



Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla: Clamor, 2006, mixed mediums with recorded and live music, dimensions variable; at the Kunsthalle Zurich. Photo A. Opposite, performance detail of Clamor; at the Moore Space, Miami. Photo Dawn Blackman.

Use What Sinks

Allora & Calzadilla's collaborative work combines sculpture, video, and live and recorded music to address issues of cultural identity and political resistance—with a recent focus on militarism in the contemporary world.

BY TOM MCDONOUGH

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's *Sweat Glands, Sweat Lands* (2006) might be thought of as a perverse excursion into the realm of the music video. Its roughly 2½-minute length is dictated by the song that forms its soundtrack, a song commissioned by the artists from Residente, lead singer of the Puerto Rican hip-hop and alt-reggaeton duo Calle 13. Accompanying Residente's verbal attack (delivered in Spanish), with its rhythmic invocations of contemporary global crises from environmental disaster and uneven development to American neo-imperialism, is a relatively static scene: a car sits at night in some sort of makeshift shelter, perhaps a garage; evidently raised up on blocks, it has a spit attached to its back wheel, on which a suckling pig roasts over coals; when the driver steps on the accelerator, the spit turns faster. The car, an old American sedan, has been transformed, simply and expeditiously, into a means to cook that most traditional of Puerto Rican delicacies, *lechón asado*, and the garage becomes a makeshift kitchen. Residente's words give this scene a pointedly political edge, in which the do-it-yourself ethic emblemized in the video is aligned with a bottom-up spirit of revolt: "broken/hiccup/from billions of people/waiting with teeth," he chants at the end of his song, "throw away what floats/use what sinks."

"Use what sinks" could well be the motto of Allora & Calzadilla's innovative work, which has rapidly emerged in the past few years as one of the most intriguing and sought-after attempts to reconsider the critical practice of art. Although they have only recently come to broad attention, with appearances in a spate of international group exhibitions, these two young artists—both are in their mid-30s—have been collaborating for over a decade. Jennifer Allora, a native of Philadelphia, and Guillermo Calzadilla, born in Havana but a resident of Puerto Rico, initially met as art students studying abroad in Florence; once they completed their respective degrees, in 1996, they moved in together and have been jointly producing work ever since, from bases in both Cambridge, Mass., and San Juan.

While they have worked in the most diverse mediums, a common theme may be said to lie in their exploitation, often in solidarity with subaltern populations, of the underutilized, the discarded and the





Still from *Sweat Glands, Sweat Lands*, 2006, single-channel video projection with sound, approx. 2¼ minutes.

forgotten—a sort of vast project of recycling and reclamation. Last summer, the Kunsthalle Zurich assembled a representative grouping of the duo's recent work in an exhibition that allowed us to trace their development and assess its current direction. Although far from comprehensive, the show offered a cohesive group of six works, the majority of which addressed the place of militarism and war in the contemporary world, and the particular role played by sound—whether music or noise—in its expression.

Sweat Glands, Sweat Lands in this sense might be seen as a crux or turning point in their practice, on the one hand looking back to their early work based in the local cultures and politics of Puerto Rico, while on the other looking forward to their more recent and spectacular installations dealing with what has been characterized as our current state of militarized neoliberalism. The earlier work was represented in Zurich by the outstanding and widely seen video *Returning a Sound* (2004). In it, we watch a young man ride his motorbike in a great loop around the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, whose residents (including the young man in the video) had only recently emerged victorious from a multiyear struggle against the U.S. military, which had been using the island for decades as a proving ground and bombing range. The muffler of the motorbike has been altered, the tailpipe extended with a silver trumpet, so that the drive becomes a kind of aural celebration of the island's return to its inhabitants—the deafening sound of jet fighters replaced by a benign, if somewhat insistent, blast of the horn. *Returning a Sound* is so effective because of its

economy: with a minimum of means, it manages to be both entirely rooted in a particular place and its struggles (Allora & Calzadilla were themselves long active in the civil disobedience movement against the military base), as well as universal in its theme (the circling of the island is reminiscent of the kind of ritual plowing by which ancient societies reclaimed a plot of land).

As a starting point, *Returning a Sound* made sense, but one missed in Zurich the opportunity to see the pair's work in deeper perspective. Given the overarching theme of music, their breakthrough *Charcoal Dance Floor* (first realized in 1997, although perhaps most famously displayed at the 1998 São Paulo Bienal) could have served as a more effective opening. The work consists of an illusionistic drawing, on paper affixed to wood panels placed on the floor, of dancing club-goers at a Puerto Rican disco, seen from above. Executed in unfixed charcoal, the work is gradually destroyed by the footsteps of viewers, its details steadily becoming an undifferentiated gray blur. At least three elements frequently found in Allora & Calzadilla's art are here brought together for the first time: the reference to music as a generator of community, the use of canonical forms of postwar art (the floor panels recall Carl Andre's gridded metal "carpets") and the allegorical examination of the inequalities inherent in contemporary neoliberalism. While *Charcoal Dance Floor* is not an entirely successful work—it brings together those elements in somewhat obvious ways—it nevertheless announced a trajectory that would occupy the pair in much of their work of the following decade.

