled on but then delicately plucked and its keys removed. It was a lengthy and elaborate process, and it wasn’t musical in its artistic intentions alone: it took place in the context of a festival explicitly dedicated to “new music.”

Many of the composers on the program (Dieter Schnebel, Terry Riley, La Monte Young) are known more as composers than as visual artists or Fluxus artists: others, like Henning Christiansen, were composers within Fluxus. Philip Corner himself is later reported to have distanced himself from the performance of his work, which he regarded as a “risky articulation in a world full of destruction.”

Nevertheless, it had a lasting and far-reaching influence in the Fluxus context, because in the relationship to the piano an approach became possible that was musical as well as sculptural, and usually negative.
The piano became something like a logo for the specific Fluxus balance of destruction and lightness, aggression and humor, artistic seriousness and revolt. The faces of the audience in Wiesbaden displayed great amusement, while Wolf Vostell's features were marked by concentration and seriousness as he took aim with a little hammer at insides of the piano slated for destruction. Finally, by working with this expensive piece of furniture that stood for authority and standardization—the key parameters of an industrialized disciplinary culture—the Fluxus movement was able to explore the variety of its negations and distancings. Two artists naturally stand out in this context: Nam June Paik and Henning Christiansen. Both were musicians by training, and Christiansen in particular was much closer to the institution of music; some of his works are available on record and can be appreciated purely sonically. But I also discuss them at greater length here because they gave programmatic answers to the over-determined object "piano."

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**12 PIANO COMPOSITIONS FOR NAM JUNE PAIK, by George Maciunas, Jan. 2, 1962**

| Composition no.1 | let piano movers carry piano into the stage |
| Composition no.2 | tune the piano |
| Composition no.3 | paint with orange paint patterns over piano |
| Composition no.4 | with a straight stick the length of a keyboard sound all keys together |
| Composition no.5 | place a dog or cat (or both) inside the piano and play Chopin |
| Composition no.6 | stretch 3 highest strings with tuning key until they burst |
| Composition no.7 | place one piano on top of one another (one can be smaller) |
| Composition no.8 | place piano upside down and put a vase with flowers over the sound box |
| Composition no.9 | draw a picture of the piano so that the audience can see the picture |
| Composition no.10 | write ‘piano composition no.10’ and show to the audience the sign |
| Composition no.11 | wash the piano, wax and polish it well |
| Composition no.12 | let piano movers carry piano out of the stage |

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When Nam June Paik created his piano object of 1962, which at first glance looks more destroyed than prepared, he called it Prepared Piano. In 1963, in his solo exhibition Exposition of Music - Electronic Television at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, he exhibited at least three more “prepared pianos.” It is well known that Paik was one of John Cage’s greatest admirers; he also had a slightly Oedipal, mildly sarcastic fixation on Cage;11 and these works, of course, were direct allusions to the latter’s “prepared pianos,” which were not conceived as sculptures but continued to work with the medium of the European concert grand. In Cage’s music for prepared piano, the aim is not to permanently alter the instrument, but rather, with the aid of a specific set of little objects and for the duration of the performance of a highly specific piece, and following the latter’s specific score, to prepare it in such a way that its native attributes are merely supplemented and extended rather than destroyed. In the case of Paik’s preparations, however, it not only becomes virtually impossible to relate to the instrument as a musician; the instrument also loses its character as standardization, to which modifications can only be made when they are related to the standard: the pianos Paik exhibited in Wuppertal in 1963 are clearly individuals. To this extent, however, their negation as reproducible musical instruments is not quite absolute; they are still musical instruments/sculptures, but which can function now not on the basis of their universality but rather on that of their sculptural particularity. This particularity goes along with defects that make it impossible to do certain things with the instrument, and this is entirely in line with Cage’s intentions: the screws and bolts with which Cage’s pianos were prepared essentially restrict its sound production rather than provide it with new sounds like the electronic sound production devices emerging at the time.

Cage often mentions, however, that after 4’33”, the “silent piece,” which was initially a piano piece and only later became a piece for any instruments at all, he also took a more open approach to his preparations,12 even allowing the performer certain interpretive freedoms in applying the set of screws and bolts. If for Paik the principle of “preparation” is already the production of an irreversible individuality of the piano, this information allows us to read his preparations as escalations,
not just negations, of Cage’s preparations. In this sense, they may be seen as resembling his other Cage stagings in performances, for example his production of a performance and film of 4’33” as a rock song, which he presented on a university campus in 1972. Here, then, a modern rock setup stays silent for four and a half minutes before a restless and agitated audience of young people at an open-air stage. The little sounds to which Cage wished to draw attention with his silent piano (“the wind stirring (...) raindrops pattering on the roof (...) interesting sounds [made by] the people themselves,”13 all of which could be heard at the work’s premiere in 1952) were thus replaced with loud, impatient, but naturally no less sharply contoured man-made sounds.

In a mixture of veneration and parody, Paik used Cage’s influence to leave music even further behind while retaining it as a point of departure within his work. By contrast, in his collaborations, including many with Joseph Beuys, Henning Christiansen was always the partner associated with music, even if he too regarded the piano as an object (in works like Das grüne Vogelchorklavier, or The Green Bird-Chorus Piano, 1982). Yet it was Christiansen who described the divergence of the two great revolutions of the piano into two different, in his view equally justified but nonetheless antithetical directions around 1960. Christiansen was present at a complex act of piano destruction by Danish Fluxus activists at the Copenhagen conservatory in 1961 and took a role in it, which led to his being expelled from the conservatory. It began on September 30, 1961—hence a year before Wiesbaden—when Nam June Paik used water and flour to make a piano “foam” at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art near Copenhagen (in addition to cutting off a critic’s tie; see note 10). Then Danish “Fluxus candidates,” as Christiansen calls them (since the group did not officially exist yet), brought the foaming piano to the conservatory, ultimately lowering it on a rope out a third floor window and letting it fall to the ground with a crash.

Christiansen takes this action as an occasion to recall another moment.14 During the Fluxus festival that took place in Copenhagen the following year, in November of 1962, and what constituted an “official” Fluxus event, there was a conflict between Fluxus people and the Organization for New Music, who had initially joined forces. “A short dark man in a dark coat”
observed the conflicts and the actions and came to the festival every day, listening and watching attentively. Finally, Christiansen followed him to “Mont Martre,” the legendary Copenhagen jazz club, where the man—it was Cecil Taylor—performed every evening. While the Fluxus people were destroying pianos, dousing them with water, and dropping them from dangerous heights, this man was “showing the piano who’s boss” in a different way. Taylor, Christiansen suggests, only attended the Danish Fluxus festival so that his own concrete negation of the bourgeois piano would come out even harsher, but different from Fluxus: “a flickering drama, hewed directly out of the piano keys, a magnificent architecture of forms—but the opposite of FLUXUS.”

At this point, of course, this negation had long been an accomplished fact. If one disregards certain moments in Lennie Tristano’s development, Cecil Taylor was the first free, that is, atonal pianist in jazz. But unlike in
European composed music, the move to atonality in jazz didn’t just mean that this single parameter of music, the rules of composition, changed, while all other parameters (timbre, instrumental techniques, rhythm, etc.) remained untouched, as in the music of the Second Viennese School or other European innovators of the first half of the century. In jazz, atonality was also associated with new ways of playing: among saxophonists, for example, over-blowing was a common new technique. There was no equivalent among the pianists. Because sound production was so standardized on their instrument, the act of expression mediated through such a highly complex mechanism, they were unable to express the transgression of becoming atonal with a corresponding physical transgression in the realm of instrumental technique.

Not so for Cecil Taylor. He doesn’t just play the piano atonally; he plays a different instrument. Val Wilmer once wrote of him that he plays as if the piano consisted of “eighty-eight tuned drums.”16 The phrase has since been cited countless times in innumerable variations: “88 tuned bongos,” “88 ringing percussions.” For it makes it clearer—when we think of Christiansen’s formulation, “the opposite of FLUXUS”—that this opposite of the piano doesn’t lead to its destruction or its transformation into a repository of preparations but to an entirely different relationship with the object. Taylor’s eighty-eight drums need not be physically altered; on the contrary, he has the greatest admiration for the art of the piano manufacturer Bösendorfer. The difference lies in the anti-hierarchical gesture, summed up so brilliantly in this phrase, of a drum orchestra all of whose members are completely equal. For one of the main reasons why the European piano consistently evolved in the direction of equal temperament was to maintain the coherence of a complex tonal system in whose graphic and schematic representation all remnants, all superfluous elements, were to be rationalized away and absorbed into the standard. The so-called “wolf” or “imperfect fifths,” for example, had to be removed from the circle of fifths. A hierarchical system in which there was always a tonic or fundamental tone but above it functions that, not coincidentally, had names like dominant and subdominant. But Taylor’s eighty-eight drums aren’t simply the complete undoing of the hierarchical architecture of functional harmony, a gesture that would lead to a functionless equality
of pitches. The eighty-eight drums, which are now incorporated into a complex rhythmic system, continue to be related to each other. Even when they are swept up into the poly-linearity of Taylor’s improvisations, a kinship survives that they bring with them from another world. What Cecil Taylor does with the piano is therefore more than a negation, whether abstract or concrete and purposeful.

It may be that this undoing marks the end of the play of Oedipal negations and the beginning of another kind of development. Even the prehistory of Cage’s preparations isn’t simply a matter of Oedipal front lines in the battle of the avant-gardes; pianos with little effects devices built into them were already being mass-produced in the nineteenth century. In 1913, in the first private performances of his music theatre piece *Le piège de Méduse*, Erik Satie placed sheets of paper on the strings to give a voice to the mechanical toy monkey that appears in the piece.\(^1\) Cage was familiar with the story and was personally involved in a performance of the piece and other music by Satie in 1948. Henry Cowell is another composer whom Cage often cited as an influence, in part because in his *Aeolian Harp* he instructs the pianist to reach into the open instrument and pluck the strings, essentially playing the instrument pizzicato. Cowell in turn was excited about Cage’s solution to the preparation question, and Cage explained that a direct line led from Cowell’s plucking pianist to the idea of a percussive piano. And this shows that, from preparation as practiced by Cage, lines go forward not just to the latter’s friendly negation in Nam June Paik’s works but also to Cecil Taylor’s drums—however little involvement Cage had, or wished to have, with jazz.

But perhaps this aggression cannot be reduced to its Oedipal component alone. Perhaps another type of aggression was also at work in the rebellion of these young men—since it was generally young men who destroyed these pianos and shoved knives between their keys like Keith Emerson or studded them with white nails like Günther Uecker (*Piano*, 1964). Perhaps it was also a fight against the mothers, a struggle against a musical culture that was coded as female in the bourgeois household, where it centered around a domestic music-making assigned to women and girls. And perhaps it is only logical, then, that a rejection of this
aggression—and of the “aggro” masculine component of rock and avant-garde to which it gave rise—has become so important in more recent artistic approaches to the piano. Two examples.

