

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

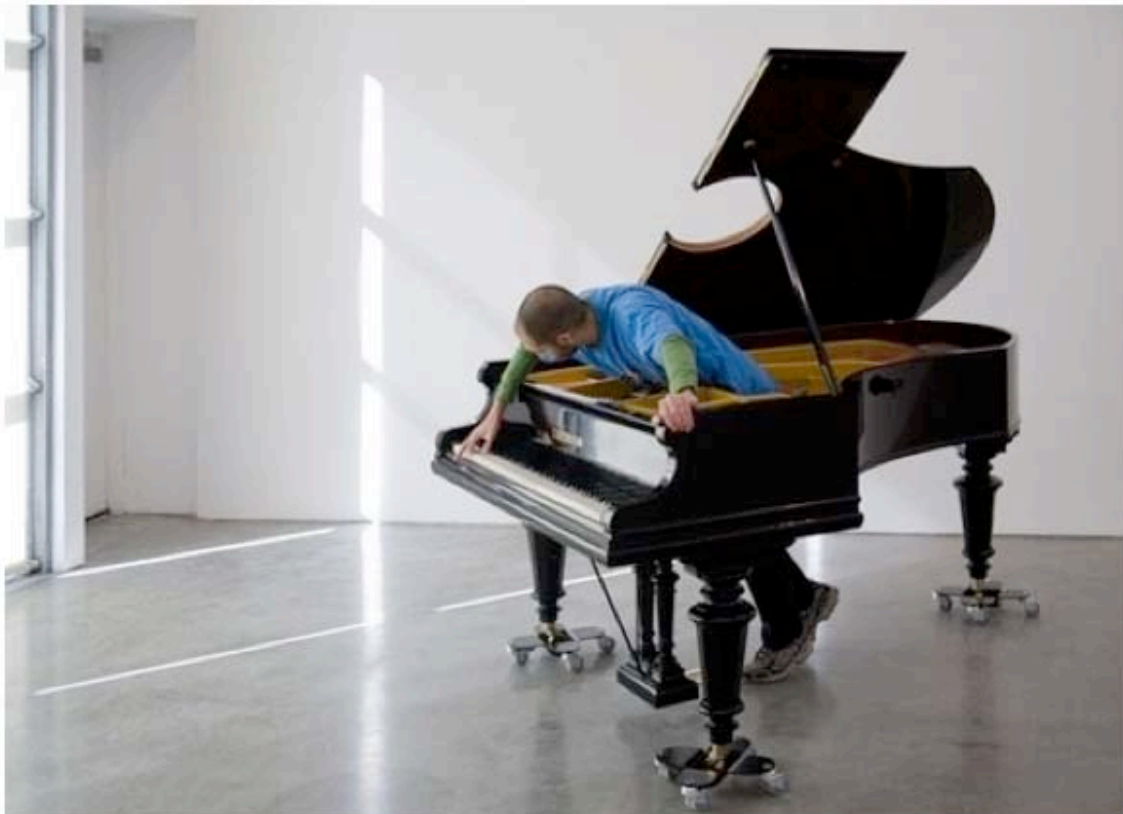
Howe, David Everitt, "Allora & Calzadilla's Embodied Instrument", *Art in America*, December 10, 2010

Art in America  
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

## Allora & Calzadilla's Embodied Instrument

by david everitt howe 12/10/10

Beginning this past Wednesday, five pianists take turns playing the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in MoMA's vast atrium, and upside down. The museum's is hourly re-staging of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on Ode to Joy for a Prepared Piano* (2008), for which each pianist stand in a small circle carved into the center of an early 20th-century Bechstein grand piano. Hunched over the keyboard, the performers play the score from the opposite direction while shuffling the altered instrument across the space—an awkward dance negotiated between pianist and object.



More than just "prepared," the classical instrument is quite altered: The circular void in the center eradicates two octaves of strings, forcing the pianist to invert the instrument's utility in a way that both builds upon and undermines John Cage's prepared piano experiments in the mid-20th Century. If Cage's contingent sound scores drained music of any romantic affect, *Stop, Repair, Prepare* reinforces Beethoven's romantic melody. As the official anthem of the European Union and a favorite of the Third Reich, the Turkish style military march is interpreted variously by each pianist, to reinforce the aesthetic valences of political ideologies.

We sat down with the duo after their final rehearsal to talk about the origins of the work and its relationship to their past practice.

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DAVID EVERITT HOWE: This work was first performed in Munich at Haus der Kunst, and then at Gladstone Gallery in New York, among other venues. How has the venue affects each iteration?

