NAAMA TSABAR
MATRIX 189
MELODIES OF CERTAIN DAMAGE (OPUS 6)

JUNE 3, 2022 – SEPTEMBER 11, 2022
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART
ON SMASHING GUITARS

It happened by complete accident the first time. We were just kicking around in a club we played every Tuesday and I was playing the guitar and it hit the ceiling. It broke and it kind of shocked me ‘cause I wasn’t ready for it to go. I didn’t particularly want it to go but it went. … [The story] built and built and built and built and built until one day, a very important daily newspaper came to us and said, “Oh, we hear you’re the group that smashes their guitars up. Well we hope you’re going to do it tonight, because we’re from the Daily Mail. If you do, you’ll probably make the front pages.”


No matter how far we think we’ve come, as far as music’s overall treatment of gender, the song remains the same. … Couch it all you want—the fact remains that men don’t have to answer for smashing stuff. … It’s only rock and roll, baby.

—Rachel Brodsky, The Independent, 2021

Long before musician Phoebe Bridgers sparked controversy by smashing an amplifier with her guitar at the end of a performance on Saturday Night Live in 2021, artist Naama Tsabar explored the hyper-masculine bravado of the guitar break—made famous in 1964 by The Who’s Pete Townshend—in her iconic work Untitled (Babies) (2008). Tsabar counters the sizeable list of all-male bands following in the footsteps of The Who’s legacy of performance, destruction, and self-promotion, which includes The Clash, Nirvana, and Nine Inch Nails. In her eight-minute video piece, which also happens as a live performance (2010-ongoing), Tsabar and a band of women performers play the song Babies (1994) originally recorded by Pulp, a British rock band led by the androgynous Jarvis Cocker. The lyrics tell the story of a young man’s first awareness of sexual attraction toward a woman. In Tsabar’s throaty rendition, the lyrics stay the same. Altered by a female voice, the narrative becomes an empowered expression of queer desire of a woman for another woman. As the song reaches its climax, Tsabar, onstage with three band members, removes her guitar, grabs it by the neck, and repeatedly smashes it against the stage in a physically grueling performance of endurance. In the end, the guitar doesn’t break, but instead, Tsabar destroys the stage floor and collapses from exhaustion. Curator Zoe Lukov explains:

While the performance can only happen once, the action is captured on video, preserved in a style that exists somewhere between documentation of 1970s performance art and a 1990s music-video edit—a documentation of not just the stage’s destruction but of what it might look like to punctuate the very platform of rock ‘n’ roll, to put a hole in the foundations upon which we stand, to leave room for new questions to emerge within the hegemonic structure.
UNTITLED (BABIES), 2008. VIDEO STILL OF SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO
RUNNING TIME: 8 MIN.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
Tsabar’s awareness of the male-dominated music field is based on personal experience. While attending art school, the Israeli-born, New York-based artist performed in an electro-punk band named Akita in Tel Aviv. The group’s members were primarily female, and the music’s content was intentionally political. Tsabar positions her work as feminist, upsets traditional male/female gender norms, and questions prevailing hierarchies of power.

The struggle for power is enacted in a second video, Stranger (2017), which has also been performed live as Untitled (Double Face) (2010–ongoing). The eleven-minute video features Tsabar and longtime collaborator Kristin Mueller. The two female musicians negotiate, cooperate, and clash over controlling and playing a single instrument, two electric guitars that have been fused together back to back. Alternately strapped onto one player and both players, the performers’ interaction moves between intimacy and aggression in a fluid, shifting dance across a physical, shared border.
After the ten years that encompass *Untitled (Babies)* and *Stranger*, Tsabar built on the *Guitar* series by creating the *Melody of Certain Damage (MOCD)* series (2018–ongoing) as sound sculpture, installation, and performance art. The floor sculptures comprise broken guitars scattered across the gallery, the parts secured to the floor, and the instruments restrung into new configurations, restored with performative potential. For the sculpture, the artist selects guitars that she had always wanted as a young musician but couldn’t afford at the time. Unlike *Untitled (Babies)*, in which the guitar is violently activated in the performance, the *MOCD* guitars are broken in the studio, and their scatter patterns recorded for reinstallation in the gallery space.

Tsabar’s MATRIX 189 exhibition, *Melodies of Certain Damage (Opus 6)*, features numerous *MOCD* sculptures installed across the gallery floor, as if the site of a violent crime or battle scene. Curator Chen Tamir stated:
The image of the male rock star, able freely to express anger and rebellion, and to impose violence, has become almost cliché today. By maintaining the composition of the guitars as they originally fractured, Tsabar focuses on the aftermath of violence, the debris. Transforming the remains—the “victims” of violence—into a new and beautiful landscape is an empowering female act. For this reason, Tsabar chose to collaborate with and empower musicians who identify as female, as she often does in her performances.

