EXHIBITION REVIEW

Andrea Büttner: Piano Destrucions
WALKER ART CENTER
MINNEAPOLIS

In Jane Campion's groundbreaking film The Piano (1993), her protagonist, Ada, is forced to marry a man she has never met. Ada brings two possessions—her young daughter and her piano—with her. Because Ada is mute, both function as communicative substitutes; signing with her daughter, she is able to relay her basic needs, and using the piano, she can express her varied emotions. When her new husband discovers she has been unfaithful, he severs one of Ada's fingers, warning that if she continues to make him a cuckold, he will gladly cut off another. This sadistic mutilation is indubitably meant to limit Ada's ability to communicate as well as to truncate her pleasure, but it also signifies how intentionally cruel patriarchal culture can be. In Piano Destrucions (2014), German artist Andrea Büttner juxtaposes archival footage of (predominantly male) Fluxus artists willfully destroying pianos with more recent footage of female pianists elegantly playing in concert. By doing so, Büttner brilliantly reprises and contemporizes two of Campion's major themes: men's propensity to destroy and the piano as the embodiment of genteel femininity. This five-channel video installation with nine-channel soundpiece is meant to complement Büttner's first solo exhibition stateside (also on view at the Walker), but in my opinion it is her most impressive piece. Her conceptual multimedia work is primarily concerned with institutional critique, and Piano Destrucions seems to tacitly indict the art world—albeit subtly—for rewarding the "bad" behavior of men while simultaneously diminishing the talents of women. But Büttner also complicates this too facile reading by placing her large-scale woodcut, Piano (2015), on the wall of the installation's anteroom. Initially, it seems nothing more than a decorative and literal image, but when one realizes that Büttner had to herself dismantle a piano to make this gray-toned image, all bets are off.

Büttner also problematizes an overly simplistic interpretation of the work by eschewing a simplistic division of the rectangular gallery. Rather than placing the obviously gendered screens in direct opposition, she has situated the four channels featuring mostly male artists disinterring, chopping, and defacing pianos on the long left wall, and the one channel devoted to entirely female musicians on the significantly smaller flanking wall. This arrangement forces viewers to think beyond the binaries of male versus female, destruction versus creation, and chaos versus harmony, which are self-evident in the imagery and sound. Three handcrafted Klavierstühle (piano benches), made by Büttner specifically for this installation, were positioned to face the men. When I asked the guard if I could turn them to face the women, he said I could not. When I later asked the curator if the benches were meant to be stationary, she said that the guard was incorrect and they could indeed have been moved. Nevertheless, the fact of their original placement remains, and is analogous to the politics of gender within most art museums and galleries: the focus is on the male-dominated action, while the women are given a quarter of the allotted space.1

And what extreme action it is! Pianos are dropped from helicopters and bounce down cliffs; they are sawn or smashed apart; they are meticulously and clinically dismantled; they are even set aflame. Their strings and casings are covered with milk, paint, nails, and dry ice, and it is astonishing to witness how intently the men go about their demolition. Even when they are working together, there is typically one "genius" directing the exploits, proving Linda Nochlin's supposition that the Western ideal of the artist is a "super-endowed [male] individual."2 In a reprisal of one performance, Nam June Paik gleefully and guiltlessly commands a group of young men to...
re-erect an upright that he repeatedly pushes over like a chubby toddler willfully thrusting his bowl off of his high chair, just because he can.

In contrast, the synchronized orchestrations of the nine women seated at grand pianos, whom Büttner filmed in Banff, Canada, in 2014, illustrate the importance of collaboration. Keyboards have been emblems of female propriety as early as the Renaissance: both Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana painted themselves playing the clavichord. But such iconography was not meant to illustrate these artists’ musical skills. To the contrary, it conveyed that these women were sufficiently proficient to entertain guests, but not so skilled as to upstage a man. Victorian novels are also riddled with this gendered motif. In *Middlemarch* (1874), George Eliot’s central male character believes that the ideal wife “can sing and play the piano and provide a soft cushion for her husband to rest after work.” Significantly, Büttner’s pianists both continue and rebuke this cultural symbolism. Although demurely clad and modest in their gestures, their skill is undeniable—it is their musical expertise that fills the gallery with sonorous beauty. Indeed, my sculptor husband said he was about to walk out until the video of the women began to play; it was their melodic and calming performance that made the space bearable. This is another way in which Büttner exposes curatorial inequities and foolishness. By not running the female footage continuously, she reifies the artworld tendency to devote more time to art made by men. Their genius is always on display, while the women have to wait their turn.

They say well-behaved women rarely make history, but if more artists thought like Büttner, it would be much easier to see why. Both she and the Walker should be lauded for continuing this still indispensable critique.

ALISIA GRACE CHASE is an associate professor of art history and visual culture at both the College at Brockport, State University of New York, and Visual Studies Workshop.

NOTES

1. If you think this assessment is far-fetched, see Micol Hebron’s recent Gallery Tally project, which found that “in 2014, the numbers regarding women artists in the gallery system are only marginally better than they were when the Guerrilla Girls began counting in the 1980s.” “The Gallery Tally Poster Project: A Call for Gender Equity in the Art World,” Brooklyn Rail, September 2014, 72. 2. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Women, Art and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 158. 3. Rosemary Ashton, “Introduction” in George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1994).