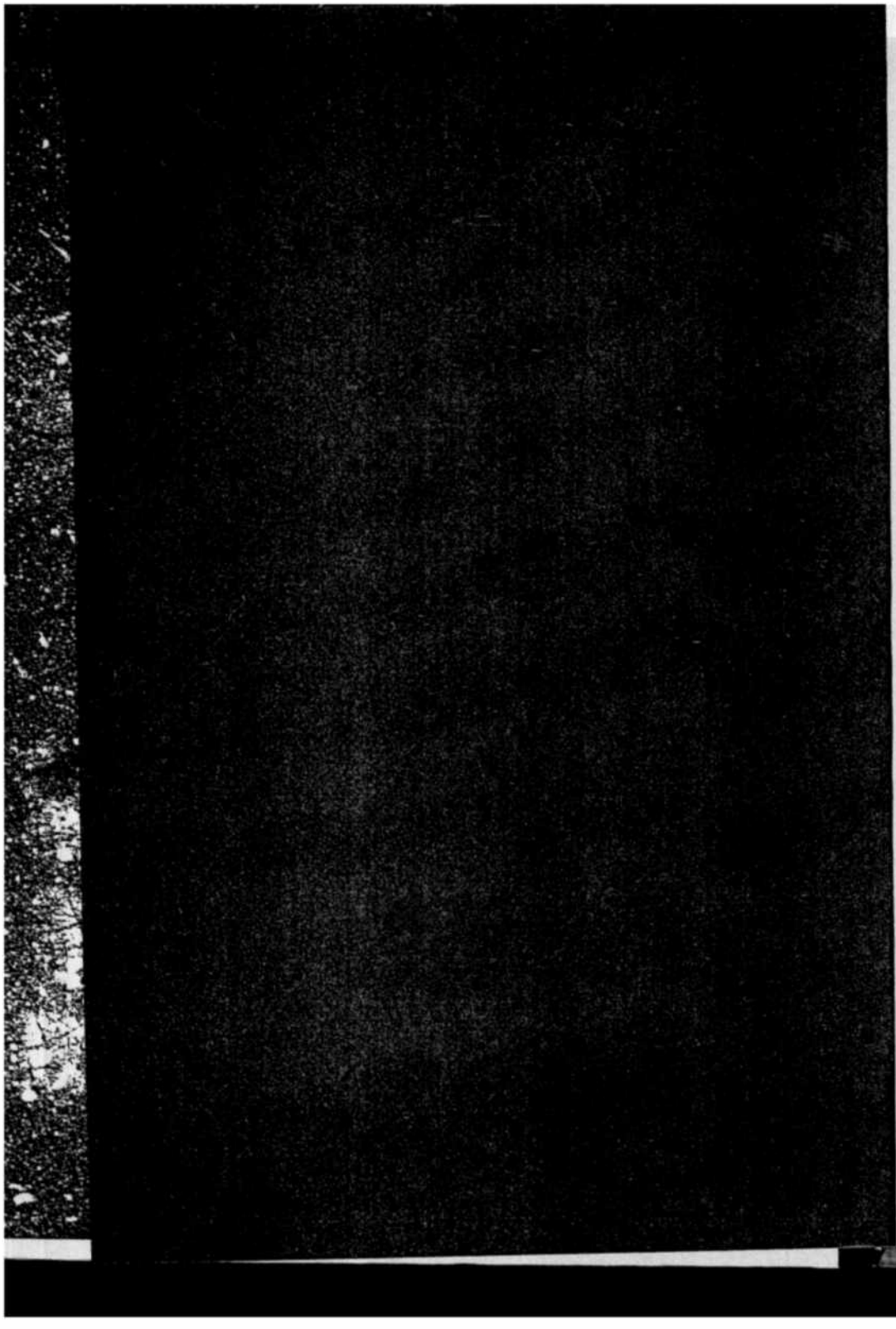

Dick Raaijmakers

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER

preceded by

Walter Benjamin

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER

The Destructive Character
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according to my own conviction, the theme of 'destruction and art' is art historically speaking completely out of fashion, it is however in a social and political sense more present than ever, especially when considering the increase in destructive violence and all those horrible attacks and social disintegration around us.›[4]

Reflecting on our current times I do not think that this motivation has lost any of its strength. Just like in the case of Raaijmakers, Walter Benjamin's short essay ‹Der destruktive charakter›[5] (The Destructive Character) was written under pressure of social and political conditions of an economic crisis, the rise of Nazism, and his inner struggle with the ideas of communism. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem from October 1931, Benjamin mentions the essay, describing it as a sketch of a banker friend, Gustav Glück. On November 20, 1931, the essay was printed in the Frankfurter Zeitung (Vol. 76, Nr. 863/4). The full version of the English translation by Edmund Jephcott has been included in this publication. Raaijmakers has emphasized several passages with specific pertinence to his own text.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank those who have helped me make this publication possible. First of all, Dick Raaijmakers himself, who, against all odds and with immense patience and precision, has at length discussed with me both the text and the images included in this edition. I applaud his persistence. Also, I owe my gratitude to the late Frans Evers, with whom I shared the first ideas about this publication, but who unfortunately did not live to see them materialize. I would also like to thank Remco van Bladel and Freek Lomme from Onomatopee publishers for their engagement regarding the editing, design, and content of this book, and John Van Houdt for proofreading all the English translations. All footnotes in the text are my own. ◖