Tsabar’s project marks a return of performance art to the MATRIX program. Over four-plus decades of MATRIX, the program has featured prominent performance artists, predominantly female, including Laurie Anderson, Rachel Rosenthal, Andrea Fraser, Janine Antoni, Vanessa German, and now Tsabar. Tsabar will present a series of live performances over the closing weekend of MATRIX 189. Featuring Tsabar and her partner Sarah Strauss, the group will also include local women or nonbinary musicians. In a conscious move away from music’s focus on the solo artist or lead singer, the composition MOCD (Opus 6) will be written collaboratively using the sculptures, in the
gallery space, approximately a week before the performances will take place. Each performer brings their own musical history, training, experience, and creativity to the instruments, which can be played with bows, picks, drumsticks, or fingers. There are no rules. Notably, the MOCD works are installed directly on the floor with no plinths, pedestals, or stages to elevate the sculptures. Zoe Lukov notes:

What might be seen as a position of servitude or vulnerability on the floor for the performer becomes a position of empowerment, both with the objects and the other performers. Tsabar’s refusal to engage with the monumentality of the [museum] is a transgressive act that shifts our gaze and our understanding of the lines of power—a decolonizing of the ground beneath us that necessitates a reevaluation of traditional performance hierarchy in a way that is less centric, more amorphous and dispersed—toward a new disorder.

Patricia Hickson
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
MELODY OF CERTAIN DAMAGE #14, 2021 (DETAIL)
BROKEN ELECTRIC GUITAR, STRINGS, MICROPHONE, SCREWS
PHOTO: ZAIRE KACZMARSKI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST


3 Zoe Lukov, “Instruments with No Master,” Naama Tsabar (Opus 1), Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2019; 63. This catalogue served a three-venue exhibition at the Faena Art Center, Buenos Aires; Kunsthaus Baselland, Muttenz/Basel; and CCA – Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.


Naama Tsabar lives and works in New York. She earned a Bachelor of Education from Hamidrasha School of Arts in Beit-Berl, Israel, in 2004, and a MFA from Columbia University in 2010. She has had solo exhibitions and performances at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Museum of Art and Design, New York; The High Line, New York; Nasher Museum, Durham, NC; Kunsthau Baselland, Switzerland; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Prospect New Orleans; Tel Aviv Museum of Art; The Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Israel; MARTE-C, El Salvador; the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), Tel Aviv; and Faena Art Center, Buenos Aires. Selected group exhibitions featuring Tsabar’s work include The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; The Jewish Museum of Belgium, Brussels; Ballroom Marfa, Texas; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; Elevation 1049, Gstaad, Switzerland; TM Triennale, Hasselt Genk, Belgium; Greater New York 2010, MoMA PS1, New York; Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Belgium, The Bucharest Biennale for Young Artists, Hungary; Hessel Museum of Art at CCS Bard, New York; Casino Luxembourg, Luxembourg; and Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp, Belgium. Tsabar’s work has been featured in publications including ArtForum, Art In America, ArtReview, ARTnews, The New York Times, New York Magazine, Frieze, Bomb Magazine, Art Asia Pacific, Wire, and Whitewall.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Melody of Certain Damage #5, 2018
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
7 x 86 1/2 x 25 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #15, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
3 1/4 x 43 x 66 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #16, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
3 1/2 x 79 1/2 x 43 1/2 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #17, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
2 5/8 x 43 x 105 1/2 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #18, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
3 1/2 x 57 x 104 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #19, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
2 1/2 x 50 x 62 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #20, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
2 1/2 x 42 x 126 1/2 in.

Melody of Certain Damage #21, 2022
Broken electric guitar, strings, metal, cable stops, screws, and microphones
4 x 34 1/2 x 80 in.

Stranger, 2017
Single-channel video
Running time: 11:34 min.

Untitled (Babies), 2008
Single-channel video
Running time: 8 min.

All works courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery
ARTIST TALK
with Naama Tsabar
Thursday, June 2; 5–6pm Gallery Viewing
6pm Artist Talk – In museum

Listen in as Tsabar discusses her approach to creating interactive sound sculptures and her process for building site-specific performances with local communities of women and nonbinary performers.

CURATOR TALK
with Patricia Hickson
Thursday, July 21; 1pm – In museum

Explore Tsabar’s immersive installation with curator Patricia Hickson as she illuminates Tsabar’s feminist and political approach to artmaking.

MATRIX PAST AND PRESENT
Naama Tsabar and Laurie Anderson
in Conversation
Thursday, August 4; 6pm – Virtual

Listen in as Naama Tsabar and Laurie Anderson (MATRIX 46 in 1978–79) discuss how they utilize sound as a medium for artmaking, challenge the stereotypes of musical genres through experimentation, and reveal the feminist dialogues at play in their work.

GALLERY TALK
Sound Walk with Adam Lenz
Saturday, August 27; 1pm – In Museum

Sound in an art museum? Join composer, sound artist, and museum educator Adam Lenz for an inside look at artworks in the Wadsworth’s collection that engage with music, sound, and auditory histories, including Naama Tsabar / MATRIX 189.

PERFORMANCES
Melodies of Certain Damage (Opus 6)
Saturday, September 10; 2pm & 4pm – In museum
Sunday, September 11; 2pm & 4pm – In museum

Tsabar’s Melodies of Certain Damage performances are realized in a landscape of smashed guitars, evoking male-dominated rock and roll, yet repositioned as feminist narrative. Join Tsabar and an ensemble of women and nonbinary performers from across the region as they activate Tsabar’s installation through site-specific performance. Duration: 1 hour. Free with required reservation.

Visit thewadsworth.org for Zoom program links and performance reservations.

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

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