In February, a calamitous winter storm left Houston, like much of Texas, without power for days. Though the timing was unusual, the city is no stranger to storms: Houston is often ravaged by hurricanes in the summer and fall, much like San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the artist duo Allora & Calzadilla is based. The two cities’ vulnerability to extreme weather is one of several themes in the artists’ exhibition “Specters of Noon” at the Menil Collection (on view through June 20). Walking through the exhibition while the city was still picking up the pieces from the most recent storm made many of its works seem especially resonant.

The show opens with the hum of a transformer damaged during Hurricane Maria in 2017. Partially cast in bronze, Blackout (2020) is a hulking sculpture of a machine gone awry. Hanging behind it is a seventy-foot painting made from iron filings on linen, titled Cadastre (Meter Number 18257262, Consumption Charge 36.9kWh x $0.02564, Rider FCA-Fuel Charge Adjusted 36.9 kWh x $0.053323, RiderPPCA-Purchase Power Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh x $0.016752, Rider CILTA-Municipalities Adjusted 36.9kWh x $0.002376, Rider SUBA subsidies $1.084), 2019. To create the work, the artists placed the canvases on top of an electromagnetic field produced by electrified copper cables in their studio, allowing the current to determine the composition. The title, derived from their electric bill from the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, links the work’s formal structure to the island’s energy infrastructure, shaped by both American colonial control and internal corruption.
Manifest (2020), a two-part sculpture of a Crowley ship’s engine cast in bird and bat guano, speaks to the long history of the island’s subjugation and the mining of its resources. In the nineteenth century, guano was discovered to be nitrogen rich, making it an effective agricultural fertilizer. As a result of this find, the US passed the 1856 Guano Islands Act which allowed for the annexation of over 100 unoccupied islands containing guano deposits in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Local workers mined the guano from caves and loaded it onto ships bound for the US mainland. As the mechanism that powers the movement between mainland and island, the engine also signifies the relationship between occupier and occupied.

Throughout the exhibition, Allora & Calzadilla explore the surreal qualities of colonialism. For instance, Entelechy (2020), is a massive sculpture of a blackened felled tree, cast in coal from the remains of a pine that had been hit by lightning. Inspired by a story recounted by the French Surrealist author Georges Bataille, it alludes to a tree in southern France uprooted by a storm in 1940, leading to the discovery of the Lascaux cave system underneath. Entelechy conjures the magical, even alchemical, properties of coal, a substance made from plant matter that has been transformed by pressure and heat over millions of years—and, like guano, is at the center of exploitative extraction economies.

As curator Michelle White mentions in the catalogue, the artists were informed by Martinican Surrealist author René Ménil’s description of the marvelous as a theoretical space of enchantment defined by the uncanny possibilities of opposites coexisting. The exhibition’s final work, Graft (2019), consists of thousands of yellow artificial flowers scattered across the floor, which are painted to appear as if they are in varying states of decay. Representing blossoms that fall from the roble tree, which is native to the Caribbean, the work evokes a scene from Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s novel One Hundred Years of Solitude in which thousands of yellow flowers fall from the sky, smothering the animals. Such a beautiful sight can also be powerful and violent. Like a storm that smashes through walls or a colonial force that crosses borders, the effects last longer than the initial rupture.

The exhibition’s title alludes to acedia, a medieval concept that the artists encountered in Roger Callois’s 1936 essay “The Noon Complex,” published in the Surrealist journal Minotaure. Callois writes that noontime, when the sun is highest in the sky and shadows contract, is when the demon of acedia emerges, characterized by apathy and sloth. Perhaps as the center of the day, noon is much like the eye of a storm, a time when we are caught between dramatic surges, and all we can do is take stock of the wreckage.
Allora and Calzadilla create a 'haven' from the horrors of the past year at the Menil Collection

New works informed by the Houston museum founders' literature collection delve into the spiritual and social discomforts of our current time

GABRIELLA ANGELETTI
24th March 2021 18:26 GMT
The Puerto Rico-based conceptual artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla hope to provide a “haven” for visitors amid the turmoil of the past year with their current show *Specters of Noon* (until 20 June) at the Menil Collection in Houston. The artists visited the museum repeatedly over the past four years to create the seven site-specific works in the show, which are all inspired by the art and literature collection of the late philanthropists Dominique and John de Menil, who championed the “spiritual power of art”, elevating its effect to something akin to a religious experience.

The show is specifically themed around a 1934 text in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* that the artists discovered in the Menil’s vast literature holdings, in which the French writer Roger Caillois describes an enigmatic Christian concept known as “acedia”, or the idea of a “noonday devil”. This condition was believed to be caused by a demon which psychically disrupts its victim and incites a sense of restlessness that “makes the present intolerable and the future impossible to imagine”, Allora says. “This moment has a special role in literature, mythology and religion; it’s a moment of opposing forces, an ominous moment of crisis and a metaphysical experience.”

The New York-based composer David Lang collaborated with the artists to produce an eight-hour cycle of sounds that aims to capture the essence of this esoteric state that many might find surprisingly familiar now after a period of simultaneous chaos and inaction caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Scores of instrumental, vocal and electrical sounds are emitted from sculptures like *Blackout* (all works date from 2020) in the form of a static hum like that made by a volatile power grid. The bronze work was cast from a bisected transformer that exploded in Puerto Rico in 2017 during Hurricane Maria.
The ominous audio that reverberates throughout the galleries aims to evoke “the mantra-like sounds one might use to focus and concentrate on a subject, or to meditate”, Calzadilla says. “Dominique and John de Menil felt that silence—absolute silence—was a condition necessary to fully engage with an artwork, so there was an interesting crossover in how our approaches arrive at the same point from different places.”

Other complex sculptures like Manifest and Penumbra—which also require a significant amount of reading and meditation to unpack—were also made with “a deep sense of communication with the collection”, Allora says, and through “exploration of the on-site vaults, or the treasure rooms” which contain thousands of objects and historical publications. The Menils “made connections in their collection that are not just chronological but iconographic, formal and conceptual, and connected ideas that otherwise seem very far apart”, Allora adds.

The artists previously collaborated with the Dia Art Foundation, which was founded by Philippa de Menil (Dominique and John’s daughter), to realise their monumental immersive light installation Puerto Rican Light (To Jeanie Blake) (2015) in a limestone cave in Puerto Rico. That piece reactivates a 1965 work by Dan Flavin from Dia’s collection, and explores issues of post-colonialism.

“The ethos of the Dia Foundation—and in turn the ethos of the Menils—was something we had been thinking about years before we ever arrived in Houston, so this exhibition is actually a culmination of a connection we’ve had for over a decade,” Allora says. “The Menils were interested in the same kinds of questions that we have in our practice, and had a similar thirst to explore those questions.”

The artists, who are based in San Juan, are now preparing for a major exhibition at the Serralves Museum in Porto, Portugal, which will be announced in the coming months.
A sprawling tree made of compressed coal. A cargo-boat engine cast from bat guano, a natural fertilizer. A 70-foot-long canvas speckled with iron filings set by a jolt of electricity.

The artist duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, who are based in Puerto Rico, have long used unusual materials to create massive misfit sculptures that address sociopolitical and environmental issues in inventive ways. On Sept. 26, Houston’s Menil Collection will open “Allora & Calzadilla: Specters of Noon,” an exhibition of new works by the pair that tackle everything from time and energy to the legacies of colonialism and surrealism in the Caribbean.

“They take one spot, like Puerto Rico, and swivel out to show us how its concerns and issues are actually universal,” said Michelle White, senior curator at the Menil, which reopened Sept 12.
The couple is best known for hiring Olympic athletes to jog on a treadmill strapped atop an overturned military tank during the 2011 Venice Biennale. That work, “Track and Field,” served as a wry critique of the biennial, in which dozens of nations traditionally compete for bragging rights by mounting shows of their top artists. Ms. Allora and Mr. Calzadilla represented the U.S.

“People stood in front of that tank and were astounded,” Ms. White said.

To prepare for the Menil show, the artists said they began regularly visiting Houston four years ago to try to discover overlooked connections between the city and their adopted island. (Ms. Allora was born in Philadelphia; Mr. Calzadilla is Cuban.) The pair said they were struck by the fact that the museum’s French co-founder, Dominique de Menil, fled war in Europe in 1941 by taking an ocean liner to the Caribbean before joining her husband, John, in Houston.

Her method of escape reminded them of laws today that regulate goods imported by U.S. ships to Puerto Rico, an arrangement the artists say can result in higher product prices. In response, they created “Manifest,” a pair of huge wall reliefs shaped like halves of a cargo engine and cast in seabird and bat excrement, a natural fertilizer. The form has been sprayed with a sealant to keep the space hygienic.

An earlier version of the same engine made using bat guano alone did suffer some crumbling off its frame, Ms. Allora said, but mixing in some seabird waste should help the Menil’s iteration survive. “We had to work some kinks out,” she said.
The artists’ “Penumbra” installation is a digital projection of a Martinique forest where surrealists once hung out.

PHOTO: ALLORA & CALZADILLA/PAUL HESTER

The artists also took a time of day—noon—as their muse after discovering an essay in the museum’s library by French surrealist Roger Caillois that explored the eerie aspects of that moment each day when the sun peaks and shadows shorten.

“There’s something poetic and complex about people and things essentially being dressed in their own shadows,” Mr. Calzadilla said. “Noon also breaks the day into two parts, creating a moment of suspension.”