Terre Thaemlitz is a musician, DJ and composer who as a queer activist has long been observing, commenting on and attacking the gender politics of the dominant musical cultures. In doing so, he came upon the technique of rubato—playing indeterminate in terms of its tempo—which was modern in the nineteenth century and closely associated precisely with the music of Chopin and its performance. Rubato was regarded as emotional, but for that very reason it was derided and not really taken seriously. For his work Die Roboter Rubato (The Robots Rubato, 1996), Thaemlitz takes songs by Kraftwerk regarded as classic examples of musical standardization and reproduces them on a piano played rubato. Now Thaemlitz values Kraftwerk precisely because the element of standardization is acknowledged in their music, rather than remaining implicit and unmarked as in the case of
the classical piano, where standardization is the hidden backdrop to the performance of seemingly free and emotional feelings which are coded as gender-specific but are really constrained by gender politics. But these Kraftwerk melodies are not just defamiliarized by the sound of the piano; the rubato—freedom of tempo controlled entirely by feeling—is actually controlled by a rubato software program. The binary antagonism between active and passive, individual feeling and standardized instrument, men and women is reduced completely ad absurdum. In a second, even more successful electronic rubato album (*Oh No! It’s Rubato!*, 2001), Thaemlitz arranges music by the band Devo, which also flirts with robot-like discipline and (bio-)mechanicity.

Cory Arcangel also refers to music, usually pop music, in many of his digital image and sound performances and installations. *A Couple Thousand Short Films about Glenn Gould* (2007) refers to one of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. Arcangel digitally registered the individual characteristics of Gould’s playing to the extent it was possible to do so and then collected the notes for the variation exclusively from the countless self-posted YouTube videos in which instruments are played by private individuals, sometimes including children, cats, etc. Note by note, Arcangel’s software searches this material for the tone that comes closest to a given note of the Gould recording. Even more relevant for our context than this twofold twist on the notion of virtuosity and the system supporting it (the singular virtuoso is represented by a computer program, but singularity returns in the fact that the program chooses singular elements from individual, albeit precisely not virtuosic music-making situations) is Arcangel’s next YouTube work. *Drei Klavierstücke Op. 11* (2009) applies the same principle to Arnold Schönberg’s first atonal composition, which was also, not coincidentally, composed for the piano, the “official organ” of Western tonality. Once again, a program searched YouTube videos for the appropriate notes to recreate Schönberg’s composition. Except that in this case, the universe of possible sources was limited to videos with pianos where cats walk around on the keys and play notes accidentally. Those that came closest to the notes of Schönberg’s composition were selected.
On the back cover of the CD of *Die Roboter Rubato*, Thaemlitz has placed a little photograph in which one can vaguely make out how an elegant hand with manicured and polished nails seems to be using a screwdriver to install a little mechanism under a piano key. This would be an image for the present state of engagement with a symbol of universalization and standardization at a time when its digital successors are installing much further-reaching standardized structures and constructing an oligopolistic economy on the basis of them (Microsoft, Apple, Google). Yet in their coupling of keyboard and expression machine, these structures seem to come very much out of the piano, indeed seem to have learned from its advances in the areas of regulation and automation. In their sarcastic references to the relationship between computer and piano, domination and expression, gender and standard, Arcangel and Thaemlitz (and a number of others) confront the computer with the chief god of an earlier pantheon, which is related to its successors as the Titans are to the Olympians. The answer to the, by no means diminishing, efforts at totalization and standardization can hardly be the usual narcissism of contemporary culture. Perhaps Tom Waits had an answer in 1976 on his album *Small Change*, when he depicted a bar pianist’s loss of control as involving the drunkenness of the instrument rather than the pianist. The universal machines, indeed universality and mathematicity themselves, are drunk. They produce fractions with an infinite number of decimal places, as La Monte Young has explained. “The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me).”18

Endnotes

1. The universal TV museum YouTube contains two broadcasts from 1968 in which The Nice play the song in a similar way, once as a trio and once as a quartet with Dave O’List, their first guitarist: the British program How It Is and the Swiss program Hits A Go Go, which also aired in Germany and Italy. In Hits A Go Go, at the end of the show the moderator, Susanne Doucet, asks Emerson why he fights his organ with knives. He responds that there are two reasons: first, the knives allow him to hold two notes at once; and second, he is speaking symbolically about violence in America.


3. La Monte Young, “Notes on The Well-Tuned Piano,” in booklet for La Monte Young, The Well-Tuned Piano 81 x 25 (note 2), 5, 6.


5. Al Hansen almost certainly presented his Yoko Ono Piano Drop before it was officially performed before an audience, although without that title; he would thus predate the Wiener Gruppe. Raphael Ortiz is also reported to have destroyed a piano earlier, although again probably not in front of an audience. And that in turn is a distinction to which the comedian Jimmy Durante can also lay claim, having reportedly destroyed a piano at a New Year’s Eve party in 1920. “Piano drops” are by now a student ritual. At MIT, the end of the enrollment period is observed by throwing an old piano off a roof several stories high.


7. H. C. Artmann, “Eight-Point-Proclamation of the Poetical Act” (1953), in the vienna group: a moment of modernity (note 6), 54.

8. For more on this event, see the reminiscences of Ludwig Gosewitz, who notes that the order of performances listed on the widely published poster did not correspond to the actual sequence, which he therefore reconstructed from his notes of the time for a 1982 publication. Ludwig Gosewitz, “Enschede und Wiesbaden, Fluxus—Autobiographisches,” in 1962 Wiesbaden Fluxus 1982, ed. René Block, Harlekin Art, and DAAD (Berlin and Wiesbaden: Harlekin Art, Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, Henrich, 1983), 101–104.

9. Just a selection: Tomas Schmitt, Piano Piece No. 1 (1963); Joseph Beuys, various performative works with and about pianos, including Sibirische Symphonie, 1. Satz (1963), but also sculptural works like Konzertflügel Infiltration homogen (1966); George Maciunas, Piano Piece (1964), Piano Piece (1970); Al Hansen, Yoko Ono Piano Drop (1975); Joe Jones, Player Piano (1977); Larry Miller, Remote Music (1979); George Brecht, Piano
Piece (1982); Eric Anderson and Ben Vautier, Ben and Eric Piano Piece (1982); the most numerous such pieces were produced by Henning Christiansen and Nam June Paik, whose works I discuss at greater length later on in this essay.


11 In 1960, Paik cut off Cage’s tie at a contemporary music event in Cologne and threw shampoo at him and David Tudor (both, incidentally, while seated at a piano). In 1961, in his Hommage à Cage in Copenhagen, he attacked a conservative Danish music critic in the same way. He had picked up the practice of cutting off ties at the Cologne Carnival, where women cut off the ties of the men they run into on the street (“Weiberfastnacht”).


13 Ibid., 63.


15 Ibid., 143.


Five Easy Pieces for Pianoforte

William Wood

For my Mother

I

An industrially manufactured rosewood upright piano is positioned to the right side of William Holman Hunt’s Awakened Conscience (1853), yet the instrument is central to the painted drama. So keen have been the sentiments aroused by playing and singing the song on its music stand, Thomas Moore and Sir John Stevenson’s Oft in the Stilly Night (1818), that they have prompted the woman to rise from the lap of her lover, turn toward the garden reflected in the mirror behind her and realize how far she, like her predecessor Eve, has fallen. While Moore’s lyrics have a man recalling “The smiles, the tears / Of boyhood years,” the woman’s reaction is to twist away in shock over her status as a kept woman living in the interminably adulterous London suburb of St. John’s Wood. Whereby the closing lines resound: “Sad memory brings the light / Of other days around me.” Meanwhile, as John Ruskin took note, in a letter to the Times, her gentleman friend, “not seeing her face, goes on singing, striking the keys carelessly with his gloved hand.”¹

For Ruskin, the piano is both an instrument of revelation as well as part and parcel of the dismal condition of life he found so feelingly put on show by Holman Hunt’s meticulous technique:

There is not a single object in all that room, common, modern, vulgar (in the vulgar sense, as it may be), but it became tragical, if rightly read. That furniture, so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood—is there nothing to be learned from that terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness; nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home?


(Photo: Tate Gallery)
“Fatal newness” and the unheimlich occupy the suburbs by means of the “common, modern, vulgar” manifestation of industrial manufacture of lustrous, unlived-with single objects, only to be countered by a tune extolling memory and the airy call of the music played and sung, thanks to the piano, leading the woman to her unexpected renewed and awakened conscience.

Such a moralizing, anti-modern artwork featuring a piano might seem to be antithetical to the works of The Piano exhibition, but I prefer to see Holman Hunt’s composition and Ruskin’s response to it as representing dominant and residual aspects of the cultural dominance the piano retained over 200 years. Indeed, the date of Awakened Conscience is halfway between our early 21st century and the late 17th century emergence from the workshop of Bartolomeo Cristofori of what Scipione Maffei, in 1711, christened a “gravicembalo col piano e forte,” or harpsichord with softness or loudness. The novelty was to mix the mechanical action and multi-octave range of the harpsichord keyboard with the softer sounding and touch-sensitive felted hammers of the dulcimer. For some time, such mechanisms were built solely by specialists such as Cristofori and hence available to (and desired by) elite courtly circles of aristocrats such as Fernando de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany (Cristofori’s employer); João V, King of Portugal (who employed Domenico Scarlatti); or the Prussian ruler Frederick the Great (on whose Silbermann pianoforte Johann Sebastian Bach improvised portions of the Musical Offering in 1747). As an aristocratic possession of great sophistication, the pianoforte was company to the precision clock or watch, the telescope or microscope, renaissance painting and sculpture or, ambiguously, the resident musician hired to play and compose upon it. Proof of munificence as much as proof of sensibility, taste or exceptional interest in music, the piano became increasingly part of chamber music ensemble and featured in concerts and theatricals during the development of the public sphere.

The spread of piano music, piano concerts and pianos to this broader audience would come in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and gave rise to what can be ranked an early and paramount manifestation of a vertically integrated culture industry. Musical instrument-makers promoted concerts using their pianos featuring celebrity performers and their
endorsements as well as sheet music through which the home player could emulate attended concerts thanks to simplified transcriptions of complicated scores. Additionally, as Holman Hunt portrayed, there was a market for sheet music, so that playing and singing of popular songs at home with family and friends became widespread, as did piano accompaniment to group singing of hymns and other uplifting lyrics in schools and churches, as well as pianists mirroring folk tradition and current enthusiasms, elite and common, in taverns, public houses, cafés, museums and galleries, department stores and, later, movie houses—not to forget concert halls and piano showrooms themselves. All this meant that the piano became pervasive and a world-wide wonder of purchase and usage accompanying the spread of trade, colonialism and imperialism (principally through their constant alibi, missionary work). No other sound-producing device has had such reach and staying power across lines demarcating elite and mass culture, orient and occident—at least until radio, and subsequently television and computers, displaced the piano to become what Perry Anderson has called “perpetual emotion machines, transmitting discourses that are wall-to-wall ideology.” What better description of Ruskin’s comments on Awakened Conscience than “wall-to-wall ideology?” What other bit of furnishing in the room dispenses the discourse of emotional and ideological awakening more effectively than the pictured piano?

II

The other crucial cultural product of the piano was as equally ideological as its massification. Here we need to think of the aura of heroic maleness radiating from the history of piano composers and virtuoso players. Coincident to the instrument becoming “common, modern, vulgar,” its most accomplished and exalted devotees were celebrated and promoted as superb individuals exercising extraordinary skills and sensitivities due to their mastery of keyboard and pedals and the multi-faceted variations possible through their inspired and prodigious manipulation. Although keyboard playing and composing had begun to dominate court music with the Bach family, George Frideric Handel and Wolfgang Mozart, the specifically piano-associated line of composers who were also virtuosi runs from Ludwig van Beethoven through Frédéric Chopin, Robert
Schumann (not Clara), Franz Liszt, Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms down to Claude Debussy, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Béla Bartók and Sergei Prokofiev. For all of these men, being outstanding both as a player and performer was integral to their compositions and their projected legacy—they understood the need to assume a particular place for their talents in the compositional and performing tradition they embodied.

