

GLADSTONE GALLERY

# *BOMB*

Art : Interview

January 26, 2015

## Allora & Calzadilla by Christopher Y. Lew

*Music, the voice, intention, and history.*



*Fault Lines*, 2013. Ten metamorphic and igneous rocks; performance by Carlos and Jorge Tapia, from the Transfiguration Boychoir. Dimensions variable, installation view at Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

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

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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 infamously 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.

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 furthers 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.

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**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.



*Fault Lines*, 2013. Ten metamorphic and igneous rocks; performance by Brogan Donston and Charles Rosario, from the Transfiguration Boychoir. Dimensions variable, installation view at Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

**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,

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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.

**JA** 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 sopranos 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.



*Fault Lines*, 2013. Ten metamorphic and igneous rocks; performance by Charles Rosario and Mules Simon, from the Transfiguration Boychoir. Dimensions variable, installation view at Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

**CYL** 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?

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

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**GC** *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.

**JA** 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.

**CYL** Two of your most recent videos, *Raptor's Rapture* (2012) and *Apotomē* (2013), depict attempts to communicate with other species and to other eras. Do these works, along with *Fault Lines*' layering of geologic time with human development, engage with our new Anthropocene epoch? In other words, do they address humanity's massive impact on the Earth?

**JA** The Anthropocene is a very provocative term. Geologists are still debating whether or not an actual geological epoch has begun starting with the Industrial Revolution, or if human agricultural practices which began several thousand years ago are a more adequate marker of the changes that humans have inflicted on the earth's lithosphere. We are interested in this relatively new and still debated term, as well as in the new fields of bio-semiotics and bio-musicology.

**GC** With these films and other recent projects we have been working in the space between multiple temporalities and diverse actors that unsettle historical time, by drawing attention to where and how human and non-human entities come into contact and intersect.

**CYL** What are you working on now?

**JA** We are currently preparing for an exhibition titled *Intervals* that will take place across two venues, The Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Fabric Workshop and Museum, in December 2014. We will be presenting a trilogy of recent films—two of which you mentioned, *Raptor's Rapture*, and *Apotomē*—as well as *3* (2013), along with a series of new performance based works, sculptures, sound, and film installations.

**GC** *Lifespan* (2014), one of the new sculpture and performance-based works we will be showing, focuses on a single rock—a rock of the earth's mantle estimated to be over 4.2 billion years old. Suspended from the ceiling, this Hadean period rock is “played” by three vocalists whose whistling and breaths follow a score by composer David Lang and will turn the rock into a pendulum. Their action can be taken as an unproductive yet poetic form of wind erosion, directed toward this uniquely uncorrupted material from a time when there were no life witnesses to the planet's geological transformation.

**JA** And a new film *The Great Silence* (2014), centers on the world's largest radio telescope, located in Esperanza, Puerto Rico, home to the last remaining wild population of a critically endangered species of parrots. We are working with science fiction author Ted Chiang, who will write a subtitled script in the spirit of a fable that ponders the irreducible gaps between living, nonliving, human, animal, technological, and cosmic actors.

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**GC** Taken as a whole, this exhibition creates an alternative present—a present in which contemporary and past events intermingle; live entities and ancestors commune; geology, evolution, sensation and emotion intersect in an entangled synthesis of natural and biological sign relations.

**JA** Music is a key aspect that links the works for this exhibition. From its evolutionary and biological origins to its translatability into mathematical properties, all the works in *Intervals* look to music as a key signifying element of a larger cosmology. While at the same time, it revels in the unknowable as essential to human experience. The exhibition bears witness to incomplete presences and resonant remainders. It finds in music a measure and a reckoning with these elusive forces and the abyss that lies between.

*Christopher Y. Lew is Associate Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.*

Tags: performance art