The artists play with shadows in “Penumbra,” a wall-size digital projection whose leafy animations invoke a forest in Martinique where some surrealists like Wifredo Lam took refuge during World War II—but the passage of time in the video has been synced to Houston’s time zone so that initially it isn’t clear what is creating the shadows in the airy gallery: the projection or the actual sun. Another work, “Specter of Noon,” uses lasers to project a flash of images in another gallery precisely at solar noon.
Energy and the environment also come into play with works like “Cadastre,” which was made when the artists created an electromagnetic field beneath a linen sheet covered in iron filings that took shape after the current was turned on. Then there’s “Entelechy,” a roughly 40-foot sculpture of a Scots pine tree that the artists made from coal. Ms. Allora said they chose coal because the fossil fuel “is essentially compressed sunlight.”

For ‘Cadastre,’ the artists created an electromagnetic field beneath a linen sheet covered with filings.

PHOTO: ALLORA & CALZADILLA/SARAH HOBSON

They modeled the sculpture after a particular pine tree that was felled by lightning so they could pay homage to a similar pine that fell after a storm in Montignac, France, in 1940. The uprooting of the older tree ultimately led to the discovery of the underground cavern now known as Lascaux Cave, with its famous prehistoric drawings.

Ms. White, the curator, said such “incredibly layered” works will likely underscore the kinship Ms. Allora and Mr. Calzadilla have with the surrealists who form the core of the Menil’s permanent collection. “The surrealists wanted you to have an encounter with art and feel changed by it, to feel that awe,” she said.
Studio Visit: Artist Duo Allora and Calzadilla on Steering Installations Remotely and the Benefits of Eschewing Social Media

The artist duo invite us behind the scenes as they prepare for their new show at the Menil Collection in Houston.
Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, the artists behind the duo Allora and Calzadilla, are almost always in research mode. The latest fruits of which have just been unveiled at the Menil Collection in Houston: a new exhibition, “Allora and Calzadilla: Specters of Noon” (through June 20), which presents seven multimedia works developed specifically for the site over the past four years. The show was informed by the couple’s in-depth research into the Menil’s extraordinary Surrealism collection and the role Surrealism played in the Caribbean in the years surrounding World War II.

The duo directed the installation in Houston from their home in San Juan. (They note a kinship between the two locales, which are both port cities that have been deeply affected by climate change.) We checked in with the artists to find out what life has been like in the studio, what they’re currently reading, and how they are trying to stay present “in every sense.”

**What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?**

Our studio is more like a mode than a place. It’s about concentration and focus—about trying to articulate a thought or an idea. In our case, having both of us present, in every sense, is the most indispensable thing. If one of us not in the mood or our head isn’t there, it doesn’t work.

We also can’t live without our library, which is ever-expanding. Even more indispensable perhaps is researching in special collections and libraries—places that you can’t access through the internet. Once, we were looking at the collection of the Museum of Man in Paris which, at the time, was under renovation, so all the objects were off-site. After going up and down rows and rows of stacks filled with death masks of everyone from kings to the guillotined, we arrived at the makeshift office of the museum director. He reached above his desk and opened the door of a special cabinet behind him and took out two small boxes. In the first was the skull of Descartes and in the other, the Venus of Lespugue!

**Is there a picture you can send of your work in progress?**
This photo shows an installation in progress at the Menil Collection in Houston, where we just recently opened a show that took us four years to make. In the background is *Penumbra*, a projected digital animation that recreates the effect of light passing through foliage in the tropical forest of the Absalom Valley in Martinique, where Suzanne and Aimé Césaire took a group of temporarily interred refugees fleeing war-torn France in 1941. Among the group were Claude Lévi-Strauss, Wifredo Lam, André Masson, and Helena Holzer. *Penumbra* is projected in the corner of the gallery at an angle based on a real-time simulation of the sun’s location overhead in Houston. The artificial light flickers across the space and intermingles with dancing patterns of the sun passing through clouds over the museum. Through this interaction, two disparate places converge and create a paradox of light.
In the foreground is *Entelechy*, a monumental coal sculpture cast from a pine tree felled by lightning. It was modeled after the uprooted tree that fell in Montignac, France, in 1940, which revealed to a group of teenagers the now famous Lascaux cave. There is a vocal performance that takes place on the sculpture following a musical score by our collaborator David Lang. The composition references the only image of a human figure found in the cave, a hybrid of a bird and a man.

**What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?**

We look forward to getting the model of the Serralves Museum in Porto where we are planning a show. It is a really exceptional space designed by Álvaro Siza that we got the chance to visit in person last fall. We are excited to start playing with the model and our work to see what will be revealed in this process.

**What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?**

We live in a place where the wind coming off the sea has a constant and unmistakable presence. It is always changing in a never-ending drama that at times is gentle and at others is brisk and almost violent. This sound sets the mood throughout the day. Our thought and concentration are somehow shaped by it.

**What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?**

A sense of knowing, wonder, beauty, mastery, insight, play, honesty. Formulas, habits, arrogance, pretension, insincerity.
Installation view of Allora & Calzadilla’s *Blackout* (2020); and *Cadastre (Meter Number 18257262, Consumption Charge 36.9kWh x $0.02564, Rider FCA-Fuel Charge Adjusted 36.9 kWh x $0.053323, Rider PPCA-Purchase Power Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh x $0.016752, Rider CILTA-Municipalities Adjusted 36.9kWh x $0.002376, Rider SUBA subsidies $1.084)* (2019). Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. © Allora & Calzadilla. Photo: Paul Hester

**What snack food could your studio not function without?**

Pastelillos de Chapin and coffee.

**Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?**

We don’t follow social media. However, we have recently been following the tracks of the exiled Surrealists and other artists and intellectuals through the Caribbean in the 1940s. In the Caribbean, the Surrealist call for the emancipation of the tormented existentialist soul turned into a concrete project of decolonization and resistance to political and cultural suppression. Today’s identity debates are deeply enriched by revisiting these encounters.
When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get unstuck?

We’ve been going out a lot on the water with our daughter, who sails a small Opti. We accompany her in sea kayaks. Of course, she can go a lot faster than us, so we have to really paddle hard to keep up. When you are out in the ocean, you really need to concentrate on what you are doing and be totally present with your surroundings. That focus and immersion helps relax your mind.

What is the last exhibition you saw (virtual or otherwise) that made an impression on you?

Going to the Aimé Césaire’s house (now a museum) in Martinique and getting a feeling for how he worked. He liked to have the radio on with local news playing while reading the French international newspapers. His tie collection was proudly displayed upon a humble wooden coat hanger hooked on to the window latch. An ample and breezy porch wrapped around the entire house, making a pleasant space to sit and converse, very typical of vernacular Caribbean architecture.

The home of Aimé Césaire in Fort-De-France. Photo by Franck Fife/AFP via Getty Images.
Down the road at the Volcano Museum in Saint-Pierre there are artefacts on display from the aftermath of the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902, which destroyed the entire town: a watch with the hands frozen, a massive contorted bell, a flattened lightbulb, scissors agglomerated together in single mass of metal.

Between the two locations is a large Ceiba tree that also was completely burned by the volcano but that 50 years later re-emerged alive and continues to grow to this day. Our friend, art historian Molly Nesbit, later discovered that this tree was of great importance to Césaire. She noted that for him, it “exemplified nature’s ability to absorb catastrophe.”

If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?

ROME
Allora & Calzadilla
MAXXI - MUSEO NAZIONALE DELLE ARTI DEL XXI SECOLO
Via Guido Reni 4A
February 16 - May 30

In recent years, Allora & Calzadilla have grown fond of deploying both the surreal and the kitsch, administering sociopolitical commentary to the public imagination in a direct and biting manner. At the Fifty-Fourth Venice Biennale, the duo represented the United States with a blatant j’accuse of both militarism and the myth of bodily perfection—moststartlingly with Track and Field, 2011, a living monument in the Giardini section composed of an overturned tank conquered by an American Olympic athlete on a treadmill.
Here, the expressive dynamic of the artists, who live in Puerto Rico, is subtler but no less incisive. The linchpin of the exhibition is the sonic sculpture *Blackout*, 2017, made with the remains of an electromagnetic power transformer, owned by the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, that exploded in 2016, causing a disastrous power outage. It is a sort of mechanical cadaver whose decomposition reflects the scandalous relationship between the Caribbean island’s use of energy and economy, which are subject to neocolonialist policies of the United States. This sculpture works as a diapason around David Lang’s droning vocal work *mains hum*, 2017, which is performed during the weekend. Sound is also central in Allora & Calzadilla’s video production; *The Night We Became People Again*, 2017, which uses luminosity contrasts to combine ancestral visions with postapocalyptic shots of a derelict petrochemical factory, is scored with nervous, primordial whirs.

Considering the urgency of the artists’ themes in the wake of Hurricane Maria, these works at times risk a certain aloofness. Yet as a whole, the show—which also includes more ornamental works such as a collage of broken solar cells (*Solar Catastrophe*, 2016) and palmy silk screens (*Contract*, 2014–16)—provides a trenchant interpretation of the artists’ investigation of a nature-capital binomial.

*Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.*

— *Adriana Rispoli*
Allora & Calzadilla
FUNDACIÓ ANTONI TAPIES, Barcelona
February 8—May 20, 2018

A piercing whistle punctuates the blaring of a trumpet. But in the columned central space of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, the only visible instrument is a grand piano. For three days a week throughout the course of the exhibition, the instrument is played—and, one could say, worn—by a pianist who stands in a hole cut into its center. Leaning over the rim of the piano to strike the keys, the performer energetically interprets the fourth movement of Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 (1824), while slowly pushing the wheeled instrument around the space. The building has become a musical box, the exhibition orchestrated so that one movement flows into the other, spilling through the gallery’s spaces to create a dissonant soundscape.

