

mance art during the 1960s brought traditional representations of the body into crisis. Using their own bodies or those of their audiences as subject and object, artists shattered or dramatically expanded the symbolic representations that adhered to the genres of the nude, portraiture and the formal conventions of figure/ground relations. In the 1990s, Fabienne Audéoud revisits performance to bring about similar disruptions and revelations in another art form – music.

The film *Diva* (1997) features the artist as singer, emulating the gestures of the iconic women who are elevated to the status of goddess through the medium of opera, theatre or cinema, yet who must suffer tragic ends on stage. The quintessence of the diva is that she is at once divine and doomed, though the term also carries connotations of an exaggerated sense of one's own importance (see *Chambers English Dictionary*: 'prima donna – esp. a woman, who is temperamental, over-sensitive and hard to please'). Each of Audéoud's enactments climaxes with expiry; she repeatedly swoons and falls, sliding down to the bottom of the screen into silence and oblivion. Audéoud's work hovers between an enactment of ecstasy and an accumulation of dramatic deaths, tiny, misogynist murders committed by generations of opera librettists.

The idea of practising and performing, whether a role or an instrument, are persistent themes in Audéoud's work. Her video installations are informed by historical research, drawing for example on the surprisingly numerous representations of women at the piano that occur in art history and literature. Safely enclosed within a domestic interior, the female at her instrument provides a vehicle for the composer/author, the male dramatis personae who are her audience, and the spectator/reader outside the fictional frame. Audéoud records herself playing the piano or repeating a theatre exercise she was once asked to practise: 'enter the stage, you simply are the most beautiful woman in the world, say it, be it, perform it' (*I am the most beautiful woman ...*, 1998). Her attempts are spellbinding failures, indeed refusals, to become such a cypher of expression. She 'de-learns' how to play the piano (*De-learning to Play the Piano*, 1999), stammers and distorts efforts to be the encapsulation of beauty.

Through works such as these, Audéoud maps an aural landscape, revealing the complex archaeologies of classical, modernist and popular music, or tracing the symbolic meaning of the musical instrument as deployed in the work of other artists such as Joseph Beuys, John Cage or Rebecca Horn. Significantly, her presence through these videos destabilizes and creatively ruptures the organizing principles of musical notation, the discipline of performance and male assumptions about the effects of, and audience for, music. Iwona Blazwick

in fresh cream, 2000