

## Marla Hlady

YYZ ARTISTS' OUTLET

Marla Hlady takes apart and rebuilds machines that make sounds. In recent years she has been preoccupied with rigging domestic objects, including toy drummers and teapots, to produce unexpected tones. *Playing Piano*, 2007, an installation shown recently at YYZ Artists' Outlet, represents a shift toward a larger scale and a more accessible context. Striking in its complex barrage of visual and musical stimuli, the work consists of a late-1920s player piano with keyboard and bellows compressor removed (here to the front of the exhibition space). The parts still function to produce an audible rhythm, the regularity of which contrasts with the visual chaos of the rubber tubes, wires, and metal control boxes that still connect them to the body of the piano.

The instrument's hammers still strike its strings in correspondence with the machine's paper roll, but at a slowed-down pace that registers as an uncanny echo of the jaunty melodies that mesmerized audiences during the player piano's turn-of-the-century heyday. Two separate contraptions produce a whimsical, high-pitched squeal reminiscent of a clown's horn, while another machine—composed of two spring-loaded, metal-tipped arms that move abruptly across strings—emits a more grating, dissonant sound. The violence implied here is enhanced by an occasional clanging, signaling that parts require adjustment.

An empathetic reading of the piano as victim—the instrument having long since been sidelined by the entertainment industry's ruthless process of natural selection—is enhanced by the sight of wires leading from it to a closed black cabinet containing electronic devices, perhaps designed to keep the “patient” alive. Also included is a logbook noting precise times of activation and deactivation, alongside comments about the piano's changing status and performance, including instructions for its proper care and maintenance, specifically frequent oiling. Such associations between machine parts, lubrication, and bodily functions recall Dada's eroticized interest in complicated mechanical contraptions—think, for example, of the love potion delivery system depicted in Duchamp's *Large Glass*, 1915–23. The layered sound that Hlady's piece emits is also reminiscent of Dada sound poetry. And early modernism is further evoked by the combination of the piano's sinuous curves and rectilinear steel parts that evoke 1920s compositions by Kandinsky exploring the relationship between music and geometric abstraction.

Hlady's investigation into the mechanics and expressive possibilities of music thus appears impressively thorough and learned but, thankfully, there is no compulsion to spend much time marveling at her feats as an engineer of spectacle. Rather, viewers are encouraged to

Marla Hlady, *Playing Piano*, 2007, piano and stool, miscellaneous machinery, electronics, and hardware, cabinet, dimensions variable.



## REVIEWS

dwell in a hybridized environment that combines visual and aural sensations, and obsolete and advanced technologies, in a manner that facilitates unexpected insights into the intertwined histories and cultures of sound, perception, and popular entertainment.

—Dan Adler