The piano of Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on Ode to Joy for a Prepared Piano (2008) could be thought of as the lead performer of Puerto Rico-based duo Allora & Calzadilla’s show. Popularly known as “Ode to Joy,” Beethoven’s piece has often been interpreted as a defense or celebration of humanitarian values, and in 1985 the European Union adopted it as its official anthem. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek has noted, the tune’s “universal adaptability” has made it vulnerable to use by disparate ideologies. (1) In Nazi Germany, “Ode to Joy” was used to celebrate grand, nationalistic public occasions such as Adolf Hitler’s birthday in 1942. While during the Cultural Revolution in China it was considered an example of the bourgeois culture of the West. This malleability should prompt us to be skeptical of the anthem’s political significance, especially in light of the questionable values the EU has demonstrated during the refugee crisis alone.

Allora & Calzadilla have long explored the cultural and political dimensions of acoustics. Their first solo exhibition in Spain duly focuses on sound and its connections to geopolitics, through various human and non-human encounters. Wake Up (2007) is a sound and light installation comprising a freestanding white wall, in which lights flash and military trumpets bugle intermittently into the central space. The whistle-blowing sounds, meanwhile, emanate from the upper floor, leading the viewer to the gargantuan form of a loathing hippotamus made from dried mud. In Hope Hippo, which premiered at the 2005 Venice Biennale, a performer sits atop the beast while reading the day’s newspaper, blowing a whistle whenever they read about something they consider an injustice.

At the opposite end of the sonic spectrum is Apotomé (2013), a 23-minute video featuring Tim Storms, a vocalist who holds the world record for the lowest note produced by a human voice. Storms sings an extraordinarily low version of a melody originally performed for two Sri Lankan elephants brought from Holland to Paris in 1798 as spoils of war. The shaman-like singer navigates the storage of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, where the bones of the elephants are stored, performing his guttural lament.
Despite the focus on Puerto Rico in the texts that accompany the exhibition, only two works directly engage with the artists’ home. The video *Sweat Glands, Sweet Lands* (2006), displayed on a monitor near the terrace, shows a pig being roasted over an open fire to an infectious reggaeton soundtrack. *Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)* (2015–17)—a project that displayed the titular 1965 neon sculpture by Dan Flavin, which consists of red, pink, and yellow tubes intended to evoke Puerto Rican sunsets, to a remote limestone cave in a forest near San Juan—offers a deft art-historical comment on postcolonial migration and displacement in the US territory. But *The Night We Became People Again* (2017), a video that documents the dark, dank cave in which *Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)* was displayed, pairing footage of natural light shafts and flickering bats with a brooding drone-music soundtrack, will only be screened in Barcelona during a seminar about the legacy of the place in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes.

At the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, *Lifespan* (2014) is at once the most subtle and the most potent work, offering a nuanced comment on the destructive natural forces that have devastated Puerto Rico. A 4.5-billion-year-old rock fragment appears to float mid-air, hung from an invisible thread from the ceiling. Each Thursday evening, three musicians gather around it for around fifteen minutes, their breaths, puffs, whispers, and whispers swaying the Hadean rock slowly back and forth. By effecting a micro-scale weathering process, in real time, with their own humid winds, the performers imbue the Anthropocene epoch with the intimacy of human consciousness—the pre-Socrates described the soul as pneuma, or breath.

The sparse display of the show, which places emphasis on durational pieces, is daring. As with the grand piano in *Stop, Repair, Prepare*, performative elements may not be “on” during a casual visit. Originally produced for Documenta 13, the video *Raptor’s Rapture* (2012)—in which the musician Bernadette Käfer plays a 35,000-year-old flute carved from a griffin vulture’s wing bone, producing harsh, wheezing whistles as she explores the flute's tonal qualities—will be shown for a week at the city’s Palau de la Música concert hall. Despite the slow curatorial mood, which feels closer to Dia Art Foundation In its heyday in New York’s Chelsea, this exhibition-as-program is a poignant symphonic experience, in which performers and instruments, both ancient and modern, breathe life into the building.


Mariana Cárcez Luna co-directs the Barcelona-based curatorial office *Latitudes.*


9 Allora & Calzadilla, Man Screaming is Not a Dancing Bear, 2008. Super 16mm film, colour, sound. 11:15 minutes. Image courtesy Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21).


An exhibition that opens with the dramatic situation of Puerto Rico and moves on to reflect the possibilities of artistic form within the current social-political situation of the globalized world.

An exploded electrical transformer that becomes a sculpture, a petrol pump sculpted in fossil calcareous stone, a motorcycle with a trumpet welded to the exhaust, an overturned table that becomes a motorboat, great pictures composed of fragments of photovoltaic panels and a chorus singing a composition featuring the words of Benjamin Franklin “…how many pretty systems do we build, which we soon find ourselves oblig’d to destroy! If there is no other Use discover’d of
Electricity, this, however, is something considerable, that it may help to make a vain Man humble.”

The provocative works of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, one of the most thoughtful and innovative artists on the contemporary international artistic scene, are featured in the BLACKOUT exhibition, curated by Hou Hanru and Anne Palopoli and hosted at MAXXI from 16th February to 30th May 2018.

For this exhibition, the artists have responded to the unique architectural characteristics of Gallery 5, creating a close relationship between the exhibition layout, the works and the museum.

The exhibited works include Petrified Petrol Pump (2010), an abandoned petrol pump that seems to have turned into stone. This piece alludes to the cyclical exploitation and destruction that characterises Man’s relationship with nature; carved from limestone containing fossils, it carries with it evidence of the geological eras of the Earth and those organisms that contributed to the creation of fossil fuel. Today’s technologies become relics, the object of future archaeology, and what in some way has been an agent of global climatic change has contributed to its own end, being reabsorbed by nature.

Work from the Solar Catastrophe series (2016), in which the artists use broken fragments of polycrystalline silicon solar cells arranged within a geometric grid to create a gestalt pattern, is also featured in this exhibition. The breaks, pauses and gaps created within the figure/ground composition trace a boundary between nothingness and signification alluding to the history of Modernist art, and the energy
crises of the contemporary world. The artists consider the photovoltaic panel as a complicated symbol of evolving energy technologies. While photovoltaic’s do not rely on carbon-based fossil fuels- a known source of the dangerous directions of climate change- they are nonetheless implicated in other processes of resource extraction and exploitation that raise other questions of sustainability. In Solar Catastrophe, the photovoltaic panel is deconstructed on a canvas, and becomes a metaphorical element, alluding to the detritus that progress leaves behind.

Working through the complexities of alternative sources of energy, by combining the economic, ideological and aesthetic dimension, is paramount for the artists: indeed, they have included a solar-powered system that supplies power to the exhibited works.
The exhibition layout also includes *Blackout* (2017), which lends its title to the show. Created with one of the burnt out electrical transformers that caused an island wide blackout in Puerto Rico in September 2016, the sculpture consists of electrically charged copper, ceramic fragments and transformer coils. The work is completed by the *mains hum* vocal work (2017), created by American composer David Lang (in his third collaboration with the artistic duo) and inspired by a quote from Benjamin Franklin on electrical energy. Lang’s composition, conceived in collaboration with the artists as a fundamental part of the sculpture, is performed by the Rome-based vocal ensemble VoxNova Italia, (in their second collaboration with the artists- the first being the 2015 Venice Biennial exhibition *All the World’s Futures* with the work ‘In the Midst of Things’).
The exhibition also includes a number of videos such as *The Night We Became People Again* (2017), set in the Guayanilla-Peñuelas area on the South-West coast of Puerto Rico, where an ancient cave formation, Cueva Vientos, is found and which is also the site of their long-term commission with Dia Art Foundation, “Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)”. The film blurs the boundaries between the prehistoric narrative of a Taino origin myth, an abandoned petro-chemical plant, a sugar cane plantation, and the short story by Puerto Rican novelist and renowned Marxist José Luis González “*La noche que volvimos a ser gente*”. An off-camera voice emulates the sounds of alternating-current by using it as compositional direction. Thus, the voice becomes a singular musical agent that sutures together a disjunctive flow of narratives. The text the voice sings, no longer tethered to semantic meaning, is now transformed into an affective sonorous collage.

A video review accompanies the exhibition, lending it a historical dimension, with works that testify to the artists’ enduring commitment to the analysis of key concepts of contemporaneity such national identity, democracy, power, freedom, participation and social change.
The videos shot in Puerto Rico, China, Japan, Iran, the USA, Turkey, Italy and France allow us to better understand the centrality of sound in their work: voices, words, noises and music render the violence in political, economic and social relations explicit. Allora & Calzadilla underline the worldwide nature of the circulation of sounds and create a system of resonance. In their works, the artists assemble a constellation of meanings and connections, hybrid situations capable of creating images that embody the complexity of reality.
Through a critical and visionary approach, which overcomes the boundaries between the diverse categories of artistic, social and philosophical thought, they reread the present to offer ever-new points of view.

*BLACKOUT* confirms Allora & Calzadilla’s vocation for reflection on events and circumstances associated with historical-political reality; in this exhibition, the issue that almost inevitably comes to the fore is that of energy in relation to capitalism, power and the specific political situation of Puerto Rico, where the artists live and work. The exhibition sheds light on the forces playing a role in the island’s geopolitics, an “unincorporated territory” of the United States, currently burdened by uncontrolled public debt and a serious energy crisis, which have revealed the legacy of US colonialism and its complicity with global financial capitalism.

at MAXXI, Rome
until 30 May 2018
LISSON GALLERY
The New York Times
24 October 2017

In Puerto Rico, Creating Art From Hardship

MIAMI — For the contemporary sculptors, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, the persistent economic troubles in Puerto Rico were personal, something they had to address.

They were living with them, agonizing over them every day. Mr. Calzadilla’s father’s construction business had collapsed as government contracts dwindled. He was paying taxes on land he could not use. His heavy trucks and Caterpillar tractors were rusting, losing value.