This lineage of performer-composers was sustained through changes in musical culture brought about by the industrial concerns already indicated, with broader audiences, higher celebrity profiles and, it could be argued, the demise of the figure of the virtuoso performer-composer in the age of technical reproducibility. In the so-called “classical” music world of the major part of the 20th century and after, as Edward Said has argued, performances “are effectively the re-creative and interpretive reenactments of musical compositions” rather than their realization, which has the effect “to screen entirely the composer from the performer” and to thereby accentuate the “extreme specialization of all aesthetic activity in the contemporary West.”4 In this vein, names like Sviatoslav Richter, Arthur Rubenstein, Van Cliburn, Glenn Gould, Alfred Brendel and Maurizio Pollini predominate and nominate the recent past of aesthetic specialization emphasizing performance of existing “classics” over composition of new works. In this light, it is important to record the transposition of the performer-composer as superb individual of astonishing sensitivity from “classical” music to improvisational jazz (Jelly Roll Morton, Art Tatum, Duke Ellington, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, Herbie Hancock, Cecil Taylor), as well to note the admission of some women of great skill and sensibility to the rank of virtuosic jazz piano performers and composers: Nina Simone, Marian MacPartland, Alice Coltrane, Carla Bley. In due course, all these players have been eclipsed in spectacularity by the gaudy trappings and show-business of entertainers who play pianos such as Liberace, Elton John, Diana Krall, Lady Gaga and The Piano Guys.

Such a process indicates at least two aspects of critical importance to the artworks in The Piano. The first is the comprehensive shift in subjectivity from the robust notion of self-possession formed by sublimated drives and
demons associated with bourgeois ascendancy to the thinly stretched veneer of personality and intensity by which we recognize ourselves as technocratic performers in the contemporary world of elaborated distraction and networked reification. In *The Piano*, this shift is sited around various forms of performer and performance possible when artists reconsider the “screen” that Said saw as inflating performance into what he called “an extreme occasion.” Some pianos in the exhibition are extremely performed—by tools, machines and humans. Of those humans: some are amateurs; some are artists who are also musicians (but not one of whom would be mistaken for a virtuoso). Two pianos are rendered unplayable and one is not really a piano at all. In a single pair of works by Patrick Bernatchez, an accredited concert pianist, David Kaplan, plays the instrument though he is placed in a compromised position in order to complete his task.

Shying away from the virtuosic and the properly musical is indicative of forms of “deskilling” that have seized the practices of the contemporary arts over the past seventy years. Much as the performer has superseded the composer in mainstream pianism—requiring that interpretation trumps creativity, tradition stifles innovation, technique supplants inspiration—so the attention of those who continue to make music has shifted away from directing performance, propriety and canonicity in set and predictable directions towards serious examination of fundamental issues of sound, noise and silence, the effects of technology upon reception, as well as the consequences achievable through commandeering control of (or rescinding control to) the mechanical means and electronic processes that now dominate all aspects of life. This encroaching technological dominance was first most thoroughly experienced through the mechanical, then wireless, then digital reproduction of music via industrial concerns entwined with the corporations and interests simultaneously endorsing the mechanical, photographic and digital reproduction of imagery—themselves the heirs of the piano and music industries of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Much as “deskilling and re-skilling” of labour is properly associated with the rise of Post-Fordist modes of production in the economy, so “deskilling and re-skilling” of visual arts is linked to the dis-embedding effects of contests.
between the fine arts and what Jeff Wall has called “the movement arts.”

A conservative means of disavowing the issue of technological dominance upsetting the discipline-fixated milieu of the academies and the Salon, Wall’s distinction—more properly for him between the “depictive arts” (“drawing, painting, sculpture, the graphic arts and photography”) and “theatre, dance, music and cinema” (where duration and motion occur)—is, in turn, based on differences between mediums upheld by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, but with a pedigree leading back to G. E. Lessing’s *Laocoon: or, The Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1766). In each case, stress on what is particular to a medium or image-category—“colour and space” in painting for Lessing, “flatness” and “opticality” for Greenberg, “shape” and “presentness” for Fried, “depiction” and “métier” in “the canonical forms” for Wall—occludes a more complete history of the medium or category. As when we think of the non-medium specific encounters of Jacques-Louis David with revolutionary festivals (including *Marat Assassiné* [1793] as a funerary talisman); Gustave Courbet toppling the Vendôme Column; Édouard Manet illustrating Edgar Allen Poe and Stephane Mallarmé; and painting japoniste fans; the shared ambitions towards synesthesia and Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* among Parisian artists and writers of the later 19th and early 20th centuries; the mixtures of mediums and temporal and spatial forms that constitute the contributions of Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Suprematism, Productivism, Dada and Surrealism, as well as institutions from Bayreuth to Black Mountain College, from the Bauhaus to UNOVIS, from Fluxus to Experiments in Art and Technology and Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable. A history of certain acts and artists advancing specific mediums towards the categorical purification or canonicity of art is simply not up to the challenge of the complex and hybrid methods and processes by which artists have attempted to outline what is at stake for art practices that are not necessarily rule-bound (canonical) nor formless in the face of hegemonic *techne*.

III

If a reconsideration of the place of performance and performing is visible in *The Piano*, then the second propensity devolving from its history is a focus on the instrument as a thing. This interest stems incompletely from
the impure, hybrid character of the “movement arts,” but even Alfred Brendel, a great (and witty) piano player and advocate, has to concede:

But the piano must be an instrument, not a fetish. It serves a purpose. Without the music, it’s a piece of furniture with black and white teeth. A violin is, and stays, a violin. The piano is an object of transformation.6

For Piano Piece #13 (for Nam June Paik) (1962), George Maciunas transformed the instrument by proposing to allow it to sing for itself through those—most often African-extracted ivory and ebony—“black and white teeth.” The Fluxus composer’s score gave the performer instructions to take hammer and nail to each of the keys on the piano, allowing the resulting percussive and stringed sounds to serve as the dying sighs of a slaughtered beast, its teeth pounded upon, its lyric sighs and cries an extension of the hammering and striking on the business-side past the keyboard where the sound box formerly amplified the results. If this was an insolent instance of treating the piano as a kind of living thing, it also aimed to embody its death, since the sacrificial keyboard would make music as it was effectively silenced. Specific performances reveal the explicit state of each instrument’s materiality, as bits of keys shatter and fly off along with parts of the wooden frame of the keyboard, while the tuning and sonorous qualities of the piano are gradually and systematically diminished. Although Peter Moore’s photographs document Maciunas executing the work, and others have documented versions of the performance on film and video, for the opening of The Piano, Nic 7 of the Edmonton band Shout Out Out Out Out carried out the score with vigour and taste—a less than furious enactment which possessed a memorial aspect. As far as I can tell—and this may mark a limit which might suggest a rule—Piano Piece #13 (for Nam June Paik) has not been performed on a new or well-maintained piano. Perhaps only pianos seemingly eligible for “assisted death” are worthy of ritual killing.

As an object of sacrifice, the piano in Piano Piece #13 (for Nam June Paik) is ironically animated and agonized to serve the Fluxus aim of demythologizing musical and artistic performance. However, #13 was
actually preceded by the instructive score of Macunias’ 12 Piano Compositions for Nam June Paik (1962), in which what was up for grabs in performance was not the piano’s potentially transformative life but its undeniable subsistence as emphatically representing the “piece of furniture” quality that Brendel acknowledged. In 12 Piano Compositions For Nam June Paik a concert is scored whereby movers position the instrument on stage, the performer tunes it, paints it “with orange paint patterns,” and proceeds to play all the keys at once with a stick, to play Chopin with a dog or cat on the strings, stretch the highest strings till they “burst,” and perform various sorts of performance parodies—drawing a picture of the piano, announcing the next composition as “#10” without playing a note—ahead of #11, where the piano is washed. In #12, the movers remove the piano from the stage.

Here the piano as furniture for aesthetic display, as prop for Said’s “extreme specialization,” is sent up with nods to such phenomena as the cruelty of the Katzenklavier (cat piano) and the extraordinary excessive formality of behavior in recital and concert halls.8 The dedicatee of all thirteen pieces, Nam June Paik, may have made the appropriate response in March 1963 when, at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, he presented Exposition of Music – Electronic Television, featuring four altered pianos which he invited gallery-goers to play, accompanied by deconstructed and interactive examples of those “perpetual emotion machines” Anderson identified. Dismembered piano mechanisms featured among television monitors and electronic wires that spilled from cases and sound boxes that also featured bras and eggs, barbed wire and alarm clocks—all, as in Piano Piece #13, presented in ways that animated the instrument, altered its sound and appearance in order to retrieve it for the informal pursuit of interactive play and consort with simultaneously freed forms of early electronic media. Even the sacrificial element of Piano Piece #13 was represented by the head of a freshly slaughtered ox above the entrance. Thereby the distinction of the

(Photo by Peter Moore, © Estate of Peter Moore. Licensed by VAGA, New York)
accomplished performer and his privilege was exorcized as historically superseded, politically questionable and aesthetically unnecessary.

Of course, there are other ways to efface the performer. Either shoot the piano player or replace him with mechanics or machine-like activities. While the latter replacement had long been part of the repertoire via the player piano, Euan Macdonald located another type of piano-playing killing-machine in a musical instrument factory in Shanghai. In 9,000 Pieces (2011)—the title refers to the number of parts making up the piano (but could easily refer to the number or musical “pieces” played by the machine)—a mechanism made of springs and hammers plays, as in Macunias’ #4, all the keys on the board and all the strings in the box in a regular, rhythmic fashion; the sonic outcome bears a compelling richness of sound due to the number of keys and strings being struck and sung. The video is edited so that while we hear the full onslaught of the sound,

Euan Macdonald,
9,000 Pieces,
(video still) 2011.
we only view parts of the mechanism and the instrument, so that we
witness—through the testing—the instrument's arrangement of parts and
observe its subjection to the testing device whose mechanical rhythm is
devoid of any of the human qualities we might, idealistically, attribute to a
human player. There is one exception: throughout the test portrayed, one
spring-and-hammer unit does not function, so that its recalcitrant, non-
performing presence may, like the piano remaining intact itself throughout
the test, indicate some form of resistance to the mandated sound and
allover strenuous ordeal the piano has endured.

