

# Dis / Continuity

Megan Fritz  
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The Michaelis School of Fine Art  
UCT

To my dad, who could fix anything. I miss you everyday.

Dis/Continuity  
by Megan Fritz

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*When is the exact moment that you realize something no longer works? When looking at something mechanical or electrical, it's easy. It doesn't start, there are no more lights or alternatively, there are lots of lights flashing. It no longer serves its function, it no longer does what it was specifically made to do, its purpose is lost. When it comes to relationships, with people, friends, family, sentimental objects, the line between functional and dysfunctional becomes blurred. We cling to something that no longer works, powering a machine that has exhausted its will to live. We might be able to pinpoint a moment, or a collection of moments when we realize that it has stopped working, but what is it that drives us to the moment when we loosen our grip, and what we have been clinging to slowly dissipates – when are we forced to let go?*

## Dis/Continuity

Since I was little, I have always been fascinated with taking things apart. Discovering the inner workings of old mechanical objects was paired with a sense of awe and anticipation as I started unscrewing the back of clocks and other little contraptions that people were trying to get rid of at flea markets. Their functionality, to me, was not determined whether the plug point of an old kitchen appliance would spark a reaction, instead, I found that the usefulness of my objects lay in the possibility of what they could become, and later on, what they themselves could create. Over the years this exercise has resulted in a curated collection of objects, which often find themselves in a state of flux as I use and re-use them in my artistic practice. The expansion of my collection has been paired with themes of function within dysfunction, incongruity, performativity and the recording of movement, which have evolved and shaped my 4th year work at the Michaelis School of Fine Art and will subsequently provide the framework for this essay.

It was with the discovery of the text *Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter* (2009) by Bob Plant, that gave direction to my exhibition titled "Dis/Continuity" (2020). Plant discusses themes of absurdity and incongruity through the view of Albert Camus and Thomas Nagel, and argues that "absurdity arises from the irreducible tension between our subjective and objective perspectives on life" (Plant, 2009:111), arguing that the absurd arises through the co-existence of these perspectives. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1942), Camus dissects the idea of the absurd and how it comes about:



Fig 1. "Clockwork", [Process Photograph], 2020

"In all these cases, from the simplest to the most complex, the magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of comparison. There are absurd marriages, challenges, rancours, silences, wars and even peace-treaties. For each of them the absurdity springs from a comparison. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation" (Camus, 1942).

This idea of the incongruity seemed incredibly pertinent in terms of the clash of realities which the whole world has been facing during the Covid 19 Pandemic. Our everyday lives became vastly different compared to what they were, and somehow we had to consolidate that differentiation into a new normal. It was the comparison of what is to what once was which evoked feelings of absurdity. When looking at art historical movements such as Dada and Surrealism, the absurd seems to be an appropriate response to an absurd situation. Is it possible to find comfort in the strange when the world around us has become unrecognizable? Is it a way for us to make sense of a situation, or is the employment of imagination used as an escape mechanism? The body of work that I started making aimed to investigate the idea of function amidst dysfunction and a sense of normality within the absurd.



Fig 2. "Mechanisms 1" [Process Drawing], 2020.



Fig 3. "Mechanisms 2" [Process Drawing], 2020.



Keeping this in mind, I started creating strange little objects which seemed to have a need to take on a life of their own, perpetuating their reconstruction by creating images, traces, proof that they existed. I came to realize that I was working with the idea of rebuilding. Taking something which no longer functioned in its conventional manner, but instead of discarding it, utilizing the pieces to create something new, something that was better off for having been pulled apart and put back together. The way that this manifested into my work was by creating little assemblage sculptures which acted as drawing or rather printing machines, proposing a marriage between my two favorite, yet vastly different mediums; printmaking and sculpture. My body of work now comprises of sculptures which juxtapose our expectation with a different reality.

"An Oil Painting Machine" (2020), which creates prints out of old motor oil and ink, "A Motion Picture" (2020) made out of an old projector, which presents not a movie, but a moving image out of the powder extracted from a VHS tape, "Piano Scales" (2020) in the form of a mobile made entirely out parts which used to comprise of a piano, are examples of where this train of thought has lead me.