4. Letter to Hans Locher, December 14, 2003.
5. Walter Benjamin. ‹Der destruktive Charakter›, In Gesammelte Schriften IV, 1. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972, 396–398.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER

Walter Benjamin

It could happen to someone looking back over his life that he realized that almost all the deeper obligations he had endured in its course originated in people who everyone agreed had the traits of a ‹destructive character›. He would stumble on this fact one day, perhaps by chance, and the heavier the shock dealt to him, the better his chances of representing the destructive character.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER KNOWS ONLY ONE WATCHWORD: MAKE ROOM. AND ONLY ONE ACTIVITY: CLEARING AWAY. HIS NEED FOR FRESH AIR AND OPEN SPACE IS STRONGER THAN ANY HATRED.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER IS YOUNG AND CHEERFUL. FOR DESTROYING REJUVENATES, BECAUSE IT CLEARS AWAY THE TRACES OF OUR OWN AGE; IT CHEERS, BECAUSE EVERYTHING CLEARED AWAY MEANS TO THE DESTROYER A COMPLETE REDUCTION, INDEED A ROOTING OUT, OF HIS OWN CONDITION. Really, only the insight into how radically the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness for destruction leads to such an Apollonian image of the destroyer. This is the great bond embracing and unifying all that exists. It is a sight that affords the destructive character a spectacle of deepest harmony.

The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is Nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise she will take over the destruction herself.

The destructive character sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty space—the place where the thing stood or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs this space without occupying it.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER DOES HIS WORK; THE ONLY WORK HE AVOIDS IS CREATIVE. JUST AS THE CREATOR SEEKS SOLITUDE, THE DESTROYER MUST BE CONSTANTLY SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE, WITNESSES TO HIS EFFICACY.

The destructive character is a signal. Just as a trigonometric sign is exposed on all sides to the wind, so he is exposed to idle talk. To protect him from it is pointless.

The destructive character has no interest in being understood. Attempts in this direction he regards as superficial. Being misunderstood cannot harm him. On the contrary, he provokes it, just as oracles, those destructive institutions of the state, provoked it. The most petty bourgeois of all phenomena, gossip, comes about only because people do not wish to be misunderstood. The

destructive character tolerates misunderstanding; he does not promote gossip.

The destructive character is the enemy of the étui-man. The étui-man looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined trace that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.

The destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists. Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called destructive.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER SEES NOTHING PERMANENT. BUT FOR THIS VERY REASON HE SEES WAYS EVERYWHERE. WHERE OTHERS ENCOUNTER WALLS OR MOUNTAINS, THERE, TOO, HE SEES A WAY. BUT BECAUSE HE SEES A WAY EVERYWHERE, HE HAS TO CLEAR THINGS FROM IT EVERYWHERE. NOT ALWAYS BY BRUTE FORCE; SOMETIMES BY THE MOST REFINED. Because he sees ways everywhere he stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER LIVES FROM THE FEELING NOT THAT LIFE IS WORTH LIVING, BUT THAT SUICIDE IS NOT WORTH THE TROUBLE.

Translated by Edmund Jephcott.
From: Selected Writings, Vol. II.2, 1931–1934.
Harvard University Press, 1999, 541–2.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER

Dick Raaijmakers

In case of an arrangement which is disturbed by destruction, two parties come into play: the destroyer and, of course, the arrangement in question. Initially, both are at rest. The arrangement, because it has been ‹finished› and therefore calmly resides in the world; the destroyer, because he is preparing his disturbance-operation in seclusion. When the moment arrives, their rest has come to an end: for the destroyer, because he must come into action and is on the verge of executing his plan; for the arrangement, because its order, and therefore its rest, will be definitively disturbed by the destroyer.

The action unleashed by the destroyer is experienced by the arrangement as a *hit*, even though this hit may be spread out over time. As a result of the hit, the resting order is reduced to scraps and pieces. Thus the order irreversibly deteriorates. Depending on the nature of this destructive *coup*, the disturbance of the order can work in two directions: outward or inward. In the first case, the order *explodes*, and its pieces fly centrifugally—literally fleeing the order—into the wide world. In the second case, it *implodes*, and its pieces, searching for a central refuge, collapse centripetally. There's no middle course: it's either one or the other.

The actual execution of the hit as ‹action›, that is, in relation to the rest that the arrangement was emitting just now, is extremely brief and momentary. This briefness and momentariness is an important symptom of the destructive attack. But there's more: as an initiating activity, the hit does not only differentiate itself from decay as a passive happening qua *time*—first hit, then fall—but also, and especially, qua *character*. Immediately after his attack, the destroyer does not desire to be related to the explosive or implosive course of the decay. Such a constructively inclined attitude does not fit him. His attack was not in the least meant to be warm and entertaining; entertaining in the sense of ‹close to the order›, that is. On the contrary: the destroyer performs his hit *here* aiming for a fall *there* (bomb attack), which he does in a ‹cool› way. This *here* and *there* are typical for the formation [*slagorde*] of the destructive character, and his being-cool only adds to his profile.

Equally characteristic for the destructive character, is that immediately after the staging of his *coup* there is no way back for the destroyer; he cannot undo his act by, so to speak, reversing his character. This ‹not being present› and ‹no way back›

determine the nature of the destructive event to a large extent. That is why the destroyer and arranger are each other's opposites. Whereas the former does not desire to await the inevitable unfolding of his action, the latter is constantly ‹present›. Moreover, for the arranger there is always a way back. For constructive action implies constant repetition, rehearsal, improvement and learning. And what can this repetition be but the backtracking of the way that the arranger had just covered, until any doubt about the correctness of the way has been overcome, and any other way has been excluded?