Another quasi-mechanical procedure is to play not the piano as furniture
but to render the music played as furniture by playing a piano tune to
death or to a death-like state of suspension. Here, Erik Satie's *Vexations*
(1893) is the *locus classicus*: a single sheet of seemingly simple music is
headed by an obscure inscription—“In order to play this motif 840 times,
one would have to prepare oneself in advance, and in the utmost silence,
through serious immobilities.”9 Whatever status this direction may have
held (the note is more than tentative), the piece was not known to be
publicly performed until 1963 when composer John Cage brought together
a team of 12 pianists to play the 840 repetitions over 18 hours and 40
minutes at the Pocket Theater in New York. Gavin Bryars lists some 23
performances of the work before 1975—including his own duo event in
1971 with Christopher Hobbs—most following Cage's team approach or
the Bryars/ Hobbs example of pairing. When Robert Racin encountered
the work in 1977, he resolved to be one of the few to perform *Vexations*
solo, and on four occasions between November 1978 and May 1979 he
achieved his goal—with times varying from relatively swift 14 hours and
eight minutes to a languorous 19 hours. The first of these performances—
at Véhicule Art, Montreal, November 4, 1978—was documented on video
and a partial viewing demonstrates the tenacity and intensity required.
Although the motif is rather brief, it is very difficult to memorize and many
players resort to sheet music. Racine did the memory-work—extra difficult
since Satie's eccentric harmonies and unconventional notation means that
the player (even with sheet music) must pay vigilant attention so that the
task is a feat of mutual mental concentration and physical endurance.10
The work, both a *blague* about reaching toward the unplayable and a
radical challenge to the audience, becomes, in Racine’s version a rite, a frippery, a tremendous effort with the performer seeming to become a one trick pony—no doubt part of the work’s vexatious character.

For Gordon Monahan’s *Piano Airlift* (1988/2006), the piano has no exact player, but is rather subject to forces other than human. In 1988, as part of a series of Aeolian works—instruments composed of tautened strings exposed to weather and “played” by the wind—Monahan used an upright piano box connected to long strings to amplify the sound. The location was Gibbet Hill, a rocky outcrop above the harbour of St. John’s, Newfoundland, and, in order to get the piano upon the cliff, a Canadian Forces helicopter performed the airlift. In the documentary video, projected silently and in slow-motion (accompanied by a piano composition by the artist), we see the aircraft—a Bell Huey type familiar from Vietnam War footage—approach the field where the piano sits and

view the wrapping, raising and depositing of the instrument by aircraft and crew, with many a magnificent prospect of the payload suspended against the rough sea and shore—swaying stately like the helicopter-suspended statue of the Virgin flying over Rome during the opening shots of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960). After six minutes of lifting, the scene changes as the instrument is decoupled from the strings of the Aeolian harp and a group of men maneuver the piano to the edge and over the cliff. The flying instrument comes to a crashing but silent end. As with Maciunas’ *Piano Piece #13*, the piano is a well-used old banger, pathetic


Installation view Art Gallery of Alberta.
in its dilapidation, but its fall after airlift is mock-heroic against the grey St. John’s sky.

IV

Brendel might assert that the piano is “an instrument, not a fetish,” but it is not hard to find magical powers being ascribed to the players if not to the instrument itself. Carole Itter’s Grand Piano Rattle: A Bösendorfer for Al Neil (1984) is an image of a strung-up piano assemblaged from discarded domestic and commercial pieces of wood and metal and featuring its own lighting unit. The dedicatee, well known in Vancouver for his metamorphic capabilities—one form which takes shape as an improvisatory performer on the piano—is unlikely to possess such a prestigious and expensive instrument like a Bösendorfer, that Austrian piano of great richness suited to the bebop music Neil’s improvisational playing was nurtured upon. For his partner Itter to construct the image of a Bösendorfer in the form of a hanging rattle surely indicates ambivalence, since the grandness of the select piano is reduced to the sparse and childish shaking of a rattle even though the self-contained spotlight promises celebrity or at least exhibitionism—making a spectacle of oneself. Yet, in terms of the fetish, Itter is also alluding to rattles and their role not merely in infantile noise-making but in ceremonies of shamanism, not too distant from some of the elevated qualities claimed for improvisation and the often incantatory properties of Neil’s written, collage and performance works.

Like Neil, Michael Snow has long been esteemed for his improvisational piano playing as well as his film, video and other visual art practices. In Piano Sculpture (2009), Snow plays four improvisations—or at least appears to—each projected on the square gallery’s walls, each projection centred on a speaker that, again, appears to be playing the particular sound produced by Snow’s hands as shown in the projection. Combined, the sound of the four tracks is loud and Snow’s attack percussive and jarring, featuring cluster chords and occasional
glissandi, so that while some isolation of the sound of each individual speaker is possible, the whole bleeds into cacophony. Concentration on the hands in the projections show the player sometimes not pressing but just touching the keys, sometimes the sound is bass while the hands shown are “playing” the upper register of the keyboard, so coordination of sound and image breaks down. The sculptural aspect of Piano Sculpture is realized most strongly in the twirling, ambulant viewer-auditor paying attention to the discrepancies of the visual and sound tracks rather than in any notion of a specific pianistic thing.

The sort of legerdemain Snow relies upon is, of course, established through the ability to record performances and use the technology of sound-and-image editing to disrupt and overlay the seeming seamless joining of vision and hearing. Unlike the mechanical aspects that Maciunas, Macdonald and Racine elaborated, Snow and Tim Lee’s piano pieces in The Piano are machine-aided and abetted. Lee’s Goldberg Variations: Aria, BWV 988, Johann Sebastian Bach, 1741 (Glenn Gould, 1981) (2007) is a two-monitor black-and-white video installation displaying Lee’s hands as he seems to “play” the opening Aria, the foundation for Bach’s 30 Goldberg Variations. Lee is not a piano player, nor an accomplished musician of any sort, but he was coached in finger technique by a piano teacher and, while the sight of his ungainly playing, with conspicuous errors and lack of finesse, is comic, the almost excruciatingly slow pace he adopts (as an amateur unable to keep pace) and the obvious editing of the video to bring vision and sound in crude synchrony is an homage (backhanded or cack-handed) to the most illustrious recorded virtuoso of the Variations—Glenn Gould.

Gould famously produced two recordings of the Variations, first as his major label debut in 1955 and once again in 1981, the latter marking his last recording, a recording notorious for its slow pace and idiosyncratic touches, not to mention Gould’s extensive use of analogue and digital technology in order to confect a performance out of different takes—cutting out a chord here, splicing in a note there. Lee, meanwhile, overindulges the signs of editing while also honouring the now far-crossed divide of digital versus analogue media by way of his cathode ray tube
monitors and monochrome screening—reminiscent not only of the period of Gould’s second Variations, prior to widespread use of colour video and projection, but also of the “amateurism” which preoccupied conceptual art and early video.  

Another aspect of conceptual art—its characteristic investment in procedures and processes—is also found, along with another nod to the amateur, in Katie Paterson’s Earth–Moon–Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon) (2007). Earth–Moon–Earth (E.M.E.) communication uses the Moon as a passive receiver to “bounce” signals from one Earth-based transmitter to a partner Earth-based active receiver. Used for military and commercial signals before satellites, E.M.E. is now a domain of amateur ham radio operators. Having found that it was one of the most popular pieces of music that referred to the Moon, Paterson took an already somewhat sludgy MIDI file of a portion of the first movement of

Michael Snow  
Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2 (1801), otherwise known as the Moonlight Sonata, and subjected the file to Morse coding and E.M.E. transmission and reception. Given the unevenness of the surface of the Moon, some of the signals “bounced” off and did not return to Earth, leaving gaps in the information. When the received signals were recoded into MIDI for playback on a Yamaha Disklavier, the outcome is an incomplete rendition of the “classic,” a series of fragments that interrupt and irritate listening to this over-familiar piece.

Sonata No. 14 itself was subject to another form of miscommunication, having been renamed. From Beethoven's original note of a Sonata quasi una fantasia, a reviewer, Heinrich Rellstab, several years after the composer's death, wrote of how the first movement reminded him of a boat in the moonlight on Lake Lucerne and the nickname stuck. With the figure of Beethoven and the trite sentimentality of Rellstab’s simile, we encounter the full figure of the composer as romantic genius and, for many an erudite and popular audience, the apotheosis of musical expression. Such heroics can have antecedents simultaneously profoundly moving and deeply bathetic—as when a bust of Beethoven resides on Rowlf’s piano on The Muppet Show, or when Wendell Kretschmar, in Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus (1947), tortuously elaborates on the question of why Beethoven neglected to add a third movement to Sonata No. 32, Op. 111 (1822) and comes up with the answer that Beethoven had brought the entire form of the sonata to an end with the two movements and there was nowhere for the composer or the composition to go—the close of the piece is not merely the end of the work but marks “the farewell of the sonata form.” As with Gould’s 1981 Variations, Sonata No. 32 proved to be Beethoven’s last piano sonata—so Kretschmar, a not so subtle caricature of Theodor Adorno, was correct about the terminal quality of Beethoven’s sonata career if not, arguably, about the sonata itself.

In 1977, Maurizio Pollini recorded Sonata No. 32 for Deutsche Grammophon, emphasizing in certain passages a somewhat different kind of ending or transformation. Always strongly rhythmic—far from the soft lyricism of the Moonlight Sonata—Pollini rendered the pulsive portions of No. 32 in what was thought of as a cold, analytic fashion removed
from, and consequently cancelling, the emotionalism associated with Beethoven’s *mytheme* of romantic expressiveness. Indeed, passages were pounded out as if (to return to an earlier theme) the piano were like an industrial plant itself. Also, in one specific portion, Pollini’s interpretation emphasized a specific rhythm that appeared to anticipate the type of syncopation associated with ragtime piano music (recall that Scott Joplin’s ragtime had been revived through the movie *The Sting* in 1973) and, thence, to the jazz music which Adorno had so decidedly scorned, much as his compatriots and enemies, members of the National Socialist Workers Party in Germany, had condemned ragtime and jazz as anti-German, degenerate “Negro” music.

This unprecedented constellation of music, literature, history, philosophy, racism and industrialism drew Stan Douglas to this congeries of allusions and the result was the slide-projection and piano player installation, Rowlf plays Beethoven’s “Pathétique” sonata on *The Muppet Show*, Season Three, Episode 61.
Onomatopeia (1985-1986). Generating his work based on the literary device whereby words or passages “sound like” aural phenomena, Douglas had a player piano roll cut from a selection of Sonata No. 32 in emulation of Pollini’s machine-oriented version, and brought a mechanical player piano together with synchronized projections of 35mm black-and-white stills shot in a soon-to-be abandoned textile mill. The photographs concentrate on the perforated paper strips used to program the weaving machines as well as on the brute-looking engines for the looms, thus constituting an investigation into the working of both industrial
production and into the example of the “programs” as preconditions for the emergence of neo-liberal globalized production controlled by computerized networks over the last half-century.¹³

The absent player of Onomatopoeia and of the Disklavier in Earth–Moon–Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon) may bring directly produced pianistic sound to the gallery via the mechanical and electronic player pianos, but the missing workers in the textile mill, the hands-off aloofness of the player piano as a sound-producer, the clunky rhythm and the slight “clicking” as the programmed slide projector changes images—all of these speak, as does Paterson’s “missing” information, of the distinction between human and mechanical ideas of time, of being, and of the ever-escalating management of social and subjective notions of space and time by mechanical and electronic means of control. While Snow and Lee may be seen to delight in some aspects of the illusionistic revenant of presence possible through technological manipulation, for Douglas, Paterson (and probably Itter) the pianistic fetish has long developed in synchrony with asymmetrical power relations of many sorts.