There has always been a strong duality embedded within my artistic practice. On the one hand the perfectionist within me revels in the pristine and precise nature of printmaking, on the other, almost as a release, I find immense joy working with the messiness that accompanies sculpture. It may seem odd at first, but both printmaking and sculpture allow me to explore a way of working which is guided by materiality and process. To me, it is important to listen to what your materials have to say, guiding the process by opening up a dialogue which is more likely to results in an enriching conversation compared to starting up a debate, in which you force your arguments to fit a set idea. This is something which is particularly important to keep in mind when working with assemblage sculptures.



Fig 4. "Mechanisms 3" [Process Drawing], 2020.



Fig 5. "Mechanisms 4" [Process Drawing], 2020.



As Dug North states, "An assemblage of unrelated things not only seem to belong together, but also move together in diverse and interesting ways" (North, 2011). I strongly believe that this is only possible when the materials are in agreement with one another. The process which guides my sculptures can be likened to a conductor setting up an orchestra, everything needs to be in place before the arrangement itself can start playing symphonies. I spend hours sitting and tinkering with the individual pieces until I am happy with the way that they sit together, and while I can anticipate what they will create and guide the practice overall, the result is essentially out of my hands. This is something which is most evident in my work titled "An Oil Painting" (2020), a little contraption made out of an old motor oil canister, a file and a rusty wheel. This assemblage sculpture was made to become a printing machine, manufacturing prints which blur the line between a monotype print and a lithograph, as each print is unpredictable and counters the traditional edition, however it makes use of the principle of oil and ink repelling each other, which is typical of a lithograph.

The process of creating these prints involves setting up the sculpture with a 'printing plate' underneath the spout of the canister, from which oil is then released onto the plate. I then drip water-based ink into the oil, and start tapping my contraption which activates the wheel, enabling it to mix the oil and the ink together. Once it is sufficiently mixed, I take the 'printing plate' and lay a piece of paper on top, gently rubbing the surface of the paper to make sure that the image transfers from the plate to the paper. Once the paper is lifted from the plate, the resulting print displays organic shapes, giving visualization to the way that the ink and oil clashed and the way that they settled into co-existence.



Fig 6. "Oil Painting Device", 2020. [Assemblage Sculpture], 18cm x 28cm x 16cm



Fig 7. "Process Photograph", 2020



Fig 8. "Oil Painting Device", 2020. [Assemblage Sculpture]. 18cm x 28cm x 16cm

On some of the prints, the edge of the plate is just about visible, barely able to contain the spread of the ink, yet failing to contain the spread of the oil across the paper. For weeks after the initial print, the image keeps moving and expanding as the oil, slowly but surely, creeps across the paper, forming a halo-like presence surrounding the ink. To me, the fascination lies within the fact that something which is meant to be mechanical and machine like, can create something organic and unpredictable, echoing and furthering the incongruity which was created with the disparity between what is expected from an oil painting, compared to what is presented instead.





Fig 9. "Oil Painting 1", 2020. [Ink and Oil on paper], 42cm x 30cm



Fig 10. "Oil Painting 2", 2020. [Ink and Oil on paper], 42cm x 30cm



Fig 11. "Oil Painting 3", 2020. [Ink and Oil on paper], 42cm x 30cm

## Function within Dysfunction

While works such as Man Ray's *Cadeau* (1921), which rendered two functional objects entirely useless by neatly gluing fourteen nails onto an iron (Mundy, 2003), my work titled "A Motion Picture" (2020), aims to restore an alternative functionality to 'dysfunctional' objects. Comprised out of an old Eumig 8mm Film Projector, a scratched record and the gears of an old coffee grinder, when the little handle of the projector is turned, a chain reaction through the gears leads to small magnets spinning and activating powder which I extracted from an old VHS tape. The fine black powder starts moving in organic ways as the inherent magnetic oxide powder chases the spinning magnets, creating a picture in motion. While traditionally a projector would allow a recording of a performance to be viewed, "A Motion Picture" plays with the idea of performativity and allows the artwork itself to become the performer.