Since 2004, Allora & Calzadilla's practice has grown significantly in scope, expanding, with mixed results, from the particular instance of neocolonialism in Puerto Rico and the local resistance it provokes to a global geography of militarism. On view in the same gallery as *Returning a Sound*, their recent video *Unrealizable Goals* (2007) provided a sharp contrast to the former's clarity and concision. The scene has changed to Japan, specifically to the declining industrial city of Kitakyushu, where we find a three-piece band incongruously suspended among the fronds of a palm tree, playing nationalistic music from the Second World War that is unfamiliar in the West. The palm tree looks out over a soccer field, whose two nets have been placed face-to-face; kids play around the nets, and shots of their inconclusive game alternate with grainy footage of the city itself, from its steel mills to a "Space World" amusement park. *Unrealizable Goals* is intended as a reflection on Japan's current debate over amending its constitution to allow for offensive military action, and I suppose the artists mean to link this debate back to repressed memories of the Pacific war (the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki had initially been targeted for Kitakyushu, which was saved by cloud cover) and to the recent stagnation of the country's economy, but esthetically the video never really comes together, and the viewer is expected to know too much in order to untangle its references. Opaque where *Returning a Sound* was limpid, *Unrealizable Goals* reveals the dangers of attempting to transfer the working method developed in Puerto Rico to a less familiar setting.

More successful were two works included in the Zurich show, from a trilogy of sound-focused installations that directly confront the visual and aural landscape of war. *Clamor* (2006), originally presented (to much fanfare, as it were) at the Moore Space in Miami, initiated this trilogy. You hear *Clamor* before you see it; it first impresses the visitor through the noise it generates, a cacophony in which one gradually discerns bits of recognizable music, from the Marine Hymn and various drum-and-bugle marches to rock anthems and bagpipe dirges. As one approaches the source of this sound, its volume becomes apparent, a sonic assault that emanates from a light gray, irregular artificial rock formation which, seen from the front, reveals itself to be a concrete bunker. Not guns, however, but silver instruments—trombones, a trumpet and a flute—project from its menacing apertures. At the exhibition opening, the bunker held musicians provided with sheet music of numerous war songs from various countries, ideologies and time periods; playing whatever they liked, they produced a hideous montage of music that has through the ages been meant to inspire fear in enemies and stir the souls of patriots. (Peeking inside, one finds what looks like a mundane sound booth, with fans, folding chairs and water bottles scattered about—the normal detritus of a recording session.)

For the duration of the exhibition, a 40-minute-long soundtrack, a kind of best-of collection of this music, was played at ear-splitting volume on a continuous loop from inside the fiberglass bunker. It was simultaneously terrifying and

A car sits on blocks, its back wheel attached to a spit that holds a pig roasting over coals. Pressing the accelerator makes the pig turn faster.

ludicrous, which seems to be precisely the point Allora & Calzadilla were seeking; Allora, when asked about *Clamor* for a review in the London *Guardian*, said, "There are moments when you're hearing little sounds and fragments of melody that trigger certain feelings. You can't help it because this is what you're indoctrinated into. But then it unravels, and precisely the way it is manipulating you seems silly and ridiculous. There are moments when it moves into cacophony and chaos and it renders the whole thing absurd."



Two stills from *Returning a Sound*, 2004, single-channel video projection with sound, approx. 5½ minutes.