JENNIFER ALLORA AND GUILLERMO CALZADILLA: In Haus der Kunst, which is the first place we showed it, it was in one room—in a way, similar to MoMA's atrium—with the exception that there weren't other levels from which you could view the work. In this setting is that you have aerial views, which in no other context are available. The great thing about Gladstone Gallery is that there were four rooms, and so the piano would start in one room, go out the door, and loop around, and move through all the different spaces.

HOWE: You can't get that effect here, although I did see one of the performers, Mia Elezovic, go around the column, which made me laugh.

A&C: That's our only hiding space! it's the only space where the piano disappears.

HOWE: So, the piano: it's the concert instrument by which all others are set. In light of the other instruments you've used before, such as trumpets, what drove you to tackle this particular instrument?

A&C: We had the idea for altering the piano for a really long time, seven or eight years. We just wanted to make a hole in the center, and have a piano player play inside-out, but we didn't know what the pianist should play. Since about 2004, we worked on a series of projects that were looking at the relationship between militarism and music. A bunch of works came about as a result of research we were doing. We made a film in Vieques, Puerto Rico, called *Returning a Sound* (2004), where a man drives a moped around the island with a trumpet welded to his muffler, and as he's driving around the island, it makes these trumpet sounds.

HOWE: That piece was a sort of auditory mapping of the island, a site where the US military would practice war drills and bomb maneuvers. In previous interviews you've said it served as a new "call to attention" that evoked these drills.

A&C: Yeah. And then a bigger performance piece we made called *Clamor* (2006), is a kind of accumulation of different forms of bunker architecture—as if they were montaged together into a large sculptural form. Then inside the bunker was a small brass band playing all different kinds of war music—bands like Twisted Sister, music that's been used in Guantanamo Bay, all kinds that have some relationship to war.

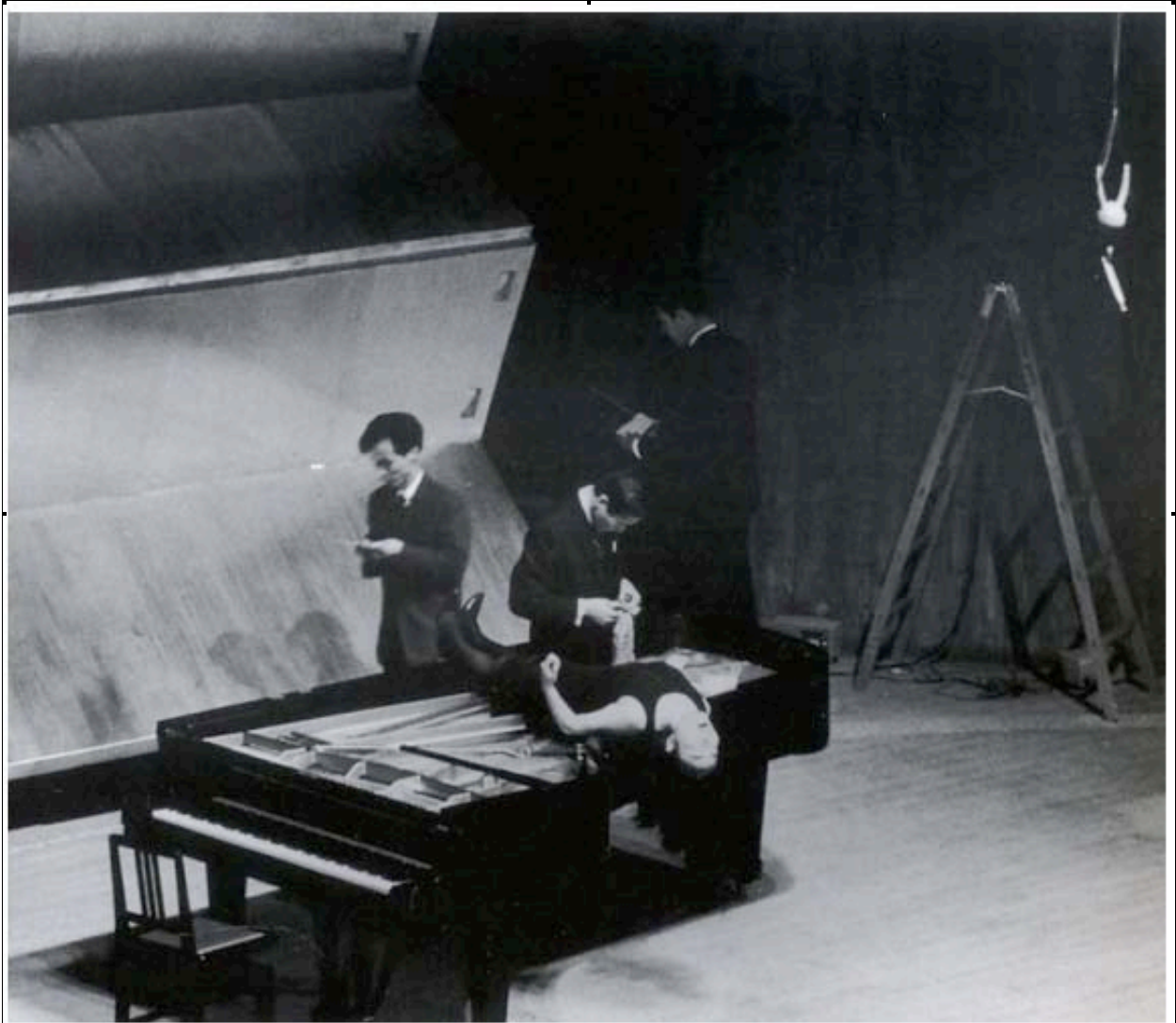
HOWE: I ask also because there's this great image, I don't know if you've seen it, of John Cage, David Tudor, and Mayuzumi Toshiro performing Cage's *Music Walk* in 1962, and Yoko Ono is literally sprawled over this regal piano. She's lying on top of the strings, as if she herself is the preparation. It's interesting that you're talking about authoritarian music, because Cage was about revealign sources of authority.