V

Bartók composed Ten Easy Pieces for Piano in 1908; Jack Nicholson played a piano-player manqué in Five Easy Pieces in 1970; Marina Abramović interpreted Seven Easy Pieces—a series of performances by other artists extended by Abramović to endurance length—in 2007—and no piano was involved. The “ease” of any of these assemblies of “pieces” is dubious, even if Nicholson’s character, Bobby Dupea, manages falsely to emote while playing Chopin on the back of a truck for his oil rigger buddies, or at his family’s exclusive compound in order to piss off his brother’s fiancée (whom he subsequently seduces, in Bobby’s amoral world, she is another easy “piece”). The idea of “easy pieces” calls back to collections of simplified compositions used to train young people to play instruments, that form of civilizing ethos imposed obliquely to introduce discipline and cultural appreciation into childhood. While the “easy” piece is meant to convince a young player that she or he is really “playing” the piano and must only practice further to achieve mastery, on a web site for “Top 10 Easy Piano Pieces That Sound Great,” we find the Moonlight
Sonata along with Für Elise by Beethoven, as well as works by Chopin, Cage, Satie and Debussy. The stress on the easy is in direct conflict with the requirement of time and commitment needed to learn to play the piano well, even if Gould quipped that he could “teach anyone the skills of pianism in one half of an hour.”

Nonetheless, beside its seeming ease, as Ruskin recognized, the piano has had a slightly menacing aspect. Like the pipe organ, a piano is heavy enough to crush a human, is a complex construction requiring continual maintenance if it is to be in proper working order, is incredibly expensive at the high end—$85,000 for that Bösendorfer for Al Neil, over $100,000 for a Fazioli ($500,000 for a gold-leafed model). It is hard to move (as Laurel and Hardy showed) and hard to play with fluency and expression (without some psychic damage, as anyone who has seen Isabelle Huppert as The Piano Teacher [2001] can attest). As well, the ubiquity previously endemic to the piano’s dominance is now residual, became rapidly diminished—partly due to electronic keyboards and partly due to the advent of the 80-year life span of the instrument itself. According to the New York Times
in 2012, the golden age of North American piano manufacture was 1900 to 1930, meaning many pianos are clapped-out by age and neglect, heading to breaking yards for their scrap value.15

So the instrument and its players might be regarded as endangered or at least in trouble. Yet, the piano can still serve additional purposes. In composer Giacinto Scelsi’s case, following a period of intense mental crisis in the late-1940s, he later described how he coped with his distress by resorting to lengthy periods where he would sit at the piano keyboard and play the same note over and over, listening to each component of the formation, timbre and diminution of the tone.16 Whether this was therapy or symptom, the experience, combined with his already developed interest in Eastern mysticism and Tibetan Buddhist chants, lead to a renewal of Scelsi’s compositions which, formerly dodecaphonic, now became focused on reiterations and explorations of microtonality. Charles Stankievech’s Sola Nota (San Servolo) (2006) is

Charles Stankievech, Sola Nota (San Servolo), (video still) 2007.
an homage to Scelsi’s extreme mode of listening based on a performance by the artist in the church of a former mental hospital in Venice, Italy. Here Stankievech sat at a disused piano previously used for therapeutic purposes and played a single note for 11 hours. His installation for The Piano consists of a projected one-hour video record of this performance with an encompassing soundtrack of the repeated note shown with Timbral (2007) an industrial felt six by two metre sculpture of the sound frequencies produced through striking the note, making evident the dimensionality and temporality of the note as a measurable entity—particularly its tone-colour or timbre.
Scelsi’s exploration of timbre followed those of French and Belgian composers of the fin de siècle such as Debussy and César Franck. Franck’s occasional pupil, Guillaume Lekeu, was a young Belgium composer, best known for string and piano quartets and for dying of typhoid contracted from a contaminated sorbet at the young age of 24 in 1894. His Sonate pour piano (1891) is described by an aficionado as “the most enigmatic, unsatisfactory, and autobiographically tantalizing of Lekeu’s works” while another called it, “sung to the composer’s own soul or to a few intimates and not to a listening crowd.” However unpromising the work sounds, perhaps its very “enigmatic, unsatisfactory” quality, its sheer typicality among the relatively precious compositions of late 19th century francophone music, recommended it to Patrick Bernatchez when he chose its fourth movement for 180°, a projected video installation, as well as the 12-inch record, Orbital Piano I (both 2011, both from the project Lost in Time (2009-2014). Both projector and disk feature the piece played by David Kaplan. During the projection (shot in a well-lit concert hall) the mise-en-scène examines the keyboard and the pianist’s hands, as in Lee and Snow’s works, but here the twist is that the keys are shown in what is apparently inverted order, so that the keys face the floor and the hands the ceiling. The camera swirls around the player’s body and through the hall, but it is only as we see sweat drops falling downwards from the backs of Kaplan’s hands that the “180°” idea becomes clear. We can now recognize the piano and the player were suspended upside down above the concert stage rather than on it. In addition, the score of the Lekeu sonata was itself subject to rotation, for Bernatchez had it inverted before having composer Mark van Hare transcribe the resultant “score.” For the recording of Orbital Piano I, the Lekeu sonata sheet music was rotated another three times, at 0°, 90° and 270° respectively, and then transcribed, so that, in listening, we can choose to note the differences of the positioning on each performance.

Those with a painfully long memory might recall that keyboardist Keith Emerson, of the 1970s “supergroup” Emerson Lake and Palmer, used to appear to play a full Steinway grand piano while it rose some 8 metres above the stage and started to rotate end upon end. But that stunt was done with an empty piano box while, in a behind the scene’s video of the preparations for 180°, we can see Kaplan being inverted before the
music begins. And Kaplan’s piano is twirled sideways rather than end upon end. Still the player in extremity is not without comedy, and the inversion itself might call to mind the inverted (or reverted) photographs of trees by Rodney Graham. If, in 180°, the world is turned upside down, Graham’s photographs remind us of the “primal scene” of both photography and ocular vision itself—specifically that an aperture or iris requires that light be projected upside down on the screen at the back of the camera or the eye to be visible. Thus, there is always a gap between perception and cognition, a turning away from straight seeing which stands as a moment of fundamental unknowing and unpredictability. We can see this in more elaborate physical terms in the constraints placed on Kaplan’s performance in 180° and Orbital Piano I, just as it lurks in the near incomprehensibly different tones discernable in Scelsi’s one note or Satie’s many repetitions or even in the gaps and misinformation that pertain to Douglas’ and Paterson’s works.
Graham's contribution to *The Piano, A Reverie Interrupted by the Police* (2003), is intelligible in terms of that gap, or the "swerving" or bias that he has referred to as the "clinamen." For this video projection, Graham impersonates a handcuffed and shackled prisoner led onto a small old-fashioned stage by a police guard who then sits and plays an upright within his limited means. His penitentiary garb replicates the black-and-white keys of the piano, just as, obviously, the cuffs and shackles reduce his range and control over keys and pedals, but they also appear to make their own music as they rattle and run against the instrument. The piano itself sounds effected, maybe out of tune, as chiming and mixed struck keys sound more percussively than lyrically, more hybrid than pure, more like a Balinese gamelan than the Western instrument. Additionally percussive is the prisoner/pianist's habit of occasionally quitting the keyboard to open and shut the keyboard cover several times, allowing for its closing thunk to serve as both time-keeping and sound. After some seven minutes, "piece" finished, time served, the guard escorts the captive off stage.

The "piece" played is an improvisation and, even if it is not immediately obvious, the prisoner's downcast demeanor suggests that the performance has an endless, repeatable character—much as looping has served Graham's other installations such as Graham's cinematic homage to Satie's *Vexations, Vexation Island* (1997). This interminable quality has melancholy to it, an element somewhat contradicted by what stands as the premier reference behind the reverie. While Steven Harris cites Graham's reading of André Breton's 1951 essay, "As in a Wood," where mention is made of a radio program broadcast from the Prefecture of Police which included a performance by "a bit of piano playing by a handcuffed man," the joker in the pack is certainly John Cage—developer of the "prepared piano" and, with his 4’33" (1952), the arch figure of the anti-pianist, the anti-pianistic, the sponsor of the 1963 performance of *Vexations* and the precursor of Fluxian dismantling of musical propriety. Graham's improvisation sounds like a "prepared piano," although the vertical disposition of the upright would make many of the usual effects of slipping materials atop and between the strings (nuts, bolts, pieces of felts or small pieces of sheet metal) difficult, and the footage shows no sign of the instrument having been prepared. Still, the early fifties milieux of Breton's essay and Cage's ascension to
widespread neo-avant-garde status at that time fits with the dreary theatre of the video and the closing days of penitentiary strictness and severity. Also, the use of the keyboard cover is an unmistakable allusion to 4’33” where the performer’s sole action is to close the cover, wait the appointed time, and open the cover, repeat this pattern three times in order to mark the “movements,” without playing a note.

A further allusion to the keyboard cover comes when we consider that the captive is in the “slammer” and does slam the cover to mark time (like the scratched lines on a cell wall). Given the penitential atmosphere we might indeed look to the “transgressive” reputation of the traditional avant-garde versus the less oppositional and more analytic moves of the neo-avant-garde to revisit, revise and exceed the achievements of their forerunners.21 Yet, given the mildness and fearful manner of his demeanor, Graham’s pianist/prisoner is not a proud transgressor and, indeed, his method and choice of musical emulation (an imposed Cagean improvisation) might be an indication that the neo-avant-garde milieu is more given to white-collar illegalities rather than transgressing the “law.” Here we might remember philosopher Stanley Cavell’s suggestion that “the possibility of fraudulence, and the experience of fraudulence, is endemic to contemporary music” and that we “trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed.”22 Graham’s pianist might not be a “fraud” in his playing, but his situation has him caught in a loop of continuing the “legacy” of pianistic progress towards its possible betrayal—even unto its most bathos-riddled jail.

In 1972, Cage recalled his initial 1940s work with the “prepared piano” and wrote:

> When I first placed objects between piano strings, it was with the desire to possess sounds (to be able to repeat then). But, as the music left my home and went from piano to piano and from pianist to pianist, it became clear that not only are two pianists essentially different from one another, but two pianos are not the same either. Instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion.”23
This call to uniqueness and singularity is easily reconcilable with Cage’s interest in Zen Buddhism, but it also demonstrates how he reacted to the closing of the long period of the dominance of the piano. That desire to “possess sounds” is related to the possessive individualism that, whether in reality or merely as ideological screen, simultaneously began to develop in the 18th century and has unraveled since the Second World War. As an exhibition, as a collection of performers and performance, *The Piano* pays tribute to the history of dominance and the residual effects of self-possession as a key artistic parable for the Modern age.

That we are far beyond such an age—but are still needing to examine its history and effects—is finalized in Dean Baldwin’s *Bar Piano* (2012). Baldwin’s bar is a hollowed out baby grand piano fitted with the fixings and utensils to prepare and serve several “classic” cocktails—martinis, champagne cocktails, Manhattans. Located outside the exhibition space, the sound component consists of recorded tracks of piano bar “classics,” and the bartenders and servers are impeccably dressed and behaved—the whole “civility” of the scene being somewhat out of place. The piano bar—whether Humphrey Bogart and Dooley Wilson’s version in *Casablanca* (1941), or the Bridges brothers’ version in *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (1989), or Bobby Short’s 35-year extended performance at the Café Carlyle in New York (1968-2003)—is a place of elegance and achievement tarnished by aspects of tawdry airport strip “entertainment.” It is the out of placedness of Baldwin’s *Bar Piano* that counts: a free drink, pleasant service, quiet, almost soporific, music—it is a pastiche of what once seemed like an atmosphere of sophistication and cares forgotten. Compared to the extremities of performance otherwise surveyed in *The Piano*, this is neither a violent attack or a spirited playing of the instrument; nor is it interminable or interrupted; rather, like Ruskin, we might be reminded through the *Bar Piano* of “old thoughts of home” where we no longer belong.
Endnotes


2  The historical material on the piano as instrument I reference derives from two sources: James Parakilas et al., Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life With the Piano (Yale, 1999); and Stuart Isacoff, A Natural History of the Piano: The Instrument, the Music, the Musicians—From Mozart to Modern Jazz and Everything in Between (Knopf, 2011).


