

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc



Charlotte Moorman, *Bomb Cello* (1984)

Sense Sound/Sound Sense: Fluxus Music, Scores & Records In The Luigi Bonotto Collection

Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK

The performance of Philip Corner's *Piano Activities* at West Germany's Wiesbaden Festival Of The Newest Music in 1962 has become an iconic moment for the Fluxus movement as a whole. More than the koan-like event scores of George Brecht or Yoko Ono, more even than the manifestos of Fluxus's founder George Maciunas himself, the gleeful wreckage of a concert grand at the hands of Maciunas, Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostell, Emmett Williams, Ben Patterson, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles on the stage of the Wiesbaden art museum is now indelibly associated with the group, more or less its defining moment.

So it comes as some small shock to

read Corner's original score for the piece on the wall of this exhibition. On a large sheet of white card, the looped Ys and tall Ts of Corner's typically neat handwriting detail a set of instructions for tapping, scratching, preparing and dropping things into the body of the instrument. They say nothing of violence or destruction. "Show restraint and extremity in both the active and inactive aspects of your participation," remarks a note at the end. Restraint is not the first word that comes to mind, watching German TV footage of Maciunas et al smashing and sawing at the body of an old piano.

The artefacts of Fluxus are perhaps more often read about than seen in the flesh, a fact that may have contributed to an impression of the movement as little more than arch pranksters. Seeing the group's objects and scores then

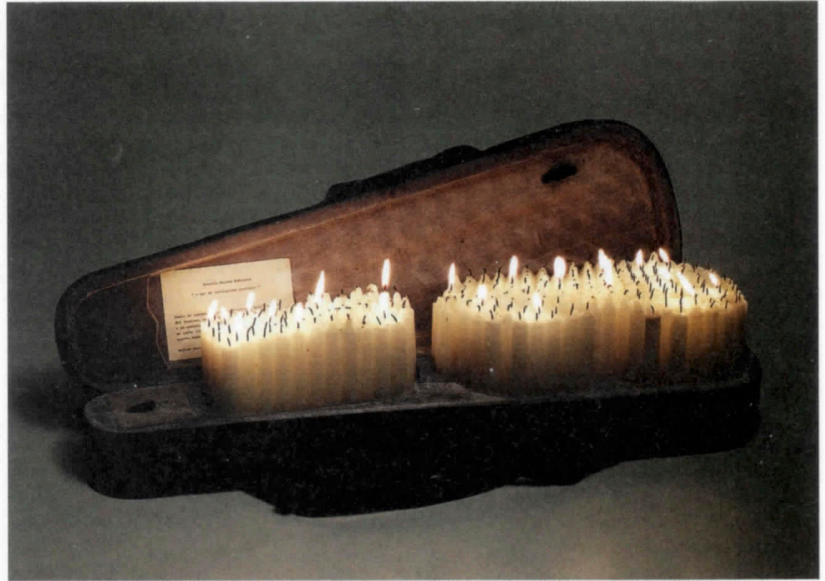
comes as a revelation. Take Charlotte Moorman's *Bomb Cello*, a military shell appended with the strings and pegs of a cello. I was familiar with the ideas as a gesture of protest against the Vietnam War, but expected a squat little thing, not this elegant man-sized figure whose tactile, sensuous curves must have been appreciated by the performer behind Nam June Paik's *Opera Sextronique*.

The score and assemblage comprising Walter Marchetti's *La Caccia*, likewise, a piece beloved by Nurse With Wound's Steven Stapleton in its original recording on Cramps Records, here proves to be a true menagerie: several dozen unique bird calls, each one a beautifully honed work of artisanal craft, pinned to a board like so many rare butterflies. Toshi Wada's *Earth Horns* are well-known for their capacity for long, perfectly tuned frequencies – as

employed in the piece *Earth Horns With Electronic Drone* – but seeing one here, it is revealed as something far more earthy: no more than an agglomeration of old plumbing, mottled and distinctly unrefined in appearance.

It's a reminder that so much of the effect of the key Fluxus works relied on a certain sense of the uncanny, of things out of place or put to improper use. After all, there's nothing especially radical about a leaky tap – until you put it on a concert stage and ask people to listen to it (as in Brecht's *Drip Music*). Another work of Marchetti's, *Piccola musica notturna* (*a mode de méditation profonde*), is no more than a dense clump of votive candles in a violin case, but somehow the combination becomes not just music but a chilling memento mori.

Robert Barry



Walter Marchetti, *Piccola musica notturna* (2002)