

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Vogel, Carol, "War Machines (With Gymnasts)," *New York Times*, May 15, 2011



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIELE RESINI AND VINCENT C. ALLORA, ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

War Machines (With Gymnasts)

By CAROL VOGEL

**An Unconventional Choice
By the State Department
Sends a Tank, a Treadmill,
A Musical A.T.M.
And Two Conceptual Artists
To the Venice Biennale**

On a nondescript street in Long Island City, Queens, is a mysterious gold-painted door with a drawing of a colorful tent and a sign that reads "Circus Warehouse." Inside is a cavernous space with a flying trapeze, gymnastic rings and ropes, ballet bars and piles of thick practice mats. It was here on a recent spring morning that about a dozen people were gathered around two pairs of strangely familiar objects: identical models of airline business-class seats, impeccably 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 Wilhelmi, 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 alighting 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 notion 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 in Puerto Rico. The two were frantically putting the finishing

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Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla bring their exhibition "Gloria," comprising six works, to the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale. One piece, "Track and Field," features an inverted 52-ton tank and a treadmill.

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touches on this performance along with the five other new 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'Brien, the 1996 Olympic gold medalist in the decathlon; the gymnast Chellsie Memmel, a silver medalist at the 2008 Beijing Games; and Ms. Wilhelmi, among others. There will be a 52-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 2003 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 curators, 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, 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, Cathie Opie and Diana Thater.

Allora & Calzadilla's presence in Venice will represent a couple of firsts for America: the first artists working in Puerto Rico to show there (Ms. Allora, 37, was born in Philadelphia, and Mr. Calzadilla, 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 collaborative — 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, England, in

two flatbed trucks that are arriving in Venice by boat; the organ is coming from Bonn, Germany. The bronze statue was made in a foundry in Berkeley, Calif.; 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 airline seats were made in Los Angeles.

Eight gymnasts 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.) Consultants who have worked behind the scenes include a pipe-organ maker; a composer; a software designer; the choreographer Rebecca Davis; and a flight strategist, who helped the artists and Mr. Durante get access to a grounded plane so they could study the airplane seats, engineers and architects.

Organizing it all is Ms. Freiman, who had been following Allora & Calzadilla'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. In addition to their performances, the artists have created videos, photographs and sculptures, many with political overtones. Exhibitions in the pavilion in past years have been tamer. In 2009 the conceptual artist and sculptor Bruce Nauman, for example, presented what 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, further heightened, the artists say, by the use of live performances.

"After this long period of commercially oriented art, it's nice to bring back other kinds of experimental practices," Ms. Allora said. "It is an important reaction to everything else in our so-called contemporary society, where it's all about texting and instant messaging and everything is so far away from the here and the now and the present. Anything that refocuses the moment is a luxury."

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. Allora 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.

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The matchmaking worked. And once she started on the proposal, officials from the Indianapolis Museum approached their congressmen asking for letters 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. Calzadilla is more involved in conceptual develop-

'Gloria' will bring overtly political art to the Biennale's American pavilion.

ment and Ms. Allora in the performative.

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

In trying to explain how they concoct their outlandish work, she said they spend their days routinely throwing out ideas and free-associating.

Sitting in a borrowed SoHo apartment on a recent afternoon while in town to work with the gymnasts, they were sipping tea together at a table. Ms. Allora stared at a jar of honey in front of her. "I'll say, 'Let's do something with honey,'" she explained. "And Guillermo will start talking about bees, and he'll say the word hon-

eycomb, the object. And I will get on the computer and start researching what's meaningful about honeycomb."

Mr. Calzadilla jumped in: "There's a discipline in a way. We go through different things: etymologies, functions, gravity operations, trying to work every angle."

In person, Ms. Allora is the more vocal of the pair, while Mr. Calzadilla 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 1998 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 visitors' imagination. "We left the opening dinner with two dealers," Mr. Calzadilla recalled.

From the moment she saw their first work in Boston in the late 1990s, Jessica Morgan, the Tate curator who organized "Common Wealth," said she "knew immediately" she wanted to work with them.

"They are amazingly astute, always politically engaged yet with a poetic sensibility," Ms. Morgan said. "And they are unafraid to use different materials." In New York this winter they received much attention when their 2008 work "Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on 'Ode to Joy' for a Prepared Piano" was performed for about a month in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art. The artists had reconfigured an early 20th-century Bechstein by removing a section of the instrument's strings and cutting a hole through the center and

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setting it on casters. They then hired musicians to stand in the hole and play Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" upside down while walking slowly through the space. The tune was a Nazi party favorite and the anthem of the European Union and of Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe.

An innocent 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 athletics and in art. The pavilion is a stately 1930 Palladian-style building, and in its grand entrance rotunda 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. Calzadilla said. "Sometimes the music will be atonal or cinematic, or like a horror movie or a gospel."

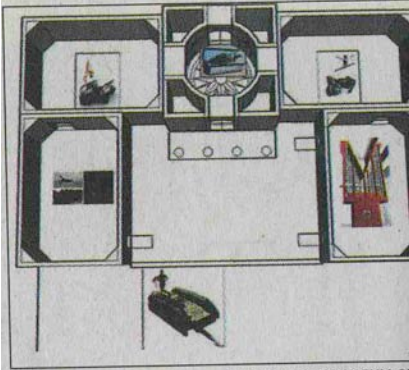
And when the Biennale is over, then what? "Hopefully," Ms. Allora said, "all these pieces will go on to have a life in other places."