The destroyer does not wish to occupy himself with any of these issues. He acts, and doesn't look back; for that's just his ‹character›. (Strikingly, around 1806, Louis Napoleon[1] thought that he had to encourage the Dutch population with practically the same slogan—‹Do good, and don't look back!›—to forget the past and focus on the future. This is striking, because through this slogan, which undoubtedly was intended to have an educational aim, he cleared the way for the early nineteenth-century ‹destructive character› to proceed on its disorderly and anarchical course. And this cannot possibly have been his intention. Perhaps, a ‹Look back, and do good!› might have been more appropriate.) ◐

1. Louis Napoleon (1778–1846), King of Holland (1808–1810) under Emperor Napoleon.

Destruction aims for what has been carefully ordered. The effect resulting from a destructive action is aimed at the destruction of that care; at obliterating it. That care then becomes lost. The careful ordering has cost the *arranger* both time and workmanship. (Which is also a form of time. For what else can workmanship be but a repeated rehearsing and experimenting, stretched out over years, in order to be able to arrive ‹that far› with arranging?) Conversely, as said, the destructive attack takes no time. That's what the one who is destructing—the destroyer—does literally ‹in no time›.

At the moment the destructive force strikes, these two times are so to speak exchanged for each other. In one strike, the very brief destructive impulse neutralises all the time that has been invested in the carefully constructed arrangement. Based on this unilaterally concluded ‹transaction›, the destroyer succeeds in retrogradely reversing the genesis of the order he has in hand to the moment of its inception: the arranger can literally start all over again. It will have become clear that the destructive character is by definition in a hurry, and sees to it that the business is finished in his way as quickly as possible. In order to have it his way, if need be, he forces this business, causing the civilised arrangement as well as the creative energy invested in it by the arranger to be completely demolished. All that is left over are smashed, broken and pulverised fragments of the once loftily organised order. The transaction between the destructive and the constructive does not only concern the mutual exchange of times, but also of energies. If one could in some way speak of a certain profit for the destroyer, it should be found in the unleashing of the energy that was contained in the order. At first sight, this energy appears to be released in an unbridled way—as if it were a breach in a dike—benefitting the destroyer just like that. It even looks as if he receives infinitely more energy than the relatively little amount of energy he invested into the unleashing of his destructive labour. But that's mere appearance; in reality it's different. At the moment of the destructive attack, the destructive energy immediately eliminates all constructive energy that the arranger once had invested in the order. The former energy annihilates the latter, which is forever lost for both parties. By the way, what in the world should the destroyer do with this constructive energy, suppose it would be released? Nothing, right! He is a destroyer, not a constructor!

The destroyer is primarily interested not in this constructive energy, but in the manner and speed of its release as a result of his attack. Experiencing this release, undergoing it as a brief, let's say ecstatic, catharsis. That's what his aim is! That's just his character!

Destruction is exclusively related to what is brief, not to what is lengthy: Walter Benjamin calls this a distinct feature of the destructive character. The destroyer has to make do with a spontaneous execution, even though he has many constructive considerations and plans preceding the actual act of destruction. A destruction operation, spread out over too long a period of time, runs the risk of showing so many constructive features, that in the end one could hardly speak of destruction. (E.g. a plane hijacking which takes more time than initially anticipated, the hijacking can easily result in an intimate fraternisation between hijackers and hostages, that is, if the former don't watch out...)

In our ordered society, destruction is condemned without discussion. We have equipped our immediate environment with many valuable things, and these things are at risk whenever the destructive character is around. All these things are accumulations of traditions, experiences, techniques and workmanship. We consider this accumulation to be our *culture*. The destructive character pre-eminently aims at releasing this ‹culture› from our things. He does so without any qualification, let alone any permission or whatever other form of commission from our side to do so. He is not the ‹right man for the job›, we say. Only we are; owners, possessors and guardians of our things, and therefore of our culture.

In this regard, it is worth considering the following. The arranger is the right man for the job at any time de-arranging the things that he has arranged into a sensible whole. He de-arranges, in order to release the energy previously invested by him in what has been carefully arranged. He can and may do so, as long as this release does not assume the character of a form of self-destruction in disguise. If he would cross this limit, he would look like someone who first has arranged something with great care, in order to subsequently, without any initially apparent reason, attack and annihilate this with the same amount of force. Afterward, we consider someone like that to be ‹beside himself› with rage, indignation, impatience or whatever. At that moment he was really ‹someone else› in order to attack himself. If these self-attacks occur repeatedly, we protect such a person against himself by isolating him from the regular world. Again it seems that the ordered and destructive attitude cannot appear in one and the same person unpunished.

And if, in spite of everything, this happens nonetheless, an unacceptable friction arises between both these qualities present within this one figure. Outsiders would call him ‹sick›.

§16. THE ‹PREPARED PIANO›

A woodscrew, three centimetres in diameter, is cautiously being wedged between two strings of a grand piano. Everything happens with extreme accuracy and deliberation. The two strings are slightly being pulled apart in order to insert the metal screw into the piano without making a mistake—as if it were a fragile glass thermometer inserted between two soft lips. But that's not all. That single screw turns out to be a front runner in a whole series of screws, bolts, and little pieces of rubber and wood, which soon will be subjected to the same implantation treatment (fig. 9).