A&C: Well to give you a little background about how the work relates specifically to Cage: the word "stop" in the title—*Stop, Prepare, Repair*—has to do with the idea of a "Turkish stop," which was a special modification to the piano where the pianist could press a pedal to ring a bell, or hit a bass drum. Well before John Cage's preparations, there's a long history of modifications that have been made to the piano. He was taking up a minor tradition of musical instrumentation, for a major part of avant-garde experimentation. In the 19th and 20th Centuries, many pianos had these modifications done so that you could play, for example, Turkish music, which was a very popular style. So you could be playing Mozart's "Alla Turka," and you could have a pedal, and have bells ring, or make all these different sounds—preparations, stops—meaning there are things that interfere with the strings of the instrument to alter its sound.

HOWE: And you could clamp strings together to alter the sound?

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A&C: Yeah, there are all sorts of ways to do it. In our case, the preparation is the hole in the center, and there's an actual person in that spot. And so, contained in the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the Ode to Joy, is a Turkish march, which is really interesting, because—going back to our research about militarism, war, and music—this kind of music of the Ottoman Empire became really popular among Mozart, and Haydn, and Beethoven because of the Ottoman Wars taking place in the 16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries. So these famous composers started to write their symphonies with this musical orientalism—an exotic sound that referred to these military engagements. In battle, these bands cued soldiers to move forward, and this later got translated into culture as a specific musical cadence: a six/eight tempo, which comes from the Orient; it's not a Western way to keep time. So even the way in which time is kept then enters into classical music.

HOWE: Cage was into Oriental music, via Zen Buddhism. You're almost looking at it from the opposite direction.

A&C: But it's important to us, the idea of deconstructing it all by having the person be inside, and playing it, and having all these holes, and these gaps, and physical dimensions of how to play it, the weight.

HOWE: And that when you're playing piano, I guess one hand gets stronger than the other, so each pianist has to re-train his or her hands, which is really interesting, as the body is in a way re-articulated. So do they have a lot of leeway in playing the score? What's the directive?

A&C: Did you see Mia? And Evan [Shinners] before? He's really robust. So each one brings a different arrangement to the piece—that's what "Variations" is about. But, you know, within certain parameters. So we develop the choreography together, based on their bodies, and gravity. Evan is really tall, so his legs are high up. It's funny you mention Evan because he realized his pinky fingers are short. He never realized it playing the piano forwards, only until he had to play it downwards from behind. So he learned something new about his body. He also moves differently than Mia, who's a little shorter. And so we kind of let her weight move the piano more. She sort of fuses more beautifully with the instrument because of her height, and just the way she holds herself—and her ponytail! And so some of them do whole sections on the strings, because they have access to them in a way you wouldn't normally when you're standing outside. So they'll start plucking and strumming the strings inside the body of the piano, whereas Evan just plays it straight as if he's playing it normally. So we're thinking about what does it mean to have the body inside an object and playing it, and how does that affect the musical performance if you're inside the piano and you have to push it while playing it. That changes everything.