Fig 12, "A Motion Picture", 2020. [Assemblage Sculpture] 52cm x 35cm x 25cm

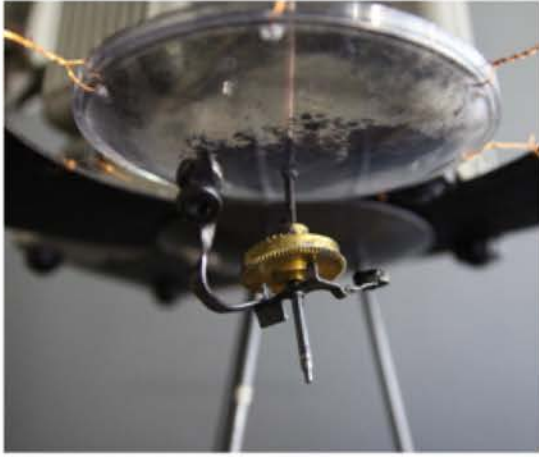


Fig 14



Fig 15, Process Photograph [VHS Tape Powder],  
2020



Fig 13 & 14, "A Motion Picture", 2020. [Assemblage Sculpture] 52cm x 35cm x 25cm

## Performativity and Loss

The idea of performance is something which has a strong presence throughout my ensemble of work. A performance of any kind, be it a concert, a play or an experience, is often most potent when experienced in person, and commonly takes shape in the form of a collective experience. There is something irreplaceable about the intense energy that is felt emanating from an audience just before the start of a performance, the presence of the audience almost as important as the performance itself. This is something which composer John Cage recognized and amplified in his silent piece titled *4'33"* (1952/1953). During the course of its first performance, the audience waited patiently as pianist David Tudor sat down at the piano, opening the lid to access the keys, and not making a single sound for the duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds (MoMA, 2019). Cage's intent with the piece was to "attune audiences to the soundtrack of everyday life" (MoMA, 2019) and to disrupt the hierarchy that is automatically put in place when placing an audience and a performance together (MoMA, 2019). *4'33"* makes use of the magic that is associated with chance, allowing for a single piece of music to have a different outcome every time that it is performed, as there is no way to control the ambient sound (MoMA, 2019). The lack of control which accompanies Cage's composition is something which strongly resonates with my work.

I was fortunate enough to acquire an old, out of tune upright piano to turn into a piece of art, and while researching the inner workings of the instrument, I discovered that a piano, similarly to the clocks that I had been taking apart, makes use of a mechanism called an escapement, which allows the hammers to fall away from the string after a key is pressed. The idea of a performance, a piece of music, art and literature as an escape mechanism in itself is something that I relate to quite strongly. There is a release that accompanies an audience coming together to witness and be moved by a performance collectively. Yes, performances can be recorded, but there is a magical aspect that accompanies being in the presence of the weight of the keys and particles of sound clinging to the air only to settle on the very surface of your skin, sending shivers down your spine. It is this very physical presence which is fading away more and more with the development of the digital age, and particularly in this past year with the Covid 19 Pandemic. There is thus a strong link between the idea of a performativity, the inherent need to record and loss, which is what my sculptures titled "Piano Scales "(2020) and "A Sound Recording" (2020) aim to explore.



The idea of taking apart a piano, an instrument created with meticulous craftsmanship and care filled me with sadness. Even though the keys echoed in an out of tune harrowing manner and the pedal, almost deflating with exhaustion, too tired to spring back up after it was pressed down, the piano was trying hard to maintain its composure. It is important to me to allow the audience to experience that sense of loss, as loss is all around us. It is however equally as important to recognize that there is great potential in the idea of transformation and rebuilding. The sculpture titled "Piano Scales" (2020), disrupts the expectations that a viewer might have of musical scales. With a strong emphasis on balance, the mobile of scales relies on the audience to 'activate' the performance of the dancing sculptures, projecting their movement through an array of shadows, and blurring the line between an audience and a performance. As Elinor Auerbach states,

"Everywhere and at all times our shadows accompany us, marking a fleeting and continuously shifting trace of our existence" (Auerbach, 2012).