Qua view, this insertion of alien components into the originally closed body of a grand piano shows a conflict between absolute order and seeming arbitrariness. On the one side, the impassiveness of the choir of strings, hiding the interior of the piano from view like a tight metal corset. On the other side, we are dealing with a collection of little tips and heads, awkwardly bulging out and towering above the metal straitjacket, without any immediately apparent logic of their placement—of ‹what is where›. No wonder. This situation is a collision between an order based on a lengthy, crystallised past, which one cannot tamper with unpunished, and something that seems to be thought up on the spot, and condemned to occur only once.

Tradition versus singularity, that's what it is all about. A handful of inconspicuous and insignificant screws—similar to millions of others—is faced with this one grand piano in all her lonely majesty. A musical instrument, of which the physical appearance is the paragon of a technical construction that, let's say, has overcome all unnecessary screws: not a screw too many. The contemporary grand piano has been ‹fully developed›; she is ‹finished› and needs no more screws. During the years of its lengthy development, all unwanted extras and contradictions have been sidetracked and cancelled out against each other, and that's exactly what the piano is *showing*.

The unsolicited insertion of a number of common screws in such a high-quality, highly complex, and in every respect ‹finished cultural product›, especially in such an undeserved spot, is usually considered to be a destructive, and therefore reprehensible act. Even if it would be only a matter of the implantation of a single screw, and not of whole swarms of them, such an intervention is diametrically opposed to everything the piano builder has invested in this piano many years ago based on his workmanship of

many years. The ad hoc execution of private ideas and individual inventions therefore seems to mock the careful practice of old-fashioned methods of which, we should say, the piano builder is the ‹designated figure›. When he inserts a screw, this is to the benefit of the order. When someone else would do so, the order is by definition disturbed. It is therefore hardly the issue whether the preparation of pianos can be called a profession. A question related to that, is to what extent the implantation of screws and such, even if this operation is executed with the utmost precision, is threatening for the status of the profession that is recognised, namely the profession of piano building and maintenance.

If we inspect the screw that the preparer is about to insert into the grand piano a little bit closer, we notice an extraordinary phenomenal characteristic: he is ‹loose›. Because of his being-loose, he figuratively unsettles all parts of the piano that have been fixed in place. The off the cuff implantation of a screw (or a piece of wood, rubber, felt, nylon, plastic or whatever) disturbs the acquired order that usually rules inside the piano. This order keeps as it were all the parts of piano together. It is definitely not the case that the piano rejects this one loose screw and doesn't want to offer him a ‹home› for discriminatory reasons. No, it is rather the complete opposite. That one screw—that one thing—provokes on his own the whole piano! Hence piano tuners have a nearly physical experience of this provocation, and they are personally concerned with the insertion of that one screw to such an extent, that they consider the preparer to be capable—and they actually condemn him already beforehand—of deliberately *destroying* the whole piano!

When viewed from ‹our› and the piano tuner's perspective, the preparer seems to be cursed with two contradictory ‹characters›. At first sight, there is something unmistakably destructive about him. For he is busy with pulling apart strings and jamming screws between them, which just isn't right. However, if we observe him more closely, and we see how he is busy performing his task with an extreme precision, only then his devotion becomes apparent and we discern his constructive disposition.

The preparer, in his regular capacity as practicing musician, usually ‹brings› his music *a tempo*. But now that he is preparing the piano, he hangs on to this same music for a comparably long time. On closer inspection, he is hardly doing anything, or even nothing while he is preparing. (Or we should interpret the moaning of the strings at the moment that he pulls them apart to be

able to wiggle something between them as an ‹execution›.) By the way, no one knows about this execution-of-nothing. Preferably, the pianist prepares his piano alone, a few hours before the actual concert starts. Moreover, this occupation requires, as said, its own time, a sort of ‹clock time› that can be best compared with the time passing away during the tuning of a piano, which no one knows about either. (Viewed thus, preparing is a special form of tuning; it invariably results in radically detuned pianos.)

The friction between the opposed character elements mentioned above—constructive versus destructive—is reflected in the ‹attitude› taken on by the preparer during his labour. This attitude attracts our attention even more if we realise that preparation and execution aren't delegated to two different persons, which would be obvious, but to one and the same figure; somebody who is expected temporarily to exchange his acquired mastery as a pianist for the ad hoc attitude of someone busy with obscure little parts; somebody capable of imperceptibly switching from master to assembler and vice versa.

This switching attitude is not only a question of mental disposition, but especially also of physical display. As a rule, the pianist is present sitting behind the keys of his instrument, that's his conventional performing posture. Contrarily, as a preparer he *stands*. He stands in front of his piano like a cook in front of his furnace. That's why the view of a pianist, preparing his piano for hours on end is quite revealing. Just look how during the preparation the former masterly pianist takes loose screws between thumb and index finger in an untrained and unprofessional manner, and disappears with them underneath the lid of the piano. As if he has just thought up the whole operation on the spot and barely has an idea of how he has to manage the job. (His posture, bent over into the dark interior of the grand piano most resembles the posture of a car driver, desperately bent underneath the hood of his halted car, seemingly sunk in deep thought.)

