

Allora & Calzadilla

YATES MCKEE & JALEH MANSOOR

The Sediment of History

An Interview with Allora & Calzadilla

Yates McKee & Jaleh Mansoor: We understand that you are en route to Zurich to install a new show. Many of the works for which you have gained the most critical acclaim such as *CHALK* (1998–2002) and *LAND MARK* (1999–2003) have been produced site-specifically although you have consistently exposed this rubric to a great deal of pressure, if not displaced it altogether. For lack of a better word, is the Zurich project site-specific?

Jennifer Allora: The show in Zurich is not site-specific in the canonical sense of being wedded to the irreducible presence of a particular space and time, though the pieces are crucially informed by the problematic of displacement to which you refer, in a way that is simultaneously conceptual, metaphorical, and spatial.

Guillermo Calzadilla: We have chosen to group together a selection of both recent and older works that explore the interplay between militarism, war, and the significance of

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ALLORA & CALZADILLA, *HOPE HIPPO* (detail), 2005,
mud, whistle, daily newspaper, live person, 16 x 6 x 5' /
NILPFERD HOFFNUNG (Detail), Schlamm, Pfeife,
Tageszeitung, Leser, 490 x 183 x 152 cm.

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music/sound in this context. There's a new silent work in the show entitled *GROWTH (SURVIVAL)*, 2006, which involves a "botanical assemblage" of tropical plants originating in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (disseminated across the globe over the past three centuries through colonial networks of scientific