

Allora & Calzadilla

(Philadelphia, USA, 1974, and Havana, Cuba, 1971)

A performer—presumably a professional pianist—inserts his body into a hole made inside a grand piano. The hole is large enough for his body to fit through. The two, pianist and instrument, immediately seem to become almost a single element, a new mythological creature endowed with human torso and arms, ample sonorous and technological hips, and a multiplication of legs and wheels. The performer leans his upper body forward and plays from this apparently unnatural and forced position, with his hands behind the keyboard rather than in front of it. The fingers' touch on the keys produces a melody, but the hole excavated inside the piano transforms certain passages of the music into percussive thuds, in sharp contrast with other moments. Engaged in the demanding task, the performer seems to come to terms with the difficulties that this curious hybrid body imposes on him and also takes advantage of the piano wheels, otherwise used merely as logistical support. Developing a form of compensation, the performer, in fact, exploits the multiplication of limbs unexpectedly at his disposal and pushes himself and the instrument through the room, walking, stopping, and sometimes peremptorily moving toward the public and the walls, in an irregular and unpredictable dance that is enjoyable but sometimes slightly threatening. The perceptible and unwieldy physicality of the whole is the visual counterpart to the sound that spreads through the room. Despite the two silent octaves, the ear quickly recognizes the power of a symphonic note, a sequence of sounds that is not difficult to retrieve from memory. *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on "Ode to Joy" for a Prepared Piano*, 2008, by Allora & Calzadilla, confronts viewers with an unexpected execution of Ludwig van Beethoven's renowned Symphony No. 9. Written between 1816 and 1842, the "Ninth" or "Choral Symphony" had a longer and more laborious genesis than any other work by the composer. Intended as a fusion of song and sound, it draws upon the "Ode to Joy" previously composed by the philosopher, playwright, and poet Friedrich Schiller; Beethoven used that earlier work, rewriting only part of the original eighteen verses. In addition to the important role it plays in the composer's creative development, the "Ninth" in turn has a long and complicated history, including its use for propagandistic purposes by numerous political power structures, such as the Third Reich, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and racist Rhodesia under Ian Smith. The symphony is currently used by the United Nations as its national anthem. Subsequent to a series of works focused on the relationship between music and power, this piece by Allora & Calzadilla represents a new chapter in their long evolution. It was presented for the first time at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, a building constructed by the Nazis, which opened, precisely, with a performance of the "Ninth." The Bechstein piano modified by the artists relates to an archival photograph they discovered at the Haus der Kunst, in which one can see that the inaugural performance was played on a piano of that make that belonged to a family of fervent Hitler supporters. (MB)