They began to see the big, worn machines as embodying the pain and sense of loss that they were feeling for his father, and they began seeing them as the foundation for their next sculpture. It will make its debut at the new home of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami when it opens on Dec. 1 in the Miami Design District — just weeks after Puerto Rico was devastated by recent hurricanes.

Titled “Unspecified Promise,” it will be ready just in time to catch the updraft of excitement and the surge of art aficionados arriving on Dec. 7 for the start of the 15th rendition of Art Basel Miami Beach, the dazzling global fair of modern and contemporary art.

To check out the site for their piece, they flew to Miami a little more than a year ago. They found themselves in a vibrant, throbbing construction site in one of Miami’s most glamorous concentrations of commerce and wealth. Crews in yellow hard hats were pouring concrete and hefting bundles of reinforcing steel for the new building.
Hermes, Louis Vuitton and Christian Louboutin shared streets in the design district with airy showrooms of Italian and French designer furniture, kitchen cabinets and closets and a shop featuring crystal chandeliers.

It was everything that Puerto Rico was not. And in the clash, the themes for their new work rushed together: prosperity and poverty, liberty and limitations, so many promises; United States policies toward Puerto Rico and Cuba, where Mr. Calzadilla and his father had been born, opportunity, dreams and disappointment. Promise. It all added up, they said, to “Unspecified Promise.”

“The site echoed very clearly the story of construction, development and displacement that my father had been telling us about,” Mr. Calzadilla, 46, said by phone from Puerto Rico.

Ms. Allora, 43, who was born in Philadelphia, picked up Mr. Calzadilla’s drift and added the idea of shifting economic currents. “They mirror each other,” she said, “one place is going up and another is going down.”

“Allora & Calzadilla, via Lisson Gallery
Their work is going to be massive. It will have two main elements: one of the elder Calzadilla’s faded and scratched, mustard-color Caterpillar tractors and a 15-foot-high, 55-ton boulder of American black granite. The big machine, called a backhoe or digger, has wide, knobby tires almost as tall as a man, and steel scoops front and rear for digging holes and shoving earth around. They are sawing the machine and the boulder in half, polishing the sheared face of the boulder to a mirror sheen, then attaching the machine to the stone.

Much of Ms. Allora and Mr. Calzadilla’s work has combined sculpture with performance art. In “Unspecified Promise,” the museum audience members become the performers, changing the perspective and shape of reflections in the mirrorlike granite as they move around the sculpture. The mirror, the artists say, gives the impression that the whole machine is there. “So many promises are illusions, and we’re trying to make that tangible,” Ms. Allora said. Whether people see what Ms. Allora and Mr. Calzadilla see is not their goal. “It will depend on your perspective, your experience, your role,” she said. “Your eyes.”

Ms. Allora and Ms. Calzadilla have exhibited their work at museums around the world. Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, Oslo and Sydney, Australia, are some examples. As they were working on “Unspecified Promise,” they flew to London for a solo exhibition of five of their latest works at the Lisson Gallery.

Their work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Tate Modern in London. In 2011, they were the United States’ sole representatives at the Venice Biennale, an important international festival of contemporary art.
“They’re among the most thoughtful and progressive and innovative artists working in contemporary art today,” said Kathy Halbreich, an associate director and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In early November, Ms. Halbreich is moving to a new job as the executive director of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in Manhattan.

The new museum building in Miami, designed by Aranguren + Gallegos Architects in Madrid, is a piece of art in itself, whitewashed, three stories high with floor-to-ceiling hurricane-proof windows overlooking a garden of sculptures, palms and native Florida trees and shrubs.

It is being paid for by Irma and Norman Braman, the billionaire Miami car dealer and former owner of the Philadelphia Eagles. Craig Robins, who developed the Miami Design District, and his partners, L Real Estate, donated 12,500 square feet of land for the museum.

Ms. Allora and Mr. Calzadilla met in Florence, Italy, in a study abroad program in art in 1995. They’ve been together since. Ms. Allora, the daughter of a New Jersey surgeon, had been preparing for a career in medicine or law at the University of Richmond. Mr. Calzadilla, who had grown up in Puerto Rico, was a student at Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño de Puerto Rico in San Juan. After Florence, Ms. Allora switched her major to art history. They eventually earned advanced degrees, she at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he at Bard College in New York State.

They have a nearly 8-year-old daughter, Isabella. “He keeps asking me to marry him,” Ms. Allora said, “and I keep saying ‘no;’ three times, I think. I don’t want to jinx anything. There was a point. Then we just got too busy.”

Most artists work solo. And that may not be hard to understand. “We argue all the time,” Ms. Allora said. “We constantly have to figure out how to seduce the other person, to make your idea appeal to the other person. You have to find a place where the other person can feel comfortable in the common outcome. It’s like two people having to wear the same shirt.”
DEEP IN A CAVE In Puerto Rico, a light burns: The evanescent glow is that of Dan Flavin’s fluorescent sculpture Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake) 2, 1965, placed there by the artists Allora & Calzadilla in a startling transposition of time, material, and energy. Art historian Irene V. Small makes the descent to explore this luminous geopolitical network.

A TAINO MYTH associates the origins of earthly existence with the crepuscular return of distant ancestors to the fabled Cave of the Jaguars. The sun set on those who did not come back before dawn, transforming them into stones, birds, trees. Those remaining in the cave eventually left, relinquishing their nocturnal affiliations to bats and opalescent spirits of the dead. The condition of life as we know it, in other words, is one of belatedness, and as a consequence, we live in a diaspora formed in blinding light. In geologic time, of course, humans are also belated—staggeringly so—inhabiting Earth for only a few hundred thousand of its approximately 4.6 billion years. The limestone caves of El Convento in the southern region of Puerto Rico are some thirty-four million years old, remnants of coral reefs of the Mesozoic era. Contemporary existence attempts to eradicate the profound sadness of this belatedness through a continual, exhausting appeal to the here and now. But art provides a potent haunting, both in its synecdochic character and in the figure of its own scandalous ephemeralism.

To wit, Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos), 2015, by San Juan-based duo Allora & Calzadilla (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla), is both a speaker and an homage. The work consists of a site-specific installation of Dan Flavin’s 1965 sculpture Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake) 2 deep within a cave, Cueva Vientos, which forms part of the El Convento system. Flavin’s work is, in turn, illuminated by means of solar-powered batteries renewed by the blazing sun of the Puerto Rican day. The colored fluorescent-light tubes Flavin used for his works were only patented in 1963, with several other prototypes being produced in the 1960s. Once emanating novelty and technological standardization, they are now industrial artifacts, their lives as works of art scrapulously extended by means of stockpiled replacements, custom-fabricated replicas, humidity-controlled storage chambers. To power an original Flavin by means of the sun is to nest this historical moment within the ever more prevailing, but sublime finitude of the Anthropocene. It is also to comprehend the configuration of these two temporalities as a question about human action as much as a critique thereof.

Allora & Calzadilla have orchestrated versions of Puerto Rican Light before, first at the Americas Society in New York (where it was commissioned by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy) and then at Tate Modern, both in 2003. In each case, they used a smaller iteration of Flavin’s work, Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake), 1965 (which appeared on the December 1966 cover of Artforum), and constructed a temporally discontinuous nonsite suspended between the space of the exhibition and the stored battery power of solar panels, previously charged off-site in Puerto Rico. Cueva Vientos does the circuit, electrifying Flavin’s larger, second version of the work with the literal power of its metaphoric source on-site. But what is a source, what is a site? Flavin’s title was inspired by a remark by Jeanie Blake, a gallery assistant who noted that the sculpture reminded her of “Puerto Rican lights.” Ostensibly, Blake was referring to New York’s Puerto Rican Day Parade, but the sculpture’s palette of red, pink, and yellow intimates a more amorphous string of associations, ranging from tropical sunsets to piña coladas (invented the same year colored fluorescents appeared, 1963). The parade was itself something of a novelty, a by-product of the dramatic surge in Puerto Rican immigration to New York City in the 1950s and ‘60s, spurred by the manufacturing and export initiative Operation Bootstrap. The electrical current that would normally activate the gaseous contents of a fluorescent tube, meanwhile, represents an even more diffuse network, a single point in a vast infrastructure of governmental and corporate relations. The conceptual audacity of Flavin’s light works lies in no small part in
gathering this tectonic web and transforming it into an evanescent envelope of space—a glow, heat, and hum—that, quite unlike the invisible network that looms beyond it, can be experienced at bodily scale.

Allora & Cala\ndilla's corresponding gambit is to similarly appropriate an object and a network, but to conceive of the resulting installation in distinct materialist and phenomenological terms. In Cueva Vientos, solar energy decouples the work from the grid and provides a renewable form of autonomy (during an island-wide power outage last September, Puerto Rican light for Jaune Blasé's radiated on). But it also renews the work to a wider set of dependencies concerning the geopolitics of energy, capital, ecology, and human life.

Importantly, Puerto Rican Light (Jeanne Blasé) is a commission of the Dia Art Foundation, whose commitments to Minimalist artists such as Flavin, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd run deep. Significantly, too, the foundation owns the Flavin work in question, and has carefully managed visitorship, in collaboration with Pata Narañaleza, the nonprofit unit of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, much in the way it maintains off-site works such as Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, 1970, and Walter De Maria's Lightning Field, 1977. In Beacon and New York City, the shells of factories and warehouses provide apt backdrops for much Minimalist and post-Minimalist work, itself created just as the industries these architectures once housed were becoming obsolete. For Allora & Cala\ndilla, the correlation between art and industrialization becomes explicit—albeit through a process of defamiliarization and displacement. En route from San Juan to Cueva Vientos, one passes abandoned sugar-processing plants and leaking petrochemical complexes, each evidence of the economic asymmetry that continues to structure Puerto Rico's relation to the mainland. Obsolescence emerges as a historical rather than aesthetic frame, one that admits the deep entanglement of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization. Once we enter the El Convento cave system, our temporal frame dilates, and we trace the reverse route of the ancient Taino, ascending through a forest of primordial trees to caves populated by bats and box contractors, seeking shade and sun in turn.

