

Tempo 85 by Bronson Smillie  
Text by Cason Sharpe

Studies for Player Piano is a series of 49 experimental compositions by the American composer Conlon Nancarrow. The ambitious catalogue, composed between 1948 and 1992, was created through the manipulation of perforated paper scrolls known as piano rolls. When fed through a player piano, the perforations on a piano roll trigger the depression of particular keys, allowing the piano to “play itself” as though controlled by some phantom virtuoso. As a composer, Nancarrow sought to create music with tempos too fast to be played by the human hand. Taken by the possibilities of mechanical instrumentation, he dedicated his life to making marks on paper scrolls, pursuing a song even the swiftest fingers couldn’t mimic. Despite Nancarrow’s intentions, Studies for Player Piano is a remarkably human catalogue, one rife with the dissonance, confusion, and sweetness of being alive. It’s as if the composer discovered, in his search for the sonic sublime, that you can’t erase the human touch.

Bronson Smillie presents his own musical manipulations in Tempo 85, an exhibition that breaks down the piano and its attendant parts and reconstitutes them into a collection of schematic sculptures and drawings made from recycled materials. Unlike Nancarrow’s compositions, which seek to obscure the human hand, Smillie’s deconstructions expose the lingering trace of many fingers. Discarded piano rolls, spread flat, become the surfaces on which the artist draws. Along the side of each roll creep lyrics plucked from a selection of early 20th century ballads: Sunshine and You; The Dying Poet; Silver Threads Among the Gold. These lyrics, along with existing stains, perforations, and annotations, merge with Smillie’s scattering of soft dots, dashes, and swirls to create a cross-temporal dialogue between the artist, the many musicians who may have owned these rolls, and each roll’s long-gone composer. A background in printmaking and comics informs Smillie’s interest in repetition, a principle fundamental to the mechanics of a piano. Recurrent sets of keys form sequential octaves; duplicate perforations trigger the same note. Likewise, Smillie builds a visual language throughout his drawings, the same lines, ticks, and flourishes forming a unique lexicon across the work. Perched upon a shelf of extracted piano keys like loose pages of sheet music ready to be played, these drawings evoke the bittersweet melodies dictated by the roll’s original markings while simultaneously suggesting a whole new tune.

Alongside these drawings, a selection of sculptures dissect and reanimate the piano’s form. Designed to function as piano roll cases, rectangular cardboard boxes are repurposed into the shape of an oversized black-and-white keyboard reminiscent of the famous dance mat from FAO Schwarz. Removed from its elegant shell, the jagged wooden innards of a piano are proudly displayed like the skeletal carcass of a fishmonger’s catch. Fiddling with context and scale, Smillie reconfigures these everyday musical objects into an unfamiliar orchestra. What kind of noises do these instruments make? What kind of songs do they play? Perhaps they play songs similar to Nancarrow’s experiments, songs too complex for the human hand to execute that nevertheless pulse to the tempo of the heart.