Emanating a state on impermanence, the moving sculptures pick up on the state of flux which quite often accompanies my work, as the potential to be built and rebuilt is what keeps my sculptures alive.



Fig 16, "Piano Scales", 2020. [Assemblage Sculpture], 30cm x 35cm x 20cm.





Fig 17, "Piano Scales", 2020. [Assemblage Sculpture], 30cm x 35cm x 20cm.

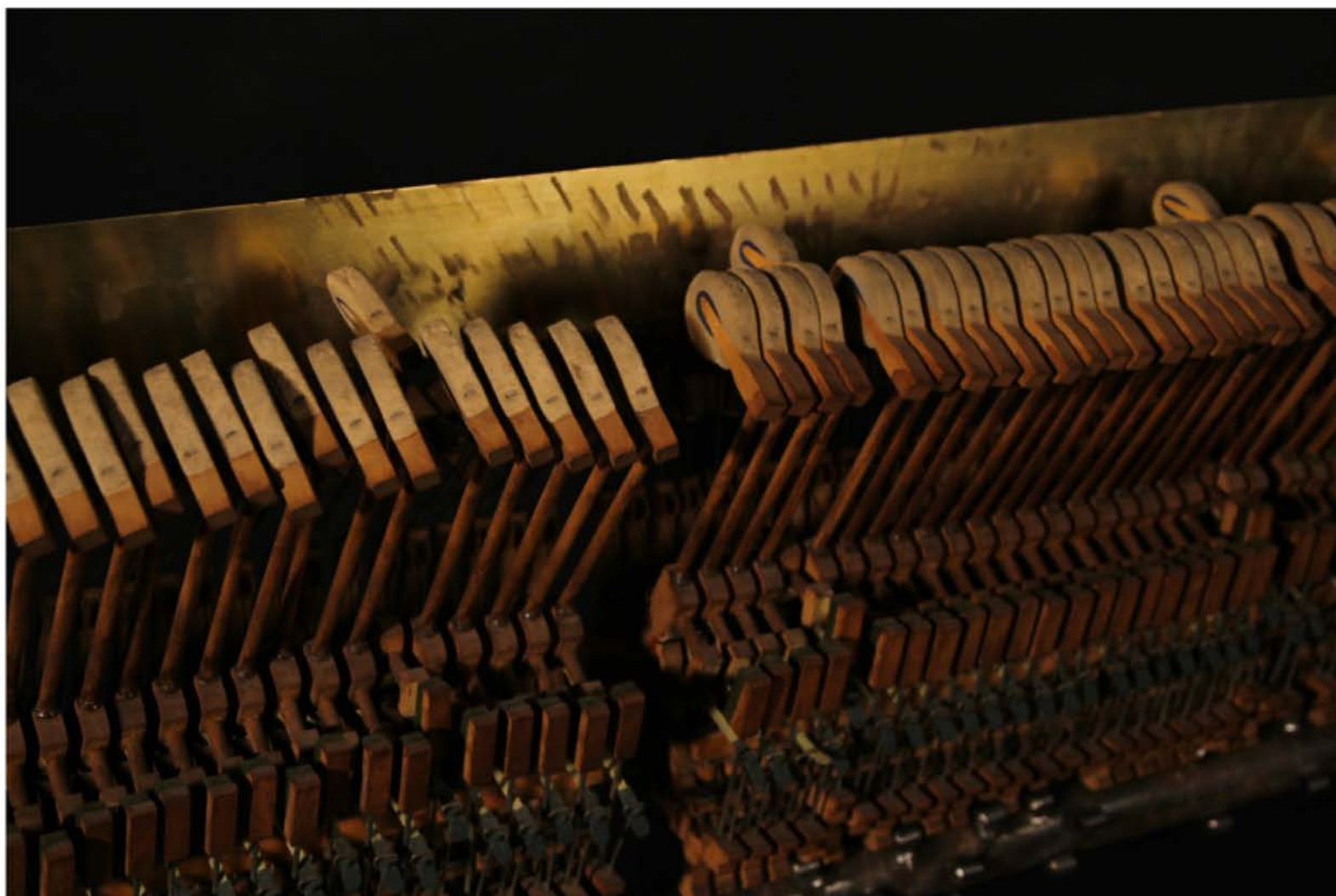


Fig 18, "A Sound Recording", 2020. [Sculpture], 135cm x 115cm x 40cm.