The novelty of Allora & Cala\ndilla's intervention as a kind of artistic killing of the father is a criticism impossible to maintain upon encountering the work in situ. For to arrive at Puerto Rican light (Jeanne Blasé) is as the apex of this journey is nothing short of a revelation. Contrary to every possible expectation or explication, the luminous ribbons of light—in actuality emanating from a source that is only eight feet tall—hold the presence of the cave's soaring 250-foot height with a profound and generous reciprocity. And if the cave's darkness subtly diminishes the spatial diffusion of light we have come to expect from a gallery installation, this environmental interplay returns in the fluorescent lights' ineluctable interaction with the faint, fluctuating glow of sunlight that penetrates the cave by means of a naturally occurring orifice. This is indebtedness as an aesthetic and phenomenological relation. It is also a means to place ourselves at odds with our own time.

Flavin once said that the temporalities of act was inevitable, and imagined a scenario in which his work would be declared void upon his death. "All posthumous interpretations are lies," he knew. So I would rather see it all disappear into the wind," he mused. "Take it all away." Cueva Vientos, Cave of the Winds. As Marcel Mauss taught us, the gift is another form of debt. 2

"Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)," curated by Terrell Ransom and Mark Cianfrone, is on view through September 23 at Cueva Vientos, Guayama, Puerto Rico.

Mark V. Smith is the author of Taxi Driver: Pounding the Pavement. He is currently an assistant professor of art and archaeology and the Harold W. Manley II Presidential Preceptor at Princeton University. Visit our premiere exhibition on the work of Allora & Cala\ndilla: "Some Remarks" by Dana Vicente (December 1994).
WAYS OF WORKING

Moral Lights

Appropriation – without a capital ‘a’ – of images by artists has been common practice throughout art history. Artists whose images are appropriated can and do use national and international copyright laws to take legal action against unlawful appropriators, but sometimes a whole artwork – the material object, rather than images embodied in it – is appropriated into another artist’s work. Do artists have any legal rights over physical use by others of artworks they no longer own?

A relevant case involves Jake & Dinos Chapman, who acquired a suite of 80 Goya etchings printed in 1937 directly from the artist’s original plates: _Disasters of War, 1810-20_. The Chapmans systematically went through all the prints and changed the victims’ heads to images of clowns and puppies, producing a body of work that they exhibited as their own: _Insult to Injury_, 2003. As intended, this new work generated much media attention and fierce debate for and against the use of Goya’s originals. Jake had red paint thrown over him while delivering a gallery talk and numerous critics viewed the artists’ working process as an act of vandalism defacing artistic treasures. In his book on Goya, art critic Robert Hughes asserted that Goya ‘will obviously survive these twerps, whose names will be forgotten a few years from now’.

Conversely, the artists themselves, and supporters of their work, argued that Goya’s etchings were not vandalised because the artists offered a new interpretation of the prints.

None of the media coverage and debate over the Chapman brothers’ appropriation of Goya’s work embraced the legal issues involved and arising. This is understandable because Goya died almost two centuries ago, at a time when the legal rights of artists and their descendants were largely undeveloped and the legal right of property owners to do as they wish with their possessions was paramount. However, within a century of Goya’s death the Industrial Revolution had spawned widespread mass production techniques and communications technologies, which caused governments in developed countries to promulgate international treaties giving legal rights to creative artists to protect their original works against exploitation.

In 1886 the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works gave creative artists international protection against unauthorised economic exploitation of their works. In 1928 the Convention was revised to add
further protection against non-economic abuses of works, introducing moral rights. Nearly all countries have now enacted moral rights laws which automatically give their artists at least two basic protections: the legal right to claim authorship of a work; and the right to object to any mutilation, deformation or other modification of, or other derogatory action in relation to, the work that would be prejudicial to the author's honour or reputation. Many countries have extended the two basic moral rights to include the right of withdrawal, whereby an author can prevent further reproduction, distribution or representation, in return for paying compensation to a distributor of the work who suffers resulting economic damage.

Berne requires that moral rights endure for at least the same length as copyright (lifetime of the artist plus 50 years after death, enforceable by their descendants). Some countries, such as the UK, extend the period of moral rights to 70 years after death. The US was reluctant to introduce moral rights into federal law until 1990, and did so via a curiously narrow statute (the Visual Artists Rights Act) that effectively applies to works made after 1991 and only lasts for the artist's lifetime. Many other countries have enacted perpetual moral rights (often enforceable by the state if the artist's descendants die out).

Within this contemporary national and international legal framework, let us now consider a very recent case concerning a Dan Flavin work: Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake), 1965, which comprises one red and one yellow vertical fluorescent light tube, each about 8ft high, flanking a pink tube about 4½ high. The work was named after a gallerist who told Flavin that the work's colours reminded her of Puerto Rican lights. Flavin intended to make an edition of five, but executed only three before his death in 1996. One version of the work was acquired by the New York-based Dia Art Foundation.

Jointly with the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, the Dia Art Foundation subsequently commissioned a new site-specific work from the collaborative Puerto Rican-based artists Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla. The new work is sited in a remote tropical cave, a roost for thousands of bats which are preyed upon by boa constrictors and cats. The Foundation made Flavin's work available to the artists from its collection, and the duo installed it high up in the cave in a hermetically sealed glass case to protect it from humidity and wild fauna. The light tubes are powered by solar panels installed at the cave’s mouth. The new work, Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos), opened on 23 September 2015 and can be accessed via guided tours for small groups until September 2017 (www.puertoricanlight.org).

Controversy now surrounds this work, which has been criticised for using Flavin's original artwork inappropriately. In particular, strong objections have been voiced by the artist’s son, Stephen, on behalf of his father’s artistic estate. The principal objections are that a work of art by one artist should not be taken from an institution’s collection and used to satisfy an egotistical gesture by another artist, and that a work of art should not be placed in a context that is completely alien to the original artist’s concept, with complete disregard for that concept. This particular placement requires an enclosure to prevent bat excrement from accumulating and this alters the physical shape of the original work; it is claimed that this is abuse of the actual work of art, and therefore the work itself becomes a component of its own abuse. Further, the work should not be claimed to be the art of another artist, with a new title to reinforce this claim, and institutions charged with the support and care of works of art should not allow and facilitate such abuse by providing an actual work of art from their collection as a plaything for another artist and by providing space in which this abuse may take place. Finally, this abuse should not be rationalised with high-minded arguments in its favour, under the ambiguous concept of ‘appropriation’. Flavin’s estate also asserts that the new installation bears no relation to the work of Dan Flavin: it ignores concepts of composition and architectural context, which were key components of his fluorescent light installations, and the estate is troubled that Allora & Calzadilla felt comfortable laying claim to this installation as part of their own art and not as simply a curatorial effort.

Thus the estate raises substantial artistic, ethical and legacy issues and objections, which illustrate compelling reasons for the introduction of artists' moral rights legislation throughout most of the world for the artist’s life and beyond. Of course, in the US an artist’s moral right to object to derogatory treatment of their artwork that is prejudicial to their honour or reputation) ends at death and does not apply to US artists’ works made before 1991 – this is no doubt why Flavin’s estate could not take legal action in this case.

HENRY LEYDATE is an art lawyer and adviser to www.artquest.org.uk.
Flavin sculpture lights up bat cave cathedral

But artist’s estate finds installation of Minimalist masterpiece by Allora & Calzadilla “objectionable”

INSTALLATION

Puerto Rico. Deep in the heart of the Puerto Rican jungle lies a monumental cave where thousands of bats congregate, and boa constrictors and cats gather to feed on them. Now this primeval space has also become the improbable setting for a Modernist masterpiece: a red, yellow and pink fluorescent light sculpture made by Dan Flavin in 1965, which has been placed in the cave’s soaring chamber by the artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla.

Powered by sunlight streaming through openings in the top of the cave, the work is hermetically sealed in a glass case, which is invisible to the human eye, to protect it from humidity and flying bats. “We liked the idea of putting this 20th-century art object into an environment that was formed over millions of years and then connecting it with a cosmic entity, which is the sun,” Allora says. The juxtaposition is spectacular: Minimalist art has never looked this good.

The artists were first asked to make a new work by the Dia Art Foundation in New York seven years ago. They decided to bring a Flavin sculpture from the organisation’s collection, entitled Puerto Rican Light (to Jeannie Blake) (1965), to Puerto Rico, where they live.

The original intention was to keep the Flavin work on the island in perpetuity but the project has been curtailed to two years following a dispute with the Flavin Estate, which finds the installation “objectionable”, says Steven Flavin, the artist’s son and executor of the estate.

“We admire Flavin’s work,” Calzadilla says. “This is a magnificent setting, like a cathedral. We have done this with the utmost respect.”

Cristina Ruiz

• Allora & Calzadilla, Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos) is on display until 23 September 2017. Only six people a day can visit the installation and advance booking is required. Visit the Dia Art Foundation website at www.diaart.org for more information.

• For comment from the Flavin Estate, see p59
The limestone cave in Guayanilla–Peñuelas, Puerto Rico, which houses Allora & Calzadilla's *Puerto Rican Light* (Cueva Vientos), 2015.

