

Wayne Horvitz

"21 Pianos"

Project Proposal

Synopsis:

"21 Pianos" is a site(s)-specific interaction with an extremely out of tune piano and twenty-one towns and cities in Minnesota. The project would take place over two month-long trips, followed by a period of composing and compiling. Finally the project will be documented in a book that includes two CDs.

The residency:

Conceptually the work is about entropy, how things fall apart, and how people think about it. It is also about transformation, conscious or otherwise. I will begin with a brief description of the project, and then tie the work into the ideas above.

Almost a decade ago a friend gave me a piano in exchange for one copy of each of my CDs. The piano is a "ship's piano", small, with a shorter scale (67) keys. It is out of tune on an epic scale, and impossible to "fix". It sounds amazing. Pianos represent the highest technological ideal of the 19th century, and this one is certainly in "decay". I enjoy improvising on this piano, and recording it, but what is most interesting it to play pieces I "know", or rather that my hands know. I suppose it is oddly analogous to a game of telephone.

The project would involve, the piano, recording gear, and a truck with a trailer. We would roll into town, pre-arranged, or not, find a suitable space, and create a mini performance where people play the piano; either a piece they "know", improvised, or both. These pieces would be recorded, and with permission documented with video and photographs. I intend to work with a collaborator on the visual aspects of the piece. This would include all the video and photography, maintaining an active blog during and after the residency, and creating the visual content of the final product.

The music:

During and after the residency I will use the recordings to create a set of music composed electronically. This involves a process I have been exploring for over a decade, in which I essentially re-mix my own notated compositions, or recordings I have made of improvisations, solo or group. This project extends the concept to include what are essentially "field recordings" of a wide variety of people playing this piano in various settings.

Using a structure based on the number 21, I will take each set of audio and create a composition electronically. Piece #1 would only use audio from #1. (Another way to think of it is as "location #1). Piece #2 would use #1 and #2. Piece #21 would use audio from all 21 locations. One CD will contain edited versions of the original audio; the other CD will be the compositions themselves. The CDs will be part of a book that includes photos and narrative.

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Artistic goals:

I would like to engage people in a discourse about decay, and change. Is there beauty to be found in decay? How do we embrace transformation? How do we plan for change? I find this particularly compelling in regards to the issues of digital culture, climate change and the mechanization of work. The idea is to let the discourse evolve out of this relatively simple interaction with a very odd piano.

I am intrigued by the notion of site-specific also being transient. The work isn't beholden to a "specific" site but it is completely and purposefully influenced by its ever-changing location. By its nature the work is fluid. The final product may exist in a tangible format, but the performance(s) exist only in the moment, without rehearsal or aesthetic preconceptions. I think the best way to articulate this is that the "site" is as much social as physical. I find the potential in this quite compelling, and ultimately very human.

"21 Pianos" engages the community directly. The focus of this project is to reach as wide and diverse a community as possible within the different locales. Frankly it is literally about meeting people. The culture of small towns and cities in the west and mid-west is very conducive to this. Even in this day and age word travels fast in small towns, and the couple that owns the gas station may also make sculpture or word carvings, and almost everyone has played music sometime in life. An old piano is familiar and it creates an entre into the music, even if the end result seems unusual.

I imagine these interactions taking place in bars, churches, community centers, and street corners. In the past five years I have created a number of projects that connect with a large web of artists, institutions, poets, musicians, historical societies and organizers. Beyond that I have connected, because of the nature of the work, with people interested in local history, environmental issues, labor history, and Native history and literature. This has been predominantly in the West, especially Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

I would like to note that I do not perceive this project as targeting music communities per se. The point of entry involves playing the piano, but millions of people play the piano well enough to know a song or two, they do not need to be professional, or even active amateur, musicians. Beyond that, the work also involves any audience, staff, owners, and the random public. The narratives we collect will come from a wide range of people from all walks of life.

I have spent the last five years recording and manipulating my own music. This project is a further step in the same direction, but considerably more complex, and more socially interactive. The old piano itself creates a structure that is both permanent and ephemeral. The process goes beyond my normal approach of interacting with performers whom I know personally and creates a context for a sort of random social practice. Fundamentally it is something I have thought about for years, and finally found the right conceptual approach to realize it.