We who are looking at all of this, ask ourselves what on earth has got into him—this masterly pianist—to take on such an unpianistic and ‹unseemly› posture. Is it his love for the music that prompts him do so? Or is there something going on with the music, and is she done loving him and us? What has got into this pianist to exchange, albeit temporarily, his position as blessed interpreter for the position of an upgraded piano tuner? Why is he prepared to climb down some steps on the evolutionary and hierarchical ladder; in the direction of loose screws and the like? Why does

he put up with this artistic degradation? We look for the answer at the composer. He is the one who both desired and staged this descent, this inverse promotion. This formational [*slagordelijk*] descent—this displacement aimed at musical production—matters everything to him. The pianist rising from his chair, bending over the interior work of the piano, his never failing concentration, slowly trying out the preparation sounds that are literally unheard-of and for time being will only stir his own ears, the hours passing; all of this, that's what the composer cares about. At least, that's what he *also* cares about, because his final target is and remains bringing about ‹correctly› sounding music for interested third parties.

Once the concert is over, the grand piano is ‹unprepared›. All incisions in the piano body are closed, all surplus screws are removed, and what was opened is closed. Thus, the cultural peace and quiet is reestablished. The preparation turns out to be incidental, a ripple in a world of timeless music. ◧

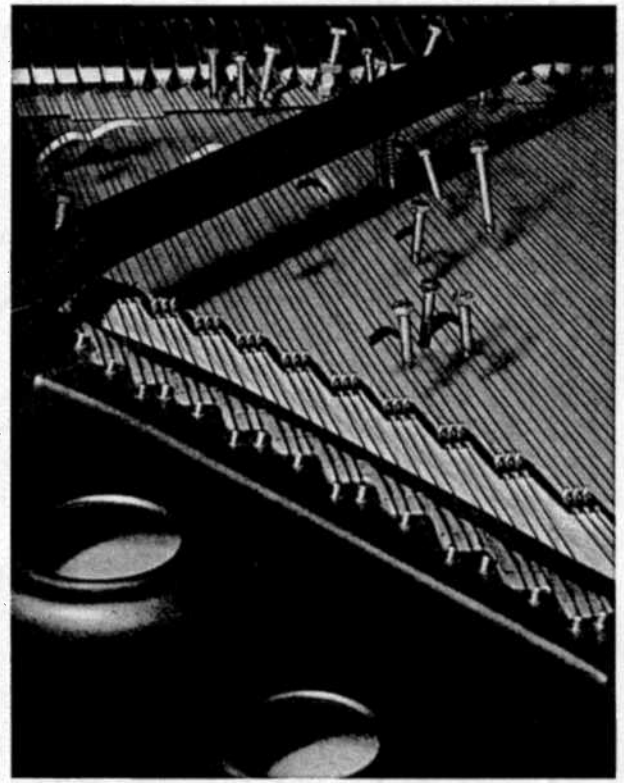

Figure 9: John Cage (1912–1992) Prepared Piano, exhibition ‹Anti Qua Musica›, Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (1989).

§17. THE CLOSED PIANO OPENED

Before a piano actually can be deconstructed, she has to be ‹ready› for it. In this case, being-ready means that the piano in question first has to be constructed most meticulously according to the rules of the piano building tradition. Construction meticulously implies a correspondingly meticulous repetition of a whole series of actions. There are two types of repetition: one is aimed at exercise in order fully to master the putting together of, in our case, a piano, the other is aimed at reproducing a whole series of copies from that one mature and viable model. In this latter case, the producer is not aiming for the production of one single specimen, but the mass production of a final, ideal specimen.

All of this doesn't exclude the fact that every piano producer will keep more or less his own building style, and will do anything to differentiate his instruments from his competitors qua richness and volume of sound, easiness of touch, stable tuning and so on. But generally speaking, all pianos around the world are constructed in the same way and according to the same rules. The mature product will always result into something that we will call ‹piano›, and not, for example, into a car, just like a completely developed car in no way resembles a piano. (Unless one pays attention to the fact that both constructions are mounted on wheels to be able to move across the earth's surface. But the difference in *why*, *when* and *how* this movement takes place is decisive. A car is a mobile vehicle, whereas the piano is an immobile piece of furniture. The former wants to move ahead, the latter wants to stand motionlessly still. Only at the moment an automobile is parked in a garage, it slightly resembles a piano in a drawing room qua immobility. But to immediately claim that a piano is parked in a drawing room, fully devalues the status and function of that piece of furniture. For a piano has to radiate in all directions, and not in just one, which is exactly what a car does and for which purpose it has been fully equipped.)

Before a piano is going to acquire her definitive, factory-based form, all necessary parts are transported to the assembly place in a, let's say, deconstructed appearance. While the factory workers are busy assembling the piano in that place, the instrument finds herself ‹fully open›. Only in the last phase of the assembly she is definitively closed and her polished surface reflects the greedy hands of her future owner. At that moment, the piano is actually ‹ready› to be sold.

If, after many years, that same piano is once again ‹opened› by members of the Fluxus movement and sometimes literally deconstructed to the bone, both trajectories of respectively building up and breaking down briefly pass each other. If this crossroads would be photographed from both directions, the view of the two partially opened instruments wouldn't differ much at first sight. At first sight, because the intention and orientation of respectively the builders and demolishers of the instrument as they are acting elude us—us, momentary observers. For if we would have closely followed the activities of both types of ‹workers›, we would know better! If, for example, we would see in a flash of a second a surgeon cutting into a human body, we wouldn't be sure whether we were dealing with a doctor or with a murderer. If, however, we would watch for longer period of time, the ‹position› of the cutter would become clear to us. This is the reason that photographic snapshots of especially Fluxus performances, showing, in our case, the maltreatment of pianos and grand pianos, so much resemble photographs showing workers welding together those same instruments into unbreakable units with the utmost care.