Artists duo Allora & Calzadilla’s latest project, *Puerto Rican Light* (Cueva Vientos), 2015, is the Dia Art Foundation’s first commission outside the continental United States since 1982. Here, the artists speak about the work, which incorporates one of Dan Flavin’s multicolored light sculptures and sets it in a prehistoric limestone cave located between the municipalities of Guayanilla and Peñuelas in Puerto Rico. The piece will be on view starting September 23, 2015.

**THIS PROJECT BEGAN** years ago when we first encountered Dan Flavin’s *Puerto Rican Light (to Joanie Blake)* from 1965 in an art history book. We became interested in the conditions and possibilities of Flavin’s work: how the light fixtures need to be plugged into the wall of the space where they are on display, and how by doing so, they involve a larger network of power and electricity—an infrastructural grid that supports the place where the work is shown. For us, these conditions immediately opened up questions about the autonomy of the work versus its dependency on other material factors.
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In order to get to *Puerto Rican Light* (Cueva Vientos), one has to drive along the southwest coast of the island and pass a large petrochemical complex that has been abandoned since the 1970s. It now stands as a modern ruin—polluting and haunting the landscape. Cueva Vientos, a few miles down the road, is part of a natural protected area conserving multiple species of endemic flora and fauna. The mouth of the cave where we installed Flavin's work is nearly two hundred feet tall, and the domed vault where the work is installed is about 250 feet at its highest point. The eight-foot-tall vertical shafts of fluorescent light, however, are not diminished by the grandeur of the space; rather, they charge the immense volume with their magnificent glow. At the top of the dome are two openings. At noon, the sunlight comes through them and hits the ground close to the Flavin sculpture, slowly moving like a sundial around the floor and the walls in a play of light.

Sunlight—the primary material of our work, which we collect through solar panels outside the cave and use to power the Flavin sculpture—dances around the glowing fluorescent lamps. Then, around 3:00 PM, the sun seeps in from the entrance of the cave. Shadows come in long over the floor. Variations of natural light, in contrast with the fluorescent lamps, alternately reveal different aspects of the cave's stalactites, the walls, and its bats—making the space and its inhabitants comprehensible.

We're using the original work by Flavin and showing it in a new context, as opposed to making a copy or replica of it. This is a historic object that we're consciously presenting and protecting in a new context. We're not appropriating it. Rather, in effect, we're aligning the histories of the work and the site. During the period when the Flavin piece was made, Puerto Rico was being heavily industrialized as a result of a US government economic development initiative called Operation Bootstrap. Apart from bringing US corporations to Puerto Rico to enjoy lucrative tax benefits, the program also promoted the emigration of island residents stateside. By the mid-1960s, nearly a million people had left the island, and a great majority of them settled in New York City. The title of Flavin's work, *Puerto Rican Light* (to Jeanie Blake), was actually inspired by a comment from Blake, who worked as an assistant at Flavin's New York gallery at the time, after she'd attended a Puerto Rican Day parade—which was a fairly new expression of island cultural identity in the city. This colorful event seems to have left an impression and somehow Flavin's three colored fluorescent lights triggered Blake's chain of associations. For us, a larger set of relationships—related to the social, cultural, and political transformations that were happening in that period and are ongoing today—can enter that train of thought.

Our work ultimately is about trying to render physical the words *Puerto Rican Light*. For instance, the current Puerto Rican debt crisis mainly stems from the country's largest electric company. There are energy transfers that occur within the photovoltaic cells of the solar panels and within the fluorescent lamps as well as within the ecosystem of the cave itself. Flavin's piece is traditionally perceived as dependent on the institutional setting or white cube. Here, we are opening that gap between object and setting, examining their reciprocal influence, and exploring the overlapping of the prehistoric and the contemporary.

— As told to Frank Espósito
For Allora & Calzadilla (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla), music does not soothe the so-called beast but is intertwined with the long history of war and human conflict. Making use of brass instruments that are featured prominently in military bands as well as rock-and-roll anthems appropriated by US soldiers as psychological weapons, the artists have drawn attention to the complicated role music and sound have played in warfare and nation building. In their early video, *Returning a Sound* (2004), they welded a trumpet to the exhaust pipe of a moped. Marking the end of the US Navy’s use of Vieques as a bombing range, a local activist drove the modified moped around the island with the trumpet blaring with every rev of the engine. Similarly, their installation *Clamor* (2006) featured a bunker-like structure that secreted away a group of musicians. With horns and flutes instead of guns protruding from the structure, the band played a range of war music from Ottoman Janissary bands to Twisted Sister, whose song, *We’re not going to take it*, was famously used during the American invasion of Panama in 1989. More recently, *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on the Ode to Joy for a Prepared Piano* (2008) engages with the idiosyncratic history of the fourth movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* which has been embraced over time by a range of groups, from the Nazi Party to the European Union. Performed on a piano set on castors and customized so that the pianist stands in a hole cut in the very center of the instrument, the player and instrument act as a single unit—one inside the other—perambulating around the exhibition space.
CYL: Why focus on insults as opposed to other emotional outpourings, such as of love, sadness, or joy?

GC: The voice is also a vehicle for establishing social bonds. The perception of music, the organization of patterns of sound, is an inherently social activity, a measure of our connectedness to others. We wanted to put into play a tension between the social aspect of perceiving music and the divisive nature of adversarial language. In other words, while the perception of the musical dimension of *Fault Lines* underscores the implicit group belonging that conditions all musical experience, and the fracturing of social cohesiveness that insults bring about undermines this unity. We liked the idea that this tension is delivered through the transient voice of the treble, whose very character is haunted by an inevitable and ultimately dramatic break.

JA: Lacan considered insults a primary form of social interaction, central to the imaginary order. At once antisocial and crucial for human relations, both divisive and unifying, insults are fissures in the social and political contract and can give rise to turmoil and conflict. These events can mark history, whether between two individuals or by an individual who speaks on behalf of a group. They can cause breaks in empathy while simultaneously reinforcing social bonds.

GC: Within the artifice of singing words that were initially spoken by adults in some other place and in some other time there nevertheless is a corporeal presence in the young boys, whose bodies undergo momentous transformation, a meaning that at times contradicts, disrupts or goes beyond the signification of both the music and the text. For example, the way a boy sits, arches his back, bends his arm, the twitching of his finger.

CYL: How much choreography and instruction was given to the singers? I noticed there were variations in how each pair of boys interacted in with each other and the stone sculptures.
The choreography was built from the specifications of the gallery: four spaces, each of differing sizes, each with its own unique acoustic condition. The stone choral risers were installed in the gallery in such a way that it was impossible to see them all at the once. They became the focus points of a kind of choreographic map for each treble pair to navigate the space. The boy soprano’s main task was to interact with all ten sculptures. How they moved about the rooms, was left up to them. We set a clear frame, but left the details open to interpretation and play. At times one boy was singing in one room, while the other waited and then responded from a different room. This affected not only how they interacted with each other, but the audience could also not see or hear everything at once.


Sound is a major theme through much of your work, especially music and its relationship to militarism. This work feels connected and yet distinct from works like *Returning a Sound* (2004), *Clamor* (2006), and *Wake Up* (2007). How would you position *Fault Lines* in relationship to those previous works?

These works used dissonance to unhinge the nationalistic underpinnings of military music and to redirect it towards a different meaning.

*Sediments Sentiments (Figures Of Speech)* (2007) has probably the closest connection to *Fault Lines* in that it also sets a pre-existing text to a vocal musical form. In this case, the texts were fragments of political speeches that were sung by opera singers. We used improvisation to organize the musical structure of this work. *Fault Lines*, on the other hand, involved creating a wholly new musical score. We worked with composer Guarionex Matos-Morales. He is the co-director of the Orfeón San Juan Bautista choral ensemble in Puerto Rico and has a lot of experience working with and composing for boy sopranos.

We asked Guarionex to write sections that were polyphonic. Polyphony is an ancient musical tradition. Some ethnomusicologists argue that polyphonic singing has played an important role in human evolution. Basically, polyphony means singing together two or more simultaneous lines, each with an independent melody. It requires a highly complex set of rules to be understood and played out among members of a group.
At their recent exhibition at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, *Fault Lines*, Allora & Calzadilla worked with trebles—boys who sing as sopranos until puberty when their voices break—from the American Boychoir School and Transfiguration Boychoir. Performing in pairs, the boys stand, sit, and bound off of sculptural stone risers installed throughout the space, all the while singing antagonistic lines culled from Cicero, Shakespeare, and popular culture. This interview took place over email throughout the course of the exhibition.

Christopher Y. Lew: How did *Fault Lines* come about? There are so many ways to enter the work via music, literature, geology, the human voice. What were the initial triggers that led to it?

Guillermo Calzadilla: We became fascinated with the specific voice of boy sopranos. This complex voice is the product of physiological attributes such as hormone levels, the position of the larynx, the musculature of the lungs and vocal chords, along with social, emotional, and intellectual maturity. The beauty of the treble sound is tied to the bodily support of the young boys in whom this voice resonates. I think the treble’s voice makes us aware of time since the vocal range is so short-lived and because it is so dramatically marked by rupture and displacement. We wanted to make a work whose subject was this very specific vocal range.

Jennifer Allora: In *The Grain of the Voice* Barthes talks about the paradox specific to vocal music, when, as he describes it, “language encounters a voice.” The grain is what is generated out of this double production. It is a surplus that cannot be reduced to either music or words. It has its own materiality. It is produced in the body of the singer, yet it is separate from it. Mladen Dolar furthered Barthes’s idea by considering the voice as an uncanny object. He describes this floating voice as “a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal.”