7  The Katzenklavier was, according to The Guardian (19 April 2010), an “instrument consisting of a keyboard, with seven to nine cats held in cages corresponding to the approximate pitch of their mewing. Each of the cats’ tails is stretched out and held down. Above each tail is a nail. Depressing a key assigned to a specific cat causes a mechanism to drive the nail into the tail resulting in a shriek from the poor animal.”

8  See www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/exposition-of-music/. One of the pianos is preserved in the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien.

9  My description of Vexations is based on Alex Ross, The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008), 526-27, with additional material from Gavin Bryars, “Vexations and Its Performers,” Contact 26 (Spring 1983), 12-20.

10  As Bryars notes, Racine’s 14 hour version (the one at Véhicule) was partially due to the pianist becoming unhinged from the indicated tempo (“Très lent”).


13  A concise account of this emergence is given in Anderson, 77-92.

14  Said, 30.


22 Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” Must We Mean What We Say? (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 188.

Dean Baldwin  
*Bar Piano, 2012*

*Bar Piano* is an example of what Dean Baldwin calls “barchitecture”, a mixture of an architectural installation featuring a functioning cocktail bar. In this case, the bartop and bottle storage are formed by the interior of a hollowed-out baby grand, with the lid serving as a raised rack for various glasses. Classic drinks—martinis, Manhattans, champagne cocktails—are on offer from a professionally trained staff, including Baldwin as host, while piano classics are broadcast from speakers within the instrument.

As a version of art as “social practice”, *Bar Piano* was originally commissioned by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, Toronto, for Scotiabank Nuit Blanche in 2012. Remounted on the occasion of the Art Gallery of Alberta’s exhibition *The Piano*, in 2013, following opening night service, the *Bar Piano* stood as a static object for the remainder of the exhibition—except for select Wednesday evenings when cocktails, conviviality and piano music once again poured forth from its chamber.
Orbital Piano is a series of projects in which the artist restructures musical compositions by rotating the score at successive 90° increments. These turned scores are then transcribed so that they can be performed by a single or a group of musicians, depending on the nature of work. The first work in the Orbital Piano series is an orbital rotation to the score of Guillaume Lekeu's Piano Sonata No. 4. After being transcribed, the 90°, 180° and 270° rotations were submitted to classical pianist David Kaplan to be performed. Surprisingly, the resulting recordings are not as random and inharmonious as one might expect in light of the procedure. David Kaplan is the pianist performing upside down in the video 180° (2011), playing the 180° version of the aforementioned Lekeu sonata.

Patrick Bernatchez’s 180° debuted as part of his Lost in Time survey exhibit at Galerie de l’QUAM in Montreal in 2011. Initially, full panning camera shots show sweeping vistas of an empty concert hall. A pianist is playing the Lekeu Sonata as the camera spins around him, and around the circular architecture of the hall. Over time, the viewer realizes that the pianist is under duress, his hands showing strain. Beads of sweat drop from the pianist’s fingers, and, as the drops fall to the concert hall floor, we realize that the piano and pianist have been suspended upside down for the entirety of the performance. As the camera spins, the theatre lighting seems to create a constellation, enveloping the single figure suspended from the stage. The artist’s deliberate inversion leads the viewer to question perception and reality within a disparate cosmology. This video installation is a disorienting examination of the concept of the opus—an artistic work done on a grand scale.
The installation *Onomatopoeia* consists of three slide projectors that are synchronized with a roll-operated player piano. As the piano plays through a segment of Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata in C Minor (Op. 111, No. 32)* photographic slide images of the interior of a 19th century textile mill are projected onto an adjacent screen. Both the player piano and the weaving loom function with the same basic mechanical technology, utilizing a series of hole-punched rolls that determine the order of musical notes or the weave pattern of cloth.

As the sound of the Beethoven sonata and slide projections move in and out of synchronization, a strange similarity of one passage to ragtime becomes apparent, referencing both high and low culture. At the same time that Beethoven brings to mind the heroic individualism of the 19th century, the erasure of human presence in *Onomatopoeia* speaks of anonymous production in an industrial world.
Rodney Graham  
*A Reverie Interrupted by the Police*, 1997

The film *A Reverie Interrupted by the Police*, shown in an endless loop, features Rodney Graham playing a convict who, handcuffed and wearing striped prison garb, is led onto a small stage by a policeman. Although filmed in the sumptuous colours of 35 mm film, the scene, including the mimed interaction between cop and convict, recalls 1920s silent movies or a vaudeville show. The convict sits down at the piano and, under the suspicious eye of the policeman, begins a short atonal improvisation whose musicality contrasts with his clanking cuffs and rattling chained feet. He plinks away for some seven minutes, interspersed with percussive opening and closing of the keyboard lid, then the policeman taps him on the shoulder, and leads the prisoner off-stage. The curtain falls, and the performance begins again, as in many of Graham’s works, in an endless, ongoing loop.
Carole Itter
*Grand Piano Rattle: A Bösendorfer for Al Neil, 1984*
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery

Carole Itter’s work, *Grand Piano Rattle*, is part of a larger Rattle series, which was first exhibited at Western Front Gallery in Vancouver in 1984. This series of instruments was constructed from found and domestic objects from the artist’s home environment. *Grand Piano Rattle* was created in honour of the artist’s partner, Al Neil, a well-known Vancouver-based composer and jazz musician with whom Itter frequently collaborates on visual art and writing projects. The form and body of the piano are represented through an assemblage of objects – some recycled, some reworked, some personal. This work is both a sculpture and a musical instrument and has been manipulated during live performances to produce unconventional sounds.

The only work in *The Piano* that does not include an actual piano or the representation of one, Itter’s work is comprised of the quotidian things used for simple household activities and tasks – mixing spoons, axe handles and shoe forms, suspended and lit from below as in a concert stage performance. The shadow images of the objects are cast on the back wall and come together to form one large grand instrument that resembles a deconstructed and suspended piano.

Installation view Art Gallery of Alberta.
Tim Lee


Tim Lee’s video diptych is homage, firstly, to Johan Sebastian Bach’s composition, *The Goldberg Variations*, and, secondly, to Glenn Gould, the Canadian pianist who made two recordings of the piano piece in 1955 and 1981.

Gould brought attention to Bach’s relatively unknown composition and raised its status beyond that of a practice piece for his first recording in 1955. After achieving great fame, retiring from performing in 1964, and subsequently earning a reputation as an eccentric recluse, Gould recorded *The Variations* again in 1981, this time combining several individually recorded elements into one recording. This controversial performance demonstrated the potential for a
recording to serve as an instrument itself in contemporary compositions. By coincidence, this was the last occasion of Gould recording his virtuosic playing.

An untrained musician, Lee took piano lessons to perform the *Aria* of *The Goldberg Variations*—with each hand playing separately for the camera, four or five notes at a time. The snippets were then spliced together and are seen and heard as one soundtrack on two synchronized monitors. Lee’s awkward rendition demonstrates how digital technology can increase the amateur's participation in cultural performance, while also stretching ideas about authenticity, by questioning the limits of personal expression and virtuoso celebrity when negotiating classical music.
Euan Macdonald
9,000 Pieces, 2011

Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Zink

Euan Macdonald’s video presents scenes recorded in a musical instrument factory in Shanghai, China. The camera zooms in on the industrial process by documenting an endurance test for the piano, meant to replicate use over the lifetime of the instrument. The video shows a mass of mechanical arms that activate all of the piano’s keys simultaneously, in a densely mechanical and visual rhythm.

The video emphasizes the mechanized parts of the piano itself; no single human performer could create or even mimic such an intense, cacophonic wall of sound. The title 9,000 Pieces refers to the average number of parts in a piano and the process of assembly required, thereby underscoring the material and industrial manufacture of the instrument.

Euan Macdonald describes the piece: “I think most art requires viewers to look and think closely. I’ve wanted to somehow involve a mass-production environment as a subject in my work ever since I worked in a factory. In the case of 9,000 Pieces, the video was produced to reflect the typical way things are made in factories – by shooting and editing imagery as cumulative information; to convey the piecemeal production methods that are typical of factory production.”*

George Maciunas  
*Piano Piece #13 (for Nam June Paik), 1962*

George Maciunas’ *Piano Piece #13 (for Nam June Paik)* (aka *Carpenter's Piece*) features a performer (or several) nailing down the keys of a piano across all registers until they are all immobilized and the instrument is forever silenced.

Dedicated to Nam June Paik, an artist whose work also celebrated destruction as a creative process, *Piano Piece #13 (for Nam June Paik)* can be seen as an attack on the piano as a high culture instrument. Yet it also presents a new way of listening through the destruction of the instrument. New sounds are created as the hammer hits the steel of the nails, the keys splinter and break apart; loud noises of torn strings and cracking wood and ivory are intermingled with the subtle rings of the piano and the sounding of its entire body.

As Maciunas put it in 1962: “In music, the concrete artist absorbs the sonic material with all its immanent richness of timbre and reproduces it this way without making distinctions of pitch or producing a denatured, abstract tone structure artificially purified of any sonic mix. A sound is thus to be regarded as material or concrete if it is closely related to the material from which it is produced.”*


Installation view Art Gallery of Alberta.
Gordon Monahan

Piano Airlift, 1988/2006

Pianist, composer and sound artist, Gordon Monahan is known for deconstructing musical instruments and sound equipment and re-purposing them in novel ways in order to produce experimental and altogether new and unusual sounds.

An “Aeolian” tone is made when wind passes over an object and sound is produced. Piano Airlift is part of Monahan’s Aeolian series which exploits the potential of piano strings by exposing, extending and stretching them to various fixed points in natural or architectural settings so that they are activated and “performed” by the wind.

Piano Airlift was initially created for the 1988 Sound Symposium in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The work involved a piano airlifted by helicopter to the top of Gibbet Hill near the St. John’s harbour serving as the soundboard for long piano strings suspended down a cliff from the top of the hill.

The 2006 version of Piano Airlift stretches even further what possible noises the combination of nature, and a piano, can possibly make without a performer to play it. The video shows the piano being lifted into the air and its subsequent destruction, as it is dropped over a cliff to smash into pieces. The video footage is accompanied by a synchronized composition “played” on a piano.

One aspect of sound art, as the artist observes, is “to look at instruments not as what they are meant to be, but as machines that produce sounds. The piano is one of the most complicated instruments around. While it is a keyboard instrument, I can turn that around by using a piano as either a machine or a sculpture that produces sound; in other words, I can deconstruct what a piano is meant to be. I can also use it as a soundboard without using its strings.”*

Katie Paterson

Earth–Moon–Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon), 2008

Earth-Moon-Earth (E.M.E) is a form of radio transmission whereby messages are sent in Morse code from the Earth, reflected from the surface of the moon, and then received back on Earth. The Moon reflects only part of the information back – some is absorbed in its shadows, “lost” in its craters. Also known as “Moon bounce,” this type of radio communication was developed by the United States Military after the Second World War but became obsolete once satellite communications became prevalent.

