

A Different Sonata

Megi Rome

Probably this has always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality—that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol—this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins.¹

At the center of this exhibition by artist Megi Rome are images of musical compositions. Seemingly torn from a book, they are painted on canvas, on wrinkled sheets of paper and on cardboard, some of which have burnt edges. These painted sonatas are thrown on the floor like useless objects, lacking context, as a “tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation,” according to Roland Barthes.² This knowing neglect is especially grating in view of the fact that we are dealing, in fact, with a musical work of art—itsself having been laboriously and dexterously composed; and also, the notes, the staves, the signs and the G- and F-clefs are precisely drawn while being thoroughly and meticulously copied from note books. The personal score created by Rome is actually characterized, in terms of artistic language, by clear realism as though it was a still-life painting depicted with the meticulousness of a seventeenth-century painter.

On the other hand, the fact that this score is out of context diverts it from its original purpose, turning it into a conceptual image. In this respect, it should be stressed that the conceptual value of these works actually lies in mimesis or their seemingly imitational-realistic nature. The musical composition turns into a stylized composition; thus two artistic fields become indistinguishable: the aesthetic composition must, in fact, adhere to the musical rules so that the artistic depiction would indeed turn out realistically, and, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, the aesthetic field absorbs and takes in characteristics of another in order to exist.³ Continuing with Bourdieu’s terminology, the specific “capital” of the musical field becomes that

¹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, 15.

² Ibid.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, “Some Properties of Fields,” in *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice, 73.

of the domain of plastic arts. The question is whether the value of this capital would now be preserved. Could the original value of the musical capital be somehow converted into another after having been pulled away from the original complete structure to which it belonged? And generally speaking, what drives one to laboriously reproduce preludes and sonatas?

Rome allows herself to penetrate these fields, a two-way penetration in nature, as she is educated in both areas, both painter and pianist who played in chamber music ensembles. The playing rules of these fields are well known to her, which in itself infuse her works with conceptual value. Nonetheless, the realistic nature of the images flowing from her paintbrush is like an acknowledgement of the value and principles of the game, a statement of its importance, and the fact that the artist does not wish to doubt its value.⁴

The question of value of ancient cultures and accumulated knowledge is at the focus of recent discourse, which was well expressed in the last biennale in Venice at an exhibition called *The Encyclopedic Palace (Palazzo Enciclopedico)*. The compositions and painted notes in Rome's works symbolize accumulated ancient knowledge, highly skilled thought based on a combination and balance between emotion and rationalism. The work of art is based on two intrinsic aspects: emotion, which is the Dionysian, the origin of artistic urges; and rationalism, which is the Apollonian, the generator of musical harmony. The balance between these two aspects is necessary to the completeness of the work. On the other hand, the intentional wrinkling of the canvases and painted papers, burning the edges, and throwing them on the ground symbolize humiliation, annulment of value and waste of potential, bringing about a feeling of sorrow and loss.

A musical image as a symbol of loss of value is the assemblage *Guitar* by Picasso from his Synthetic Cubism period (1912, metal and strings). During that period Picasso had been dealing with reconstructing images of reality he had used to deconstruct during the Analytical and Simultaneous Cubism periods. In this way, the artist sought to invoke questions concerning the essence of reality, as this guitar cannot produce sound; it is stripped of its original essence, just as the reality of life might be conceived as futile and aimless. From an historical perspective, it is not surprising that Duchamps' *Fountain* (1917) continued this line of thought and discussion about the margin between potential to realization. Being no less than a urinal for men, the object changed its original function to play a role in another field and is now realized conceptually, not

⁴ Ibid., 74.

physically. In the field of art, that is, the museum space, the object accumulated during its one hundred years of existence deep layers of significance and content.

In this context there should be mentioned additional conceptual masterpieces realistic in nature, such as *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* by Magritte (1929, oil on canvas), which raises questions about the essence of reality, and the American flag painted by Jasper Johns (1954–1955, mixed media), a work that raises questions about the essence of American society as reflected in the image of the flag. The accumulation of meanings and its interpretations will now exist with the viewers after the artist, or the author, as Barthes relates, has released it from his or her grip as it now belongs to the viewer who would interpret it his own way: “[... T]he reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of, the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination [...]”⁵

On the other hand, Michel Foucault asserts that unique authors are those who create a discourse that is not limited to their works and in which the function of an author does not delimit the work.⁶ In Rome’s works the detached piece of work would now be read by the viewer, who would see the notes for the third section of Beethoven’s fifth symphony on the wrinkled sheet, as a missing, detached expression which is realizable, if only partially, whereas Picasso’s guitar would never be able to be played. But can it be that in this fashion these tunes would be heard differently?

As Foucault says: “for repetition to occur, first it is necessary, of course, to have oblivion and not just accidental one, not concealment due to some misunderstanding, but essential, constitutive oblivion.”⁷ Hence, the act of tearing out and displacement as the “essential, constitutive oblivion” performed by the artist is intended to examine the value of the musical capital by converting it into artistic-plastic one.

This question is made extreme at the metronome installation on display in this exhibition. This installation is a 7-foot wood construction shaped as a metronome setting a strict pace which does not permit any liberty and change of rhythm while playing. To the sides and back of it is a mixed media painting (a layer of sand and mortar with acrylic paint), and on each side is an

⁵ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 17.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *Language, Counter-memory and Practice*, ed. Daniel Bouchard, 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

image symbolizing rhythm: analogue clock, hourglass, metronome, and other symbols and concepts from the world of music.

The installation is accompanied by a recording of a prelude in D minor by Bach repeatedly performed by the artist. In the background one can hear the ticking of the metronome setting the pace which appears to become part of this work. At the end of this recorded piece the pace slows down, causing deviation of the rhythmic framework dictated by the metronome.

Of course, no musician would consider playing to a metronome, or playing out of rhythm set by the composer, as a worthy piece to be performed at the concert hall. But, metaphorically speaking, it seems that maybe this deviation from the dictates, deviation from the strict rules of the game of the “fields,” may actually enhance creativity and encourage multiple viewpoints. Megi Rome, native of Georgia, was raised under an exacting, strict and stringent rhythm of life. As an artist she wishes to change her life’s rhythm, to compose and to play a different tune, a personal one. Thus, as Barthes said, writing begins, and the creation of another, maybe an even better, sonata.

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