GC: We have always been fascinated by geology and decided to see if we could find an analogy between what seemed to be at first sight unrelated interests. Beyond the drama of human time, minerals organize. They accumulate, they transform, they solidify. They change their configuration. We began to think about pressure and erosion as terms that could link together voice and rocks. Pressure, the exertion of physical force, pushes and pulls things together and apart. It leads to a physical change in mineral assemblages. Landscapes are formed. Mountains rise. Pressure causes chemical reactions that convert organic material into minerals.

JA: Similarly, erosion breaks things apart, wears things down, weakens and ultimately redistributes things. Pressure and erosion both leave signatures. We started thinking about how music erodes language and how the voice cracks under strain.
We have become accustomed to highly inventive pieces from Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. In 2011, as US reps at the 2011 Venice Biennale, Allora & Calzadilla worked with Olympic medalists in gymnastics and track and field to create works that mashed up performance, sound, sculpture, and video. Now they have followed up on that honor with a fiendishly complex and compelling new show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art that takes apart Enlightenment ideals of how music—and humans—can communicate.
Christian Viveros-Fauné initially took "Intervals" to be stuffy and overly intellectual, but he was eventually convinced to agree with Blake Gopnik that its baroque complexity and perceptual panache was winning. Viveros-Fauné was particularly taken with the artists' rearrangement of Haydn's late 18th-century oratorio *The Creation*, a portion of which 12 choir singers sing backwards (like a tape in reverse)—while walking backwards.

"Intervals" spans two venues: the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Fabric Workshop (see Mr. Gopnik's article "Allora & Calzadilla's Stone-Age Performance"). The exhibition runs at both locations through April 5.
Personal and collective histories intermingled in Li Jinghu’s solo exhibition “Time is Money”—a title that alluded to the billboard slogan “Time Is Money, Efficiency Is Life” seen in many of China’s industrial towns during the 1980s. The show consisted of two commissioned installations, the first of which, *Moonlight Piece* (2014), was a series of geometrically shaped, monochrome white paintings whose textured surfaces approximate lunar ridges and craters. Recalling moonlight as seen through irregular gaps between buildings, the paintings embody a lost urban landscape of the artist’s memory.

If this all seems somewhat sentimental, it was. Yet these nostalgic reflections were balanced by Li’s second installation, *Today’s Screenings* (2014), in the gallery’s back room. This, too, was self-referential: the artist is from Dongguan, one of the first places to experience China’s economic reform policies of the late 1970s, and the piece re-creates one of the city’s video halls catering to factory workers. The work consists of low-budget Hong Kong films projected on a screen covered in mass-produced plastic crystals. It baldly delineates the workers’ unvarying routine: producing crystal beads during the day and watching pop movies at night. In this shimmering filmic landscape, Li’s desire to communicate their inescapable weariness and boredom has taken on poetic dimensions.

YUAN FUCAI

Although none of the nine abstract artists in this solid exhibition are old enough to have experienced the heyday of Minimalism in the 1960s and 70s, each employs a Minimalist aesthetic. In contrast to the tough, industrial materials beloved by past masters of the pared-down, however, these artists use more fragile stuff. Michael Rej’s *Sukt* (2014), an anvil-shaped panel covered with a sleek layer of oil-based plasticine clay and then painted blue, suggests Donald Judd in the way it teeters between sculpture and painting. Allora & Calzadilla’s *Shape Shifter* (2013) lays out an Agnes Martin-style grid of 220 sandpaper sheets, salvaged from a Detroit construction site, that have been creased and abraded almost into oblivion.

Paulo Monteiro, born in 1961 and the oldest in this group, contributed 24 playfully abstract works, including postcard-size paintings and sculptures made of strips of lead or aluminum no bigger than a pencil. They were—like many of the pieces in the show—surprisingly rich in associations. Monteiro’s *Untitled* (2011), for example, consisting of two lengths of cotton rope draped one over the other and hung at groin-level, evoked genitals. This exhibition suggested that, apart from a softer edge, the “new abstraction” may not be that different from the old. But the best work here was so good that it hardly mattered.

ROGER ATWOOD
Allora & Calzadilla's recent video *Apostasy* (2013) takes a fair amount of work to understand. One must know, for instance, that in May 1798 a concert was performed in Paris for two elephants, Hans and Parkie, who had arrived two months earlier as spoils of war. The concert was part spectacle, part science experiment seeking to elicit a response from the animals. This history is the backdrop for *Apostasy*, where 216 years later, Allora & Calzadilla again play music for Hans and Parkie, now skeletons in a large storage facility called the Zoosèque, at the Museum of Natural History in Paris.

The video slowly pans past rows of taxidermy animals as the most bizarre sounds begin. It does not sound like music. Instead, it recalls a slowing or only partially choked lawn mower. It's extremely loud, and the notes dip as low as eight octaves below the lowest G on a piano. A uniquely gifted singer, Tim Storms, goes through renditions of arias from *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1779), by Christoph Willibald Gluck; Ô Ma Tendre Mauvaise* (c. 1777), by Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny; and the Revolutionary anthem *Ça ira* (c. 1790), though to the listener these songs will be unrecognizable. The notes go so low that they can be heard by elephants but not by humans.

The crescendo of both the video and of this strange music comes with the view of the bones of Hans and Parkie sitting on a metal shelf. Allora & Calzadilla are singing to elephants that would witness in their own way to Napoleon's extended attempt to conquer the world and how the French Revolution became the Napoleonic Empire. The elephants, once wild and then captured, travelled widely and became more exhibits. Allora & Calzadilla want to elicit a story that they know they are never going to hear, from subjects they know will never speak. In a strange way, the elephants in the video come to stand in for all the voiceless dead, all the victims of empire and colonial oppression who are lost to history.

The video is jarring, and at long stretches quite boring, but it delivers interesting opportunities for observation if one rides along with the camera and Tim Storms a while. One notices, for instance, the curious fact that most taxidermy animals are frozen in time with their mouths open, as if humans harbour some unconscious desire that animals speak. Furthermore, Storms's voice, as strange as it is, perhaps is a good indication of how other animals hear our voices or music, something foreign and otherworldly.

Poet W.S. Merwin once wrote of his sleeping dog, remarking that there is 'so little that is tamed' yet so much his dog would find deeply familiar. There is a romance in projecting knowledge onto animals, yet we probably have more in common with them than we are different from them. Allora & Calzadilla, despite a presentation that can be unbearably precious, want this primal truth. So much sophistication in animals remains unknown, yet humans continue to shock in their capacity for wildness.

*Ed Shaf"
Allora & Calzadilla celebrate beauty, oddity of animal world

By SHARON MIZOTA
JULY 25, 2014, 2:00 PM

In 1798, two elephants, Hans and Parkie, arrived in Paris. The French had seized them as spoils of war from the Dutch, who had in turn expropriated them from what is now Sri Lanka.

Objects of both national pride and intense curiosity, the imposing animals must have seemed completely exotic. In fact, their arrival was so remarkable that a group of musicians organized a concert in their honor. They hoped to communicate with the beasts through music.

This concert, situated at the intersection of nascent imperialism and Enlightenment science is the inspiration for Allora & Calzadilla’s first L.A. exhibition at REDCAT. The Puerto Rico-based duo (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla) has created an evocative, 23-minute film that is a beautiful meditation on otherness.

The piece begins with an ultrasound image of a human throat, vibrating, contracting and expanding to an array of low hums and guttural sounds. This remarkable organ belongs to Tim Storms, a vocalist who can reach a note known as G-7, eight octaves below the lowest G on a piano.

We then see Storms, a bald, fastidiously groomed man, singing songs that were played at the
elephants’ concert in his super-low register. As he sings, he walks slowly past shelves of taxidermy animals in storage at France’s National Museum of Natural History. Included among their ranks are the bones of Hans and Parkie.

The words, and indeed the melodies of the songs are barely decipherable; Storms’ singing, to our ears, is little more than a series of buzzes and rumbles, often sounding a bit like water running down a slightly clogged drain. We experience the songs as drones or vibrations, but elephants apparently can hear such low frequencies. Storms is singing for them.

When he finally comes upon the remains of Hans and Parkie, he grasps and caresses the large bones, which seem like alien specimens. Although they might resemble our skeletons in shape and texture, they are completely incommensurable in scale. Like Storms’ singing, they are of this earth yet seem completely otherworldly.

By revisiting the elephants’ concert in a register only they might fully comprehend, Allora & Calzadilla’s film occupies a limbo in which human communication is made strange. The work is a gesture of rapprochement, shifting a bit from our people-centric perspective to imagine how other species might perceive the world.

Still, it is no more than a gesture; it can’t undo the past. The images of the taxidermy animals are especially poignant and ironic in this regard. We stuffed them to save them, even as we hunted them down, despoiled their habitats and ensured their extinction. In this light, Storms’ singing becomes a funeral dirge.

It’s only fitting that the film ends with another ultrasound image of Storms’ throat. While the piece celebrates the beauty and strangeness of the animal kingdom, it is also an admission of our inability to escape our own limited frame of reference. No matter how much we may want to bridge the gap, there will always be something we cannot know.


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American Artistic Duo Allora & Calzadilla Takes Over Palazzo Cusani

**Fault Lines** is the first major solo exhibition of the work of the American artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla in Italy. The artistic duo that represented the United States of America at the 2011 Venice Biennale is known for their socially engaged videos, installations, sculptures and performances. Their work has been featured in many major exhibitions around the world. For their collaboration with Fondazione Trussardi, Allora & Calzadilla conceived an exhibition that presents a selection of new and recent pieces that examine the concept of borders.

The exhibition takes place in the spaces of Palazzo Cusani, an extraordinary 17th Century palace in the heart of Milan, Italy, close to the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera. The Palazzo, normally used by the Army Command for Lombardy, is open for the first time to the world contemporary art. This video provides you with a walkthrough of the exhibition on the occasion of the opening of the show.