By means of two photographs, both showing a little group of gentlemen busy with an open grand piano, the resemblance of both ‹postures› and ‹positions› becomes clear. In figure 10, we see six employees of the famous Steinway & Sons piano factory, busying themselves with gluing clamps to hold things together inside the piano body. In figure 11, we see a snapshot of the performance *Piano Activities* by Philip Corner, executed in Wiesbaden in 1962. Six gentlemen are busy with all their might to ‹wrest› once and for all of the piano that which is always ‹stuck› in it. With a little bit of good intentions, both functions can be reversed: on the first photo, a piano is tortured, on the second one, the same instrument is put together to become a full instrument. It just depends on which orientation we are looking from at them. But for both groups of ‹executors›, there cannot be any misunderstanding: for one group it's daily work, and the other one only does it once, and cannot be bothered to repeat the *act*. A more suitable difference between making technique and making art can hardly be thought of. ◖

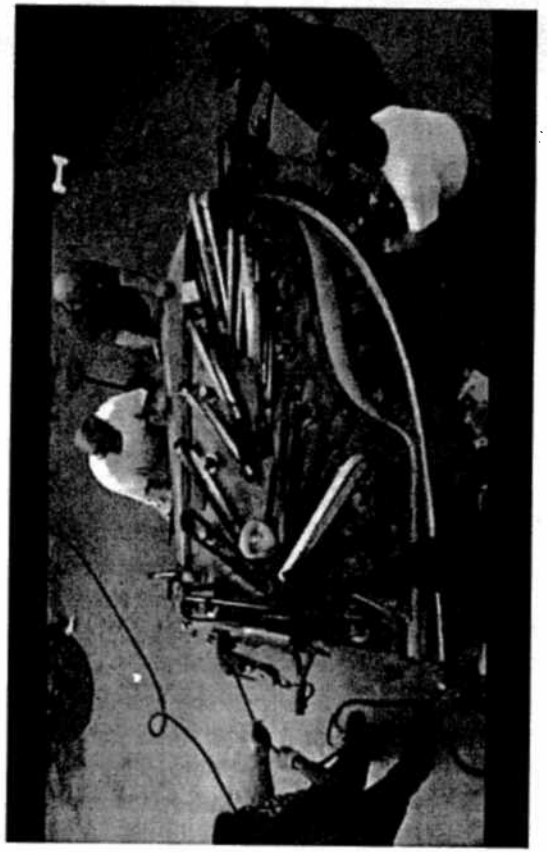

Figure 10: Steinway & Sons, New York.

Figure 11: Philip Corner (1933–), Piano Activities, performed by (from left to right) Emmett Williams, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, Dick Higgins, Ben Patterson, and George Maciunas during FLUXUS, Internationale Festspiele neuester Musik, Wiesbaden (1962).

A museum is faced with a curious dilemma when it is offered objects that are not the result of more or less ritual, and therefore public, performance-like séances, but which rather have been exposed to planned, meticulously executed destructive operations within the safe seclusion of the artist's studio. The aim of this type of ‹secret› projects is clear: the point is to produce autonomous art works, which are supplemented with the stigma of ‹performance› in order to provide them with additional artistic and spiritual value. (That stigma is as it were supplied together with the art work by the artists concerned.) The objects that have been thus maltreated are immediately—that is, without a ‹detour› through performance, event, *Aktion*, happening or whatever—offered to interested or friendly museums, galleries, and collectors. In his studio, the artist sets fire to a piano and delivers the remains, let's say, the following day to the nearest museum. Or he crushes a cello, immerses it in epoxy, and brings it to a gallery specialised in this type of art, which will take care of the further distribution and settling of the finances. The ritual as artistic act, the artistic act as stigma, and the stigma as artistic commodity, that's what this cycle comes down to.

Any museum exhibiting objects that have been destroyed or otherwise maltreated, balances between cemetery and viewing centre. Cemetery, because the material remains concerned have found their final resting place on ‹sacred ground›. Viewing centre, because the museum wants to give visitors the possibility to admire these unique objects for both their visual and historical-archaeological qualities. To give an example: a museum is guarding a collection of historical musical instruments in which a lot of devotion and restoration time has been invested. The same museum decides to collect a number of essentially similar instruments which happen to be in a radically destroyed state owing to the actions of artists for the sake of certain artistic reasons. In that case, such a museum has to guard a fragile balance between both types of *exponents* with the utmost care. Such a museum will just have to take a distance from unifying these essentially incompatible outlooks, lest it loses the correct view on its position and function.

An absolute limit for museological preservation is reached when a dismantled object is ‹far gone› to such an extent, that it cannot leave the museum by itself. A paradoxical situation: a maltreated object is brought into the museum in the form of a package of

fragments and remains, chaotically kept together, where it metamorphoses into an art work, which cannot leave anymore (for example, because of a loan request) because it is too far gone! Time stands still, and in no case the object is allowed to crumble and deteriorate any further; that's what the museum will certainly ascertain.

The apex of art works that are ‹far gone› are objects which have been attacked by their creators with fire or incineration. In any case, the exposition of these types of eliminated works poses essentially an impossible task. Everything is contradicting everything. The consuming fire extends into the exposition itself, and actually to the *position* of the museum in question. For a museum doesn't just exhibit ‹fire›. Materially speaking, art is most vulnerable to, and therefore very anxious toward, fire. Setting fire to an object and declaring it art borders on cynicism. At such a moment, this cynicism touches the museum. The museum is provoked, bursts open, and the scene moves outside. The museum cannot offer a home to the burned thing that de facto doesn't exist (anymore). That's why fire surpasses all thinkable methods of destruction, and is, in a certain sense, its perfect metaphor. But that's not all: fire transgresses the border between art and reality and reduces art to dust [*stof*]. But this cannot be the purpose of something as immaterial [*onstoffelijk*] as art; to end up as dust.