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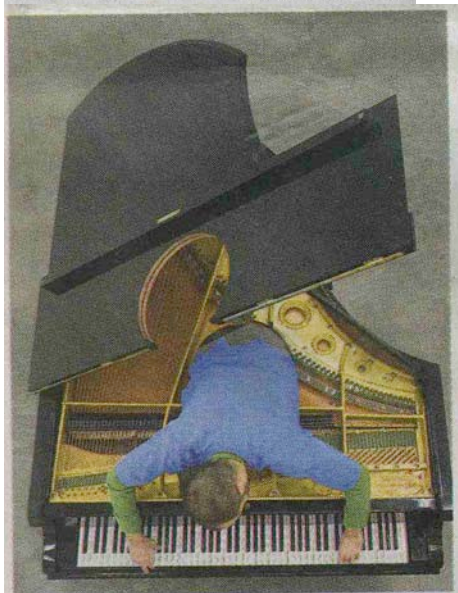
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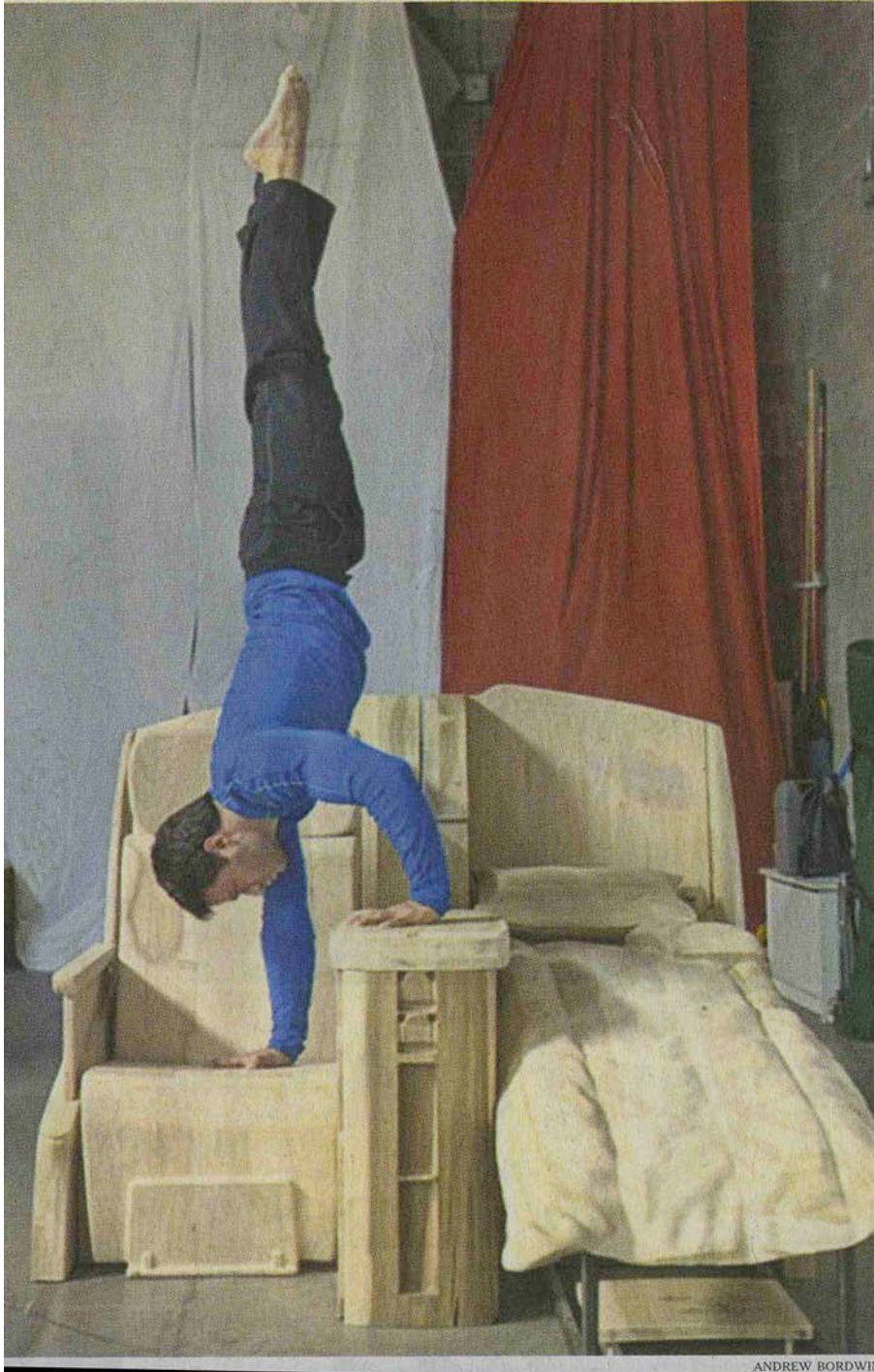
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