Allora & Calzadilla transformed the unique space into a succession of sounds, sculptures, performances, and images. In the courtyard of the palace, the visitor is greeted by their 2007 piece *Sediments, Sentiments (Figures of Speech)*, an imposing sculpture in which opera singers perform passages from the most significant speeches of the 20th Century - from Martin Luther King to Nikita Khrushchev. The exhibition continues with the performance artwork *Wake Up (Rising)*: on the staircase leading into the palazzo, a jazz trumpeter plays the military tune *Reveille*. Among the artworks that follow are two other performances: Allora & Calzadilla’s *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations of “Ode to Joy” for a Prepared Piano* (one of their best known works), and *Rivolving Door*. The latter consists of twelve dancers who through their choreographed movement form a human revolving door that lets the visitors walk through the room only by following the rhythm of the dancers.

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla met on a study program in Florence (Italy) and began collaborating in 1995. Jennifer Allora was born in Philadelphia (USA) in 1971, Guillermo Calzadilla was born in Havana (Cuba) in 1971. They live and work in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

With the exhibition *Allora & Calzadilla: Fault Lines*, Fondazione Nicola Trussardi continues the mission to rediscover hidden treasures in the heart of the city of Milan through contemporary art. Since 2003, the foundation has staged major solo shows with artists such as Pawel Althamer, Maurizio Cattelan, Tacita Dean, Paul McCarthy, Tino Sehgal, and Pipilotti Rist.

Pushing the limits in Venice

NEW YORK

For first time at Biennale, performance artists will occupy the U.S. Pavilion

BY CAROL Vogel

On a nondescript street in Long Island City, Queens, is a mysterious gold-painted door with a drawing of a colorfully painted face. It leads to a studio that reads “Circus Warehouse.” Inside is a cavernous space with a towering, gymnastic rings and ropes, ballet barres and piles of thick, practice mats. It was here on a recent morning that about a dozen people were gathered around two pairs of strangely familiar objects: identical models of air-traffic control seats, intricately fashioned in wood. One, an American Airlines design, featured a seat in the upright position, beside it a bed with a meticulously carved imitation of a blanket and pillow.

“Feel free to move around, see how different it looks from different angles,” whispered the performance and conceptual artist Jennifer Allora, a small woman with cropped blond hair, dressed entirely in black. A business-class seat conjures up all sorts of associations: money, power, hierarchy. And, as Ms. Allora explained, “there’s tension about being on a plane, and this is meant to provoke that same kind of anxiety.”

The action was unfolding around the smaller, Delta version, where the group watched as Sadie Wilhelm, a young professional dancer and gymnast, bent her body in graceful movements over a seat, wrapping herself around the tray table, draping her body along the edge of the seats, limbs splayed, forming a perfect split, and finally slitting on the divider, a leg gracefully extending high in the air — Brancusi’s “Bird in Space” sculpture come to life.

The routine lasted 17 minutes, far longer than the three-minute routines typical of professional gymnasts. “We wanted to push the limits,” Ms. Allora said.

The action of pushing the limits is heard over and over from Ms. Allora, who, with Guillermo Calzadilla, her partner in life and work, make up Allora & Calzadilla, an artist team based in Puerto Rico. The two were frantically putting the finishing touches on this performance along with the five other projects that will be incorporated into “Gloria,” an exhibition that will occupy the American pavilion at this summer’s Venice Biennale. The artists, who are hardly household names, will represent the United States in a prestigious international arena, like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Ed Ruscha before them.

To perform the pieces they have gathered a cast that includes Dave Durante, a champion in all-around gymnastics; Dan O’Toole, the 1964 Olympic gold medalist in the decathlon; the gymnast Cheville Memmel, a silver medalist at the 2008 Beijing Games; and Ms. Wilhelm, among others. There will be a 22-ton military tank turned upside down and topped with a treadmill and an Olympic runner; a classical-style bronze sculpture lying inside an open tanning bed; a custom-made pipe organ incorporating a fully functioning A.T.M.; and a 21-minute video that depicts the island of Vieques in Puerto Rico, which until 2005 was the site of bombing experiments and war games for the Navy.

“It’s all about making the impossible possible,” said Lisa Freiman, senior curator and chairwoman of the contemporary art department at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, who is this year’s commissioner of the pavilion. “I never thought the State Department would choose my proposal. I assumed it would be too politically engaged.”

Every two years museum curators from across the country detail their visions for the American pavilion in proposals that are reviewed by the Federal Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions, a group comprising curat-
ors, museum directors, and artists who then submit their recommendations to the Fund for United States Artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions. While the process is secret — and nobody would talk about it — according to sources close to the State Department.

The Puerto Rican-based artists Alicia & Calderón are preparing six performance projects that will be incorporated into "Gloria," an exhibition at this summer's Venice Biennale. Works include "Body in Flight (American)" with the gymnast Devo Dormats, top left, and "Algorithm."
America pushes its limits at the Venice Biennale

BIENNALE. FROM PAGE IS

mean, Ms. Freiman’s 95-page application beat out many by curators who were promoting the work of more established artists, including Cindy Sherman, Shirin Neshat, Cathy Opie and Diana Thater.

Aliora & Catzdilla’s presence in Venice will be a coup of firsts for America: the first artists working in Puerto Rico to show there (Ms. Aliora, 37, was born in Philadelphia, and Mr. Catzdilla, 40, was born in Havana and moved to Puerto Rico with his family as a child) and the first time performance artists — and an artist collaboratively — have been chosen to represent the United States there.

In their hugely ambitious exhibition, the artists have assembled objects and expertise from all parts of the globe. The tank was shipped from Manchester in two flated trucks that are arriving in Venice by boat; the gondola is coming from Bonn, Germany. The bronze statue was made in a foundry in Berkeley, California; the tanning bed is being sent from Indianapolis; the A.T.M. is being shipped from Milan, but the computer program that runs it was conceived in Paris; the airplane seats were made in Los Angeles.

Eight gymkasses will be living in Venice for the duration of the Biennale, which previews for the art world on June 1 and runs through Nov. 27. (The Biennale opens to the public on June 4.)

Organizing it all is Ms. Freiman, who had been following Aliora & Catzdilla’s career for years. She was inspired to propose the artists for the 2011 Biennale after perusing the national pavilions there in 2009. “It was the ideological underpinnings of those pavilions that convinced me that these artists could make work that critically engaged the notion of national identity and Americanism,” she said. Exhibitions in the pavilion in past years have been tame. In 2009 the conceptual artist and sculptor Bruce Nauman, for example, presented work that seemed like an elegant retrospective.

While Fred Wilson created an installation in 2003 harking back to American black history, nothing in recent years has had the kind of overt political references as this year’s exhibition.

But staging such an ambitious group of works in a high-profile arena like the Venice Biennale, the artists admit, is risky. “It’s a little crazy,” Ms. Aliora said nervously.

Still, it’s a gamble that everyone thought was worth taking. Ms. Freiman asked Barbara Gladstone, the Chelsea dealer who represents the artists in the United States, for an introduction, which took place in the summer of 2009. “It was the biggest blind date of our lives,” Ms. Freiman recalled with a laugh.

The matchmaking worked. And once she strolled on the proposal, officials from the Indianapolis Museum approached their congressmen asking for leases of support. Ms. Freiman also began a hard-charging fund-raising campaign. The project is expensive, costing more than $1 million, with funds from the State Department and Hugo Boss, the German men’s-wear company, as well as collectors and philanthropists worldwide.

For the artists, the chance to show six new works meant taking stock of all the ideas they had been tossing around. Although they have a hard time articulating who does what in their creative process, people who know them say Mr. Catzdilla is more involved in conceptual development and Ms. Aliora in the performance.

They met in 1995 as students on a year abroad in Florence, and they have been living and working together ever since. (Their daughter, Isla, is 16 months old.) “We fight a lot,” Ms. Aliora said with a laugh. “It’s not always pretty.”

In person, Ms. Aliora is the more vocal of the pair, while Mr. Catzdilla seems to make his artistic feelings known quietly.

For years they were better known outside the United States, having been included in various exhibitions in Europe as well as in the 1988 São Paulo Biennial. But it was “Common Wealth,” a group show at the Tate Modern in London in 2003, that put them on the map.

Their work — a giant felt carpet that was actually a map recreating the cratered landscape of Vieques — captured viewers’ imagination. “We left the opening dinner with two dealers,” Mr. Catzdilla recalled.

A performance laced with political themes is what audiences will experience in Venice. The tank, from 1945 and used in the Korean War, will sit outside the pavilion. There, a USA Track & Field athlete in uniform will run for about 45 minutes on the treadmill above its right track.

The associations are many: militarism, national identity, competition.

The work also harks back to ancient Greece and Rome, when the notion of the idealized body was evident in athleticism and in art. The pavilion is a stately Palladian-style building, and in its grand entrance rounda will be a Solaris tanning bed, its lights almost blinding visitors. Nestled in it, as though it were a body lying in state, will be a scaled-down bronze model of Thomas Crawford’s “Statue of Freedom,” also known as “Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace” — a classical female figure, her right hand resting on the hilt of a sword and her left holding a wreath of victory — which has stood atop the United States Capitol since 1863.

But perhaps that work will be upstaged by the giant custom-designed pipe organ that incorporates the A.T.M. Visitors will be able to check their balance or get cash, and for every transaction different musical sounds will be heard emanating from the organ. “Nothing will ever be repeated,” Mr. Catzdilla said. “Sometimes the music will be atonal or cinematic, or like a horror movie or a gospel.”

And when the Biennale is over, then what? “Hopefully,” Ms. Aliora said, “all these pieces will go on to have a life in other places.”