The limits mentioned above—one in which the art work is too far gone to continue being exhibited, and the other in which fire has metamorphosed the art work into a final ‹nothing›—should normally be closely guarded. But time goes on, and we are currently losing the correct sense of the problems surrounding the theme ‹art and anti-art›. Viewed thus, even the solution of the problem concerning the conservation of the unconservable will most probably not be necessary in the long run. The key to these sorts of solutions is as it were locked inside the truly anti-artistic object. That's why the anti-artistic object isn't as timeless as big, established art, but rather dated, timely and temporary. Especially ‹timely› in the sense of unstably material, non-constructive and, above anything else, dissolved. There's no actual future for the anti-artistic object. That's why it wants to go away—away from the established world, and away from the places where it is carefully stored and kept like a settled art work.

All of this is studio work, no trace of any performance. The stigma of fire and incineration is indispensable for the metamorphosis of this piano into an art work (fig. 12) or design object (fig. 13). Even

though this stigma is actually unjustified, because artificial, the object can enter the museum just like that—thus without detours. During a public performance in 1960, entitled *Homage to New York* (fig. 14), an originally immaculate white piano ignited itself. Tinguely had prepared the piano to do so beforehand. The following day, the installation to which this piano belonged were carried off to a garbage dump. At any rate, *this* piano was lost for the museum, and Tinguely acted—intentional or unintentional—in the spirit of Maciunas. (By the way, he did so a few years before that same spirit was explicitly articulated by Maciunas.)

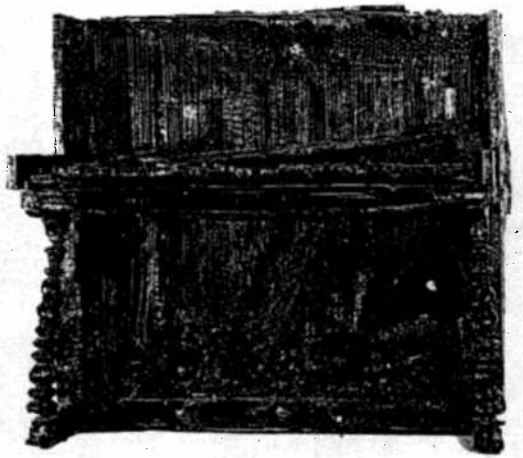

Figure 12: Arman (1928–2005), Piano Flamboyant, burned piano covered in polyester (1966).

Figure 13: Maarten Baas (1978–), Piano, from the Smoke series, burned piano covered in epoxy (2002).

Near the end of 1988, through no fault of any artistic concept, three concert grand pianos fell victim to a fire in Utrecht. Usually, the remains of these three piano would have been carried off to a garbage dump, which would have sealed their fate—to irrevocably disappear from the face of the earth. This carrying off wouldn't differ essentially from the way in which in 1960, Tinguely's burned New York piano was cleared away after its incineration. (At first sight, because a local New York regulation stated that all debris left in public space after the work had been done had to be carried off in containers.) In the case of the concept as developed for Utrecht, things were fundamentally different. The three charred pianos weren't carried off, but at the last moment ‹brought back› from their inevitable, humiliating final destination: the garbage dump as a final grave. Forcibly, this last course was changed into the direction of ‹art›. Thus, by literally placing back of the pianos in an artistic environment (not a concert hall, but a museum), their burned remains were very artistically ‹de-functioned› into art work.

The meaning of the concept of *Tombeau de Glenn Gould* (fig. 15), as often happens in cases of this type of anti-artistic, and therefore mainly temporary, artistic operations, was determined primarily by the sequence of actual actions necessary to arrive at the realisation of art. A possible sequence is the following: conceptual idea › piano › incineration › remains of piano › art work › museum. Arman's *Piano Flamboyant* from 1966 (fig. 12) is a good example of this sequence. Another possible sequence is: conceptual idea › piano › incineration › fire as action › action as art work › photographic recording of the incineration › garbage dump. A good example of this sequence is Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* from 1960 (fig. 14).

In case of *Tombeau de Glenn Gould* from 1989, the sequence was: piano › fire › dump › conceptual idea › bringing pianos back from dump › museum › piano as art work. (And after the exhibition of the piano as art work: removing the piano from the museum and organizing its definitive transport to the dump.) The difference between the latter sequence and first two ones is subtle but fundamental, and is mainly found in the retrieving manoeuvre of the *Tombeau*. In the first example, the piano moved itself immediately from studio to museum. In the latter case, the piano first moved toward the dump, so as subsequently to return to its origin: not the concert hall, but rather a museum, yet only to end up on a dump. Whereas in the first two examples the artist's incineration