For Earth–Moon–Earth, Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata was translated into Morse code and sent to the moon via E.M.E. transmission. Returned to Earth, the transmission has been fragmented by the Moon’s uneven surface. Subsequently, the returned transmission has been re-translated into a new score, where the gaps and absences of the communication become intervals and rests in the performance. In the exhibition space the new “Moon–altered” score plays on a computerized, self-playing piano.
Rober Racine  
*Vexations*, 1978-1979

This video presents the 14-hour non-stop concert of Erik Satie's *Vexations* as performed by Montreal artist Rober Racine at Véhicule Art Gallery in Montreal in 1978. Satie’s *Vexations* are based on a score of 152 notes that are to be repeated 840 times (requiring the artist to play at the piano for more than 14 hours at a time).

In 1978 and 1979, Rober Racine performed four, non-stop interpretations of Satie’s *Vexations* on the piano:

1. Montreal, November 4, 1978: 14 hours, 8 minutes  
2. Arthabaska, Quebec, December 15, 1978: 17 hours, 53 minutes  
3. Toronto, January 13, 1979: 19 hours  
4. Vancouver, May 15, 1979: 17 hours  

Satie’s original work, and Racine’s performance of it, can be seen as a feat of musical endurance, which the composer himself may never have undertaken. The work was not published in Satie’s life-time, but was accompanied with his inscription: “In order to play the motif 840 times, one would have to prepare oneself beforehand, and in the utmost silence, through serious immobilities.”

Michael Snow
*Piano Sculpture*, 2009

Michael Snow’s *Piano Sculpture* is a complex and energetic interplay between jazz improvisation, sculpture and video installation. The work consists of four individually filmed piano solos, each composed as variations on the terms “glissandi” and “clusters”—trademarks of Snow’s work on the piano. The four solo performances are projected onto the 4 walls of a square room to form a musical quartet. The installation is spatially amplified by four speakers that serve as three-dimensional “screens” for the video projections, and the speaker placement coincides with the location of the strings of each of the piano images.

As in some of his earlier work, Snow creates a multidimensional illusion: a two-dimensional projected image is presented on a three-dimensional object—the speakers—while the fourth dimension is the work’s temporal duration. The collision of the moving image, sculptural object and sound challenges the viewer’s sense of perception and explores the physical limits of the installation.
Charles Stankievech
*Sola Nota (San Servolo)*, 2006
*Timbral*, 2007

Charles Stankievech’s 20-foot long industrial felt sculpture entitled *Timbral* is a three-dimensional and material representation of the wave-form and resonance of a sound. The work is accompanied by a one-hour long video, which was excerpted from an 11-hour recital that the artist originally performed on a found piano in a de-commissioned 13th century church located in an insane asylum on the island of San Servolo in Venice, Italy.

The video, *Sola Nota (San Servolo)*, shows a hand continuously playing a single note on the piano, while the audio component of the work is replicated in the sculptural form. In this way, the original piano note, which is visualized in the sculpture, is then a synchronous sound that seems to emanate from within the form. The work was inspired by the life and work of the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi, and specifically Scelsi’s account of having cured himself from a period of psychosis through the repetitive playing of a single note.

Installation view Art Gallery of Alberta.
Artists’ Biographies

Dean Baldwin

Dean Baldwin lives and works in Toronto, and has been exhibiting internationally for over ten years. He completed a BFA at York University and an MFA at Concordia University. His installations, photography and video are often centred on the subject of food and drink. Baldwin elaborately constructs immersive environments in which he habitually “performs” the role of host. Providing a party atmosphere where food and alcohol are often shared with the public, these hybrid spaces subvert the traditional protocols and conventions of museums and galleries allowing an interactive experience with the artwork.

Other projects include Ship in a Bottle (Le Bateau ivre), 2011, a bar in a sailing boat installed in the lobby of the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal for the Québec Triennale in 2011; Chalet, 2012, another beverage-serving installation for the exhibition Oh, Canada at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts; and La table de la Méduse for the St-Jean-Port-Joli Sculpture Biennale in 2014. Bar Piano, 2012, shown in The Piano, was commissioned by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House in Toronto for Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2012.

Patrick Bernatchez

Over the past several years, Patrick Bernatchez’s works have recurrently addressed themes concerned with concepts of cycles, time and space. This is most strikingly evident in his films, in which forces of nature often predominate, and notions of the material and of the decay of the body appear in multiple guises. He explores these themes through a multidisciplinary approach that includes sculpture, drawing, printmaking, painting, photography, film, installation, music and sound.

His films, most notably those forming The Chrysalides Trilogy 2007-2009 (I Feel Cold Today, Chrysalis and 13) have been presented in Canada, Europe, the U.S. and Australia. In 2009, I Feel Cold Today was screened at Nuit Blanche in Paris, and the The Chrysalides Trilogy was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum’s-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands and was in the official competition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2010. That same year, Bernatchez was nominated for the Sobey Art Award. Solo exhibitions of his works have been held at Gallery West, Netherlands in 2009 and 2012; the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Germany; and at Montreal’s Galerie de l’UQAM (2011) and Centre des arts actuels SKOL (2008). From 2009 to 2014, he was engaged in the completion of his most recent opus, Lost in Time, which includes the works shown in The Piano. The entire multidisciplinary ensemble of works will be featured in a solo exhibition at Casino Luxembourg, and travelling to Mac/Val Paris and the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (2015). Bernatchez currently lives and works in Montreal.
Stan Douglas

Since the mid-1980s, Stan Douglas has created films, photographs and installations that reexamine particular locations or past events. His works often take their points of departure in local settings, from which broader issues can be identified. Making frequent use of new as well as outdated technologies, Douglas appropriates existing Hollywood genres (including murder mysteries and the Western) and borrows from classic literary works (notably, Samuel Beckett, Herman Melville and Franz Kafka) to create ready-made contextual frameworks for his complex, thoroughly researched projects. In March 2014 at the Arts Club Theatre Company in Vancouver, a new multimedia theatre work conceived by Douglas, *Helen Lawrence*, was given its premiere. Created in close collaboration with screenwriter Chris Haddock, the project innovatively merged theatre, visual art, live-action filming and computer-generated imagery.

Over the past decade, Douglas’ work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at prominent institutions worldwide, including the The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2014); Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris (2013); Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota (2012); The Power Plant, Toronto (2011); Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart (2007); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2005); kesntergesellschaft, Hanover (2004) and the Serpentine Gallery, London (2002). Major museum collections which hold works by Douglas include the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Tate Gallery, London; Vancouver Art Gallery; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Rodney Graham

Rodney Graham’s art pulls at the threads of cultural and intellectual history through photography, film, music, performance and painting. He presents cyclical narratives that pop with puns and references to literature and philosophy, from Lewis Carroll to Sigmund Freud to Kurt Cobain. Graham’s footing in the post-conceptual art and post-punk music scene of late 1970s Vancouver informs his work, with upside-down imagery as a metaphor for our relation to the world. Inversion, Graham explains, has a logic: “You don’t have to delve very deeply into modern physics to realize that the scientific view holds that the world is really not as it appears. Before the brain rights it, the eye sees a tree upside down in the same way it appears on the glass back of the large format field camera I use.”

Rodney Graham was born in Abbotsford, British Columbia in 1949. He graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1971 and continues to live and work in Vancouver. Solo exhibitions of how work include: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (2010); Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (2004); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2002); Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2001) and Kunsthalle Wien (1999). He has participated in group exhibitions such as the 13th, 14th and 17th Sydney Biennales (2002, 2006, 2010), the Whitney Biennial, New York.
(2006) and the Biennale d'Art contemporain de Lyon, France (2003). Graham represented Canada at the 47th Venice Biennale (1997) and among awards he has received the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, Toronto (2004); the Kurt Schwitters-Preis, Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Germany (2006) and the Audain Prize for lifetime achievement in visual arts, British Columbia (2011).

Carole Itter
Born in Vancouver, Carole Itter is an artist, writer, performer and filmmaker. She has received awards from the Canada Council for the Arts and the B.C. Arts Council for visual art, writing and for the film, Metallic, which was produced in 2002. She was the recipient of the VIVA (Vancouver Institute of Visual Arts) award in 1989. In 1979 Itter co-edited (with Daphne Marlatt) a volume in the Sound Heritage series about her Strathcona neighborhood, and she more recently published and edited a posthumous collection of journal writings by her daughter Lara Gilbert, I Might Be Nothing: Journal Writing, that documents her gifted daughter’s descent into drug abuse, episodes of prostitution, allegations of sexual abuse and her eventual suicide in 1996. Itter’s own writings have been included in Room of One’s Own, Brick, A Literary Journal, Cradle and All, Women and Words Periodicals, and elsewhere. Her exhibitions of visual art include The Pink Room: A Visual Requiem at the grunt Gallery, Vancouver (1999) and at Open Space, Victoria (2001); The Float at the Or Gallery, Vancouver (1995); Where Streets Are Paved With Gold at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1991) and Rattles at the Western Front Gallery (1984). Itter’s work was included in WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2008, and is represented in the collections of The Canada Council Art Bank, the Vancouver Public Library and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Tim Lee
Working with photography, video, text and sculpture, Tim Lee’s work both replicates and reimagines seminal moments in art history and popular culture. With sources that range from Johann Sebastian Bach, Steve Martin, Dan Graham, Public Enemy, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Glenn Gould and Ted Williams, Lee suggestively inserts himself within the history of his subjects by loosely reconstructing specific works associated with their creators and, in so doing, complicates our knowledge of these histories while mapping out an extended timeline that travels from the historical past to the imagined future.

Born in Seoul, South Korea, Lee lives and works in Vancouver. Since graduating with a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of British Columbia in 2002, he has exhibited his work widely including solo exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery, London; DAADGalerie, Berlin; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston and the CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, as well as group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; MuHKA, Antwerp; Haus der Kunst, Munich and biennales in Sydney, Yokohama, Istanbul and Shanghai. His work is also in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; the Reina Sofia, Madrid; the Art Gallery of Ontario; and the National Gallery of Canada.
Euan Macdonald

Euan Macdonald is based in Los Angeles. His recent solo exhibitions include *Open Tuning* at The Hayward Gallery, London (2012); *9,000 Pieces*, Yerba Buena Center for Contemporary Art, San Francisco (2011); *Take the Dark Out of the Night Time*, Arrow Factory, Beijing (2010); *Healer*, Times Square; *Creative Time*, The 59th Minute, New York (2006), and he has also recently been included in group exhibitions: *Super 8*, Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; *Coquilles Mécaniques*, CRAC Centre Rhénan d'Arté Contemporain, Alsace, France (2012); *Like Tears in Rain*, Palácio das Artes, Porto, Portugal (2010); *Elogio della Semplicità*, Fondazione Stelline, Milan, Italy, (2010); *California Video*, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, (2008); *The Desert Shore*, Luckman Gallery, Los Angeles (2008); *Tempo AO Tempo*, MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo, Spain, (2007); *Irreducible*, Wattis Center for Contemporary Art, San Francisco (2005); *Treble*, The Sculpture Center, New York (2004); and *The Joy of My Dreams*, Sevilla Bienale. Macdonald’s work is included in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; The Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; MAXXI, Museo Nazionale Delle Arti del XXI Secolo, Rome; Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin; Stadtsche Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich; Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal; DAIWA Radiator collection museum Hiroshima; The New Museum, New York; the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

George Maciunas

Lithuanian-born American artist George Maciunas (1931-1978) is best known as the founder and central coordinator of Fluxus, which he was involved with from 1962 until his death in 1978. Fluxus was a global collective of artists, musicians, designers bound by an intermedia sensibility and experimental enlightenment. He chose the word “Fluxus” as the title of a journal he wanted to edit together with Almus Salcius – the first usage of the term in an art context. The journal was never published, but the title provided the name for future activities of this influential circle of artists.