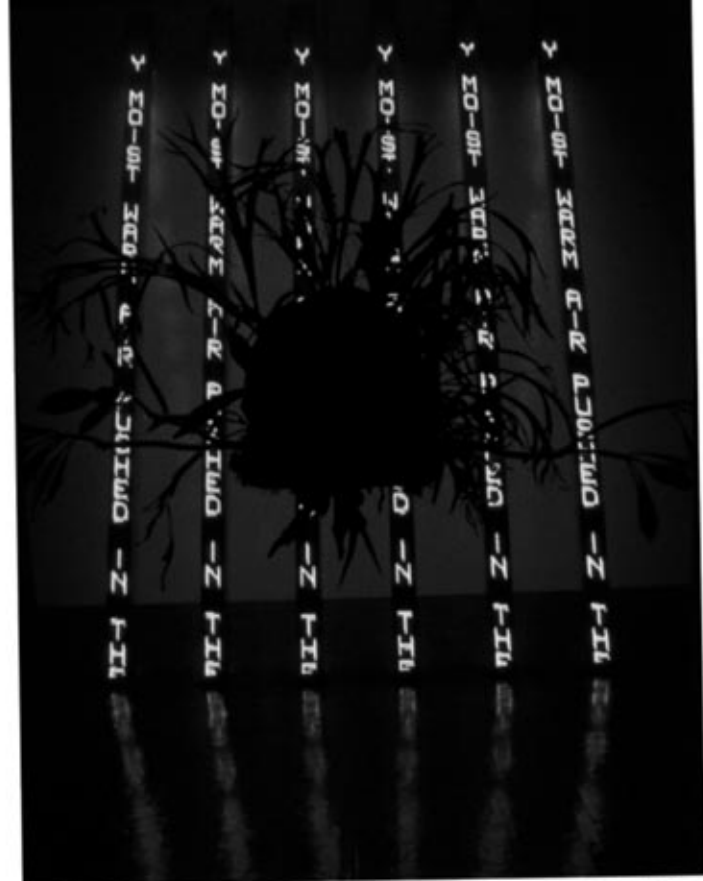


In *Growth (Survival)*, the light of an artwork linked with the metropolitan “center” is enlisted to sustain grafts of the colonial “periphery.”

In verbal description, *Clamor* can seem relatively straightforward in form and intent, but the experience of it is another matter altogether. There is a centrifugal quality to the numerous formal elements put into play: the dozens of martial tunes, the live performance, but also, above all, the bunker itself, which simultaneously evokes a military structure, a geologic formation, an example of Brutalist architecture and an ice floe. The theme of militarized culture just barely holds the whole conception together but, unlike *Unrealizable Goals*, here the over-ambition seems productive rather than incoherent.

This is also true of the second work in the trilogy, *Wake Up* (2007), first shown at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. In Zurich it spanned two rooms, each of which was split diagonally by a wall almost 10 feet high—an aggressive cleaving of space reminiscent of Richard Serra. The soundtrack here is of free-jazz trumpet players who reinterpret the early morning military bugle call known as reveille, twisting and elaborating its familiar notes beyond recognition. Lighting complemented the sound: hidden sources of illumination were keyed with the music, flashing brighter upon the walls and ceiling as the sound intensified. The effect was at once entrancing and ominous, recalling the sight of nighttime bombings as well as dawn. As with *Clamor*, *Wake Up* piled reference upon reference, from Minimalism as a “rhetoric of power” significantly coincident with American aggression in Vietnam to our own seduction by such spectacles, whether the televised destruction of Iraqi cities or the estheticized belligerence of some contemporary art. But it also suggested the liberating potential of diverting such oppressive forms and emotions—the avant-garde renditions of reveille become, literally, calls for viewers to awaken from their fitful sleep. (The third work in this trilogy, *Sediments, Sentiments [Figures of Speech]*, 2007, was on display this past fall at the San Francisco Art Institute.)

The final work included in Zurich was, in context, strikingly silent: *Growth (Survival)*, 2006, consisted simply of a group of tropical plants suspended from the ceiling, their only source of light a Jenny Holzer LED work installed in the corner of the room [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '07]. Allora & Calzadilla had discovered that the light-emitting diode signs



Growth (Survival), 2006, grafted tropical plants and Jenny Holzer's *Blue Wall Tilt* (2004, six double-sided LED signs with blue diodes). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

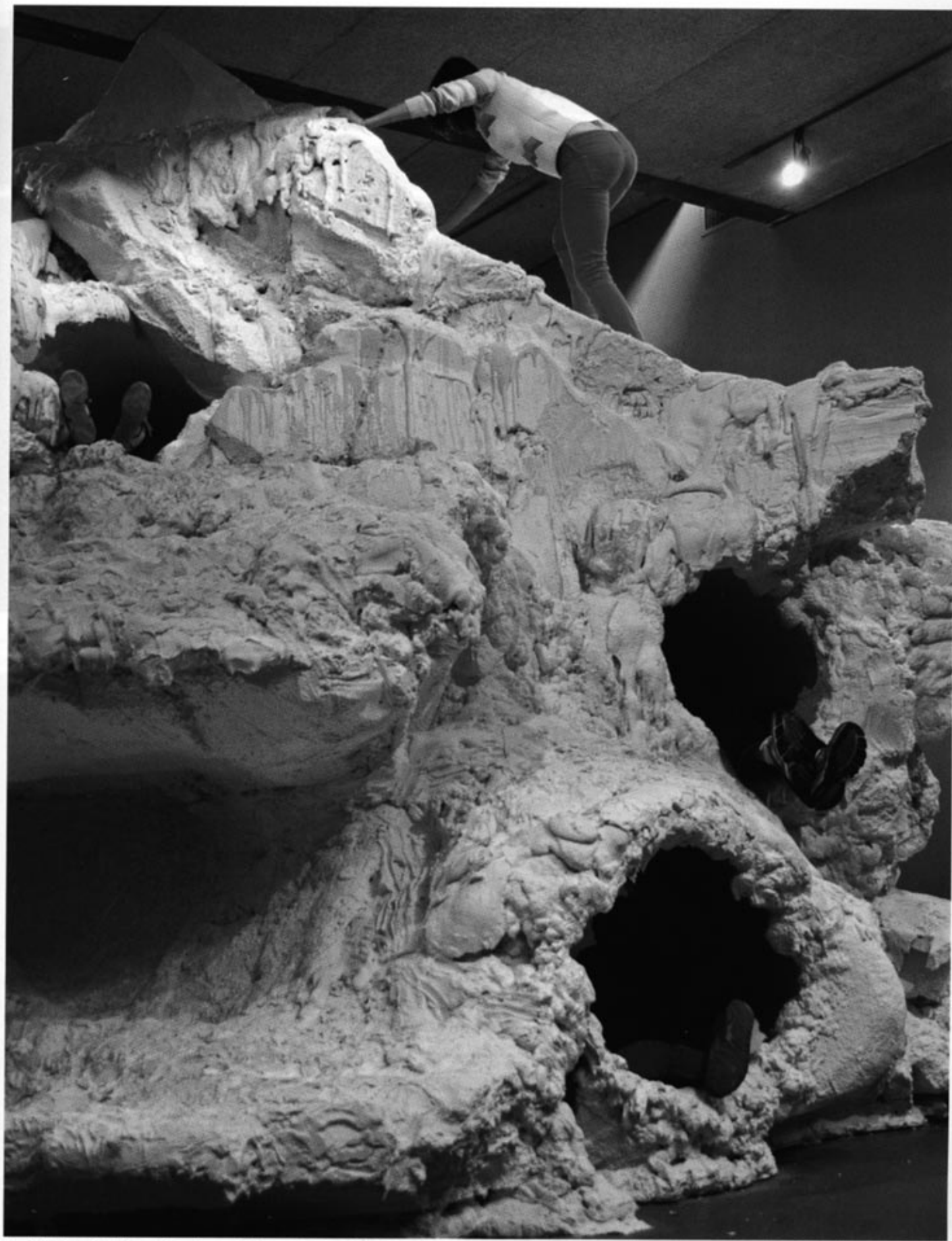
could spur photosynthesis, keeping these tropical transplants alive far from their native environment. The work is an effective reversal of the principle of their earlier *Puerto Rican Light* (2003), in which they borrowed a 1960s-era Dan Flavin fluorescent-light work of the same name and powered it with batteries charged by solar panels that captured the energy of the island's tropical sun. In *Growth (Survival)*, the light of an artwork associated with the privileged metropolitan “center” was enlisted to sustain these grafts of the colonial “periphery.” As with *Sweat Glands, Sweat Lands*, we see a piece of imported technology transformed into a tool of survival, and the show effectively comes full circle, reminding us of Allora & Calzadilla's consistent interest in “using what sinks.” Theirs is, we might say, a reinvention of the Situationist strategy of *détournement*—the appropriation or diversion of elements of the dominant culture—for a world of uneven development and systemic inequality. Some half-century ago, at the time of decolonization, cultural discourse in the so-called Third World was guided by the dream of inventing an authentic, pure national esthetic. Allora and Calzadilla, coming of age long after that dream had been bitterly relinquished, have at their best worked to insert themselves within the visual and aural topographies of a hegemonic American culture, recycling its products both high and low for defiant expressions of survival. □

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's work was on view at the Kunsthalle Zurich [June 2-Aug. 12, 2007]. *Clamor* was shown at the Moore Space, Miami [Dec. 8, 2006-Mar. 1, 2007], the first of a trio of related exhibitions that was followed by *Wake Up* at the Renaissance Society, Chicago [Mar. 4-Apr. 15, 2007], and *Sediments, Sentiments (Figures of Speech)*, which just closed at the San Francisco Art Institute [Oct. 19-Dec. 15, 2007]. This fall, Lisson Gallery, London showed two new works [Oct. 10-Nov. 17, 2007]. The artists have upcoming shows at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam [Feb. 8-May 4, 2008], the Kunstverein Muenchen [May 16-July 6] and the Haus der Kunst, Munich [June-August].

Author: Tom McDonough is associate professor of architecture and urban studies in the art history department at Binghamton University and an editor at Grey Room.

Wake Up, 2007, mixed mediums with recorded and live music, dimensions variable; at Kunsthalle Zurich. Photo A. Burger. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.





Partial view of Sediments, Sentiments (Figures of Speech), 2007, foam, white plaster, audio recordings and live performance; at San Francisco Art Institute. Photo Ryan Hendon and Seza Bali.