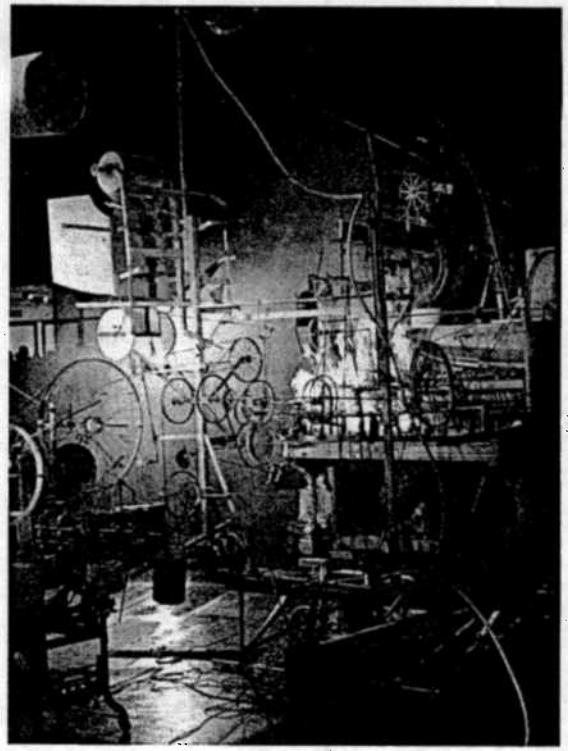

Figure 14: Jean Tinguely (1925–1991), Homage to New York (1960), The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

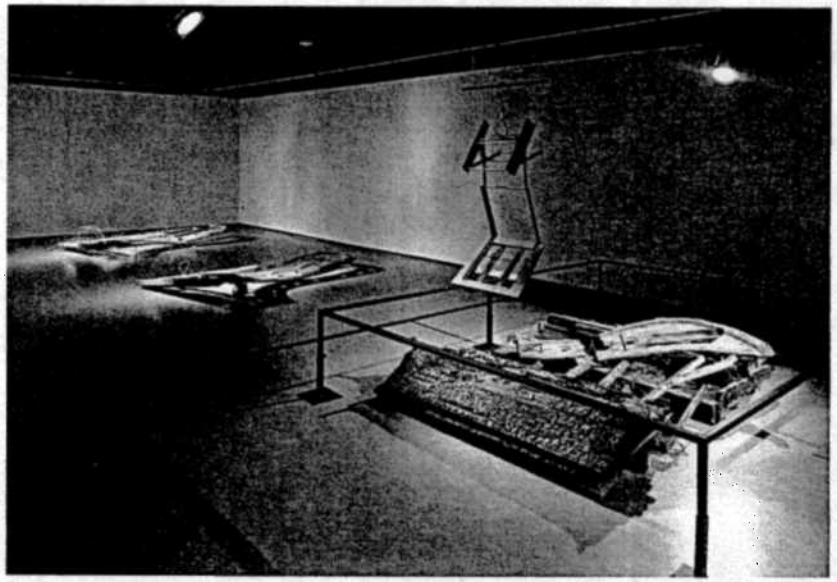

Figure 15: Dick Raaijmakers (1930–), Tombeau de Glenn Gould, exhibition Anti Qua Musica, Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (1989).

action is predominant, in the latter case it is only the displacement of the attention from incineration as ritual to the action of turning around what cannot be turned around, in this case the replacement of the irreplaceable in an artistic context.

If we qualify these sequential choices as a type of ‹cultural hesitation›, the following view appears. An artist finds himself at a crossroads. If he chooses one road, he is apparently aiming destructively at ‹opening› the piano as ‹closed› cultural heritage, in order subsequently to leave the remains behind, maltreated and fully exposed. If he wants to take the other road, he desires to ‹close› that same piano—which is now ‹opened› and in a destroyed state—once again to lend it the status of closed art work. ◐

Our ordered and organised society allows neither for wilfully executed destruction nor for self-destruction. Community and destruction are essentially incompatible concepts; they are diametrically opposed to each other. However, this juxtaposition does not exist in the world of art, where destruction follows from a constructive attitude, which is just typical of art. (By the way, in art it isn't called destruction; it rather possesses the status of a *work of art*.) Art doesn't know of destruction as such. Everything in art is constructive—even in case of anti-art. That's why only third parties feel called upon to destroy art; third parties that literally feel placed outside of art, attacking works of art with Stanley knives and cutting them to shreds (fig. 16).

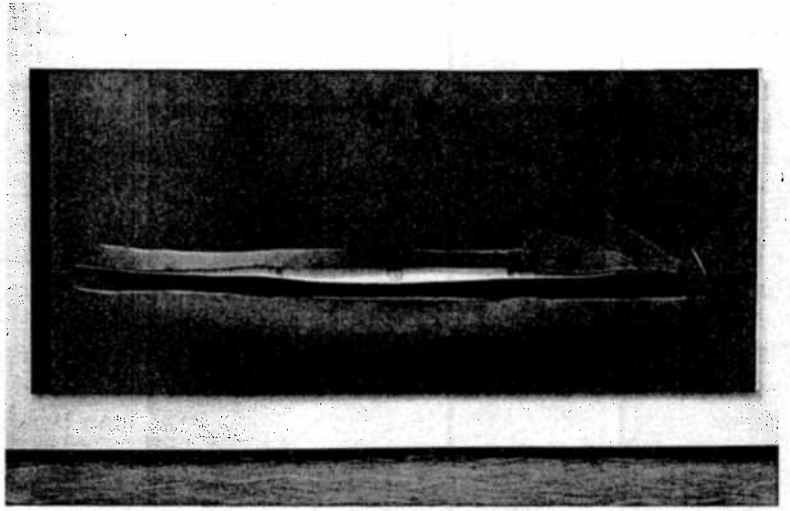

Figure 16: Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III (1967–1968), after Gerard Jan van Bladeren vandalised it with a Stanley knife on March 21, 1986.