In a class on musical composition taught by Richard Maxfield at the New School of Social Research in New York, Maciunas met La Monte Young, George Brecht, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow and other artists. Together with Almus Salcius, he founded the AG Gallery, an organization dedicated to literature, music and film. Although, AG Gallery only lasted a year, Maxfield, John Cage, Storm de Hirsch, Dick Higgins, Toshi Ichianagi, Yoko Ono, Jackson Mac Low, Joseph Byrd, La Monte Young, Henry Flynt, Walter de Maria, Ray Johnson and others were among the participants in the project. Through Nam June Paik, Maciunas met other artists in Germany and France who founded Fluxus as a movement that worked across media boundaries. While Maciunas and other Fluxus members produced a spectrum of manifestos and writings, Maciunas concentrated on the production of printed works and multiples, objects, films and books which he combined into group editions such as *Flux Year Box 1* (1964) and *Flux Year Box 2* (1967). Maciunas died on May 9, 1978.
Gordon Monahan

Gordon Monahan’s works for piano, loudspeakers, video, kinetic sculpture and computer-controlled sound environments span various genres from avant-garde concert music to multi-media installation and sound art. As a composer and sound artist, he juxtaposes the quantitative and qualitative aspects of natural acoustical phenomena with elements of media technology, environment, architecture, popular culture and live performance. The renowned composer John Cage once said, “At the piano, Gordon Monahan produces sounds we haven’t heard before.”

Monahan won First Prize at the 1984 CBC National Radio Competition for Young Composers, as well as commissions from the Vancouver New Music Society; CBC Radio; Dade County Art in Public Places, Miami; The Kitchen, New York; the DAAD Inventionen Festival, Berlin; the Donaueschinger Musiktage; the Sony Center, Berlin; the Coleman-Lemieux Dance Company, Montreal, and the Warsaw Autumn Festival in Poland. His controversial commission for the Dade County MetroRail transit system was banned during the 1988 New Music America Festival in Miami. Monahan has been Artist-in-Residence at The Banff Centre for the Arts (1990); the Exploratorium in San Francisco (1991); DAAD, Berlin (1992-1993), the Western Front, Vancouver (1999); Podewil, Berlin (2002) and Recto-Verso, Quebec City (2011-12). Gordon Monahan was the recipient of a 2013 Governor-General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts.

Katie Paterson

Collaborating with leading scientists and researchers across the world, Katie Paterson’s projects consider our place on Earth in the context of geological time and change. Her artworks make use of sophisticated technologies and specialist expertise to stage intimate, poetic and philosophical engagements between people and their natural environment. Combining a Romantic sensibility with a research-based approach and minimalist presentation, her work collapses the distance between the viewer and the most distant edges of time and the cosmos. Eliciting feelings of humility, wonder and melancholy akin to the experience of the Romantic sublime, Paterson’s work is at once understated in gesture and monumental in scope.

Since graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art in 2007 Katie Paterson has exhibited internationally, from London to New York, Berlin to Seoul, and her works have been included in exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery; Tate Britain; Kunsthalle Wien and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Her artworks are represented in collections including the Guggenheim, New York and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. She was winner of the Independent’s Creative 30 award “for Britain’s most creative young person.” In 2013 she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship at Edinburgh University in recognition of her “major contribution in fostering collaboration between the arts and sciences” and was also awarded the Spirit of Scotland Award in 2014. Katie Paterson lives and works in London.
Rober Racine

Rober Racine is a multidisciplinary artist who has created performances and installations based on his interest in the intricacies and nuances of sound, language and literary texts. Racine has become internationally renowned for his detailed, systematic working methods and the epic scale of his conceptual works. In several notable performances Racine has set extraordinary challenges for himself. These include *Tetras 1* (1978), a musical composition created for an installation involving musicians, actors and objects, and the performances based on Erik Satie’s *Vexations* (1978-1979), featured in *The Piano*. He also explored the physical, spatial and temporal dimensions of Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Salammbô* (1978-1980). For this work, he transcribed Flaubert’s text, constructing a set of large wooden stairs that echoed the architectural structure of the novel. During the performance of the piece, which took 14 hours, Racine read the novel while standing on the appropriate level of the stairs.

Racine has exhibited in museums and galleries around the world and has been selected to participate in major international events such as the *Aperto* of the *Venice Biennale* (1990), the *Sydney Biennale* (1990) and *Documenta IX* in Kassel, Germany (1992). In 1995, he had a major retrospective at the Centre internationale d’art contemporain in Montréal and at P3 in Tokyo. He has published a novel (*Le Mal de Vienne*, 1992), produced radio programs, a video (*J’aurais dit Glenn Gould*, 1984) and composed music for dance and performances. In 2015, Racine was among those selected to receive the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Art. Rober Racine lives and works in Montreal.

Michael Snow

Michael Snow’s extensive and multidisciplinary oeuvre includes painting, sculpture, video, film, sound, photography, holography, drawing, writing, and music. His work explores the nature of perception, consciousness, language, and temporality. Snow is one of the world’s leading experimental filmmakers, having inspired the Structural Film movement with his groundbreaking film *Wavelength*, 1967. Solo exhibitions of Snow’s visual art have been presented at museums and galleries in Amsterdam, Atlanta, Berlin, Bonn, Boston, Brussels, Istanbul, Kassel, Lima, Los Angeles, Lucerne, Lyons, Minneapolis, Montreux, Munich, New York, Ottawa, Paris, Pittsburgh, Quebec City, Rotterdam, San Francisco, Vienna and elsewhere. He has executed several public sculpture commissions in Toronto, notably *Flight Stop* at the Eaton Centre, *The Audience* at the Rogers Centre, and *The Windows Suite* at the Pantages Hotel and Condominium complex.

His numerous awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1972), Order of Canada (Officer 1982; Companion 2007), and the first Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts (2000) for cinema. Snow was made a *Chevalier de l’ordre des arts et des lettres*, France in 1995, and received an honorary doctorate in 2004 from the Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne. Michael Snow was born in 1928 in Toronto, where he lives and works today.
Charles Stankievech

Charles Stankievech is a Canadian artist whose research has explored issues such as the notion of “fieldwork” in the embedded landscape, the military industrial complex, and the history of technology. His diverse body of work has been shown internationally at the Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; MassMoca, Massachusetts; Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal; Canadian Centre for Architecture and the Venice Architecture and SITE Santa Fe Biennales. His lectures for Documenta XIII and the 8th Berlin Biennale were as much performance as pedagogy, while his writing has been published in academic journals by MIT and Princeton Architectural Press.

Stankievech’s idiosyncratic and obsessively researched curatorial projects include Magnetic Norths at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal, and CounterIntelligence at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, for which he received the 2014 Ontario Association of Art Galleries’ Thematic Exhibition of the Year Award. From 2010-2011 (and again currently from 2014-2015) he was hired as a private contractor for the Department of National Defence where he conducted independent research in intelligence operations under the rubric of the Canadian Forces Art Program. He was a founding faculty member of the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City, Yukon and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto. Since 2011, he has been co-director of the art and theory press K. in Berlin.
Writers’ Biographies

Diedrich Diederichsen
Since the early 1990s Diedrich Diederichsen has been a guest professor in universities across Europe and the United States. From 1998 to 2007 he was Professor of Aesthetic Theory/Cultural Studies at Merz-Akademie, Stuttgart and since 2006 has been Professor of Theory, Practice, and Communication of Contemporary Art at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna. Some of his most recent publications include: Über Pop-Musik (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2014); The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside, (Sternberg Press 2013), Utopia of Sound (Schleebrügge/Akademie der Bildenden Künste 2010). Diederichsen currently lives in Berlin and Vienna and continues to work on pop-music, contemporary art, modern composition, cinema, theatre, design and politics.

William Wood
Art historian and critic William Wood holds a doctorate from the University of Sussex and has taught art history and critical and curatorial studies at universities in Toronto, Vancouver, Lethbridge and Edmonton in Canada, and London and Brighton in the United Kingdom. His research focuses on contemporary art and its display, the history of conceptual and minimal art of the 1960s and 70s, aesthetics and cultural criticism. Since 1984, Wood has published on recent art in journals, anthologies and exhibition catalogues, as well as holding editorial positions with C Magazine, Public, Vanguard, Parachute and Fillip magazine. His catalogue essays and articles have dealt with artists such as Billy Apple, Stan Douglas, Brian Jungen, Mike Kelley, Becky Singleton, Ron Terada, and the entity known as the Vancouver School. Recent publications include essays on conceptual art in Ontario for Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada; Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Photography and Painting and a contribution to Letters: Michael Morris and Concrete Poetry (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver). Wood currently teaches the history of art and photography at MacEwan University.
List of Works

Dean Baldwin
*Bar Piano*, 2012
Mixed media installation
Collection of the Artist

Patrick Bernatchez
*180°*, 2012
Single channel video installation
Collection of the Artist

*Orbital Piano I, from Lost in Time*, 2011
_Piano Sonata, Movement IV*, Guillaume Lekeu (1870-1894)
45 rpm vinyl record, jacket, 27 min 16 sec
Pianist: David Kaplan
Transcription: Mark Van Hare
Collection of the Artist

Stan Douglas
*Onomatopoeia*, 1985-1986
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

Rodney Graham
*A Reverie Interrupted by the Police*, 2003
Single-channel video
Collection of the Artist

Carole Itter
Metal, paint, wood, linocut, and light fixtures
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery

Tim Lee
Two-channel video
Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift of Jay Smith and Laura Rapp, and Robin and David Young, 2011

Euan Macdonald
*9,000 Pieces*, 2011
Video
Courtesy Galerie Zink

George Maciunas
*12 Piano Compositions for Nam June Paik*, 1962
Archival document
Collection of the George Maciunas Foundation

*Piano Piece No. 13*, 1962
Performance and installation
Collection of the George Maciunas Foundation

George Maciunas performing his Piano Piece No. 13 (aka Carpenter's Piano Piece), Fluxhall, 359 Canal Street, NY, 1964
Photograph by Peter Moore
Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Moore and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Gordon Monahan
Piano and video projection
Collection of the Artist
Katie Paterson

*Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)*, 2008
Installation
Courtesy of the James Cohan Gallery, NYC

Rober Racine

*Vexations*, 1978-1979
Video
Collection of the Artist

Michael Snow

*Piano Sculpture*, 2009
Four-channel video
Collection of the Artist

Charles Stankievech

*Sola Nota (San Servolo)*, 2006
Video
Collection of the Artist

*Timbral*, 2007
Felt sculpture
Collection of the Artist

Fin