"A Sound Recording" (2020), takes inspiration from the workings of a music box and echoes the functionality of a typewriter. Utilizing the interior of the piano, the hammers, which usually hit the strings of the piano, are individually activated by a rotating bar. With each rotation, the hammers hit a brass plate covered in a soft ground, removing a little bit of the ground at a time. The plate is then placed into ferric chloride acid, allowing the acid to eat into the plate wherever the ground was removed. Afterwards, the plate is inked up and printed according to the techniques of etching. Contrary to a traditional etching which is governed by extreme precision and control, this visual recording of a silent piano piece relies on the elements of chance and experimentation.

Now fulfilling a role which is closely tied to a typewriter, "A Sound Recording" is a play on the composition called *The Typewriter* (1950) by Leroy Anderson, in which a typewriter is utilized not for its ability to document and record a piece of writing, but rather for the unique sounds that accompany it (Beschizza, 2020). Placed in the foreground of an orchestral ensemble, Anderson uses a typewriter to create a musical composition, and relies on the incongruity of the combination to evoke a humorous response from the audience. It is my hope that at least some aspects of my pieces conjure a similar response.

The piano sculpture starts taking on a life of its own, as it in itself starts producing and creating work with minimal intervention. The play between the dynamic of an artwork and its creator is something which Arthur Ganson emphasizes in his work titled *Faster!* which he created in 1991. The sculpture takes shape in the form of a racing cart, with a sculpted hand holding a pen to a piece of paper, facing the viewer as the cart is pushed. As the cart starts moving, the hand moves and starts writing "Faster!" onto the piece of paper. Ganson describes the work as being "designed to talk back to its creator" (Ganson, 2008), producing a piece which revels in self-referentiality

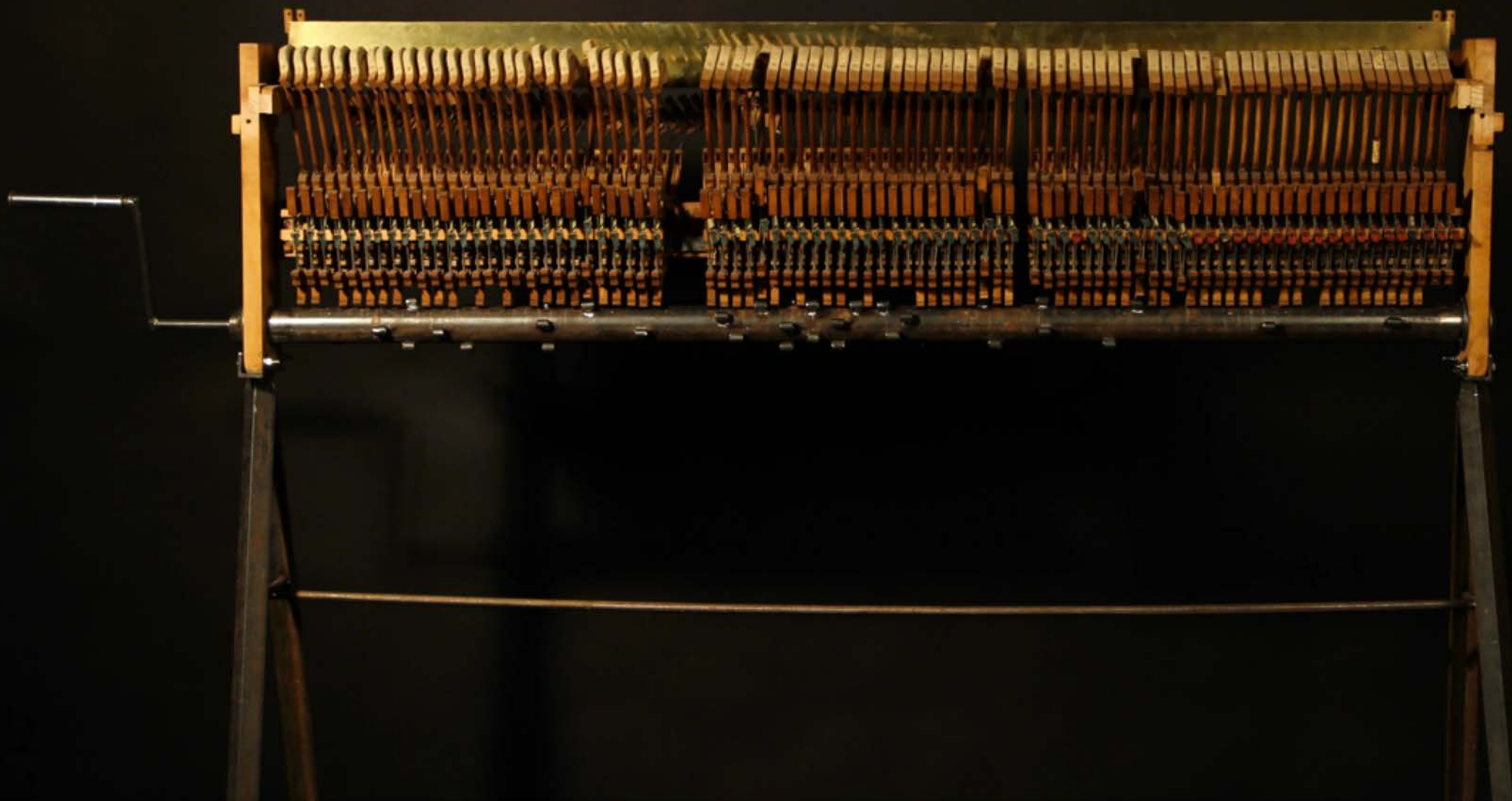






Fig 19, "A Sound Recording", 2020. [Sculpture], 135cm x 115cm x 40cm.

The idea of being self-referential is echoed in the print which the piano etching produces. The work is titled "Piano Impressions" and takes its name from the impressionist movement, which also took place in Music, and is characterized as "an avoidance of traditional musical form" (Britannica, 2020), taking inspiration rather form the atmosphere surrounding the musician. In the case of 'Piano Impressions' (2020), the print that is created is not only a reflection of the visual and physical components of the sculpture, but is also quite literally made through the impression of an etching plate on paper.

The importance of process and the influence which it has on the outcome of my work was brought to the forefront with "Piano Impressions". The final print, which comprises of an image taken from the front of the plate, the back of the plate and one layered with both, is embedded with chance. The lines that were formed at the back of the plate were a result of the acid making its way through the masking tape, which I had lined across the plate as protection from the acid. It is these very lines which now give the print a strengthened visual reference to sheet music, resulting in illegible sheet music made by an unplayable piano, acting as a testament to the pianos performance.



Fig 20, "Piano Impressions", 2020. [Etching on Hahnemühle Etching Paper, 350g], 125cm x 30cm

## To Record

The idea of loss, I would argue, is closely linked to our inherent need to record our experiences, thoughts and movements. In the video piece titled "Recordings" the viewer is confronted with three screens, each giving a glimpse into the way that the sculptures and surrounding objects functioned. Of the three, "A Motion Picture" is the only sculpture still in the physical form in which it was in the video recording, leaving the viewer with a sense of impending loss as it is only a matter of time until the sculpture is once again dismantled and turned into something new.



Fig 21, "Recordings", 2020. [Film Still], 1m33s.



The idea of ephemerality is, and always has been embedded quite deeply within the work that I create. By allowing my materials to evolve organically, I allow them to influence my practice as much as I influence their state of being, Accompanying the sense of loss is a simultaneous sense of anticipation, as the sculptures are not static, instead, they have the potential to take shape in many possible forms. As much as we desire that things last forever, to me, there is beauty and appreciation attached to the idea of impermanence; sometimes the possibilities which arise through chance and change are worth the uncertainty.





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## Contact Information



Megan Fritz

[meganfritz333@gmail.com](mailto:meganfritz333@gmail.com)

064 037 4057

[@megs\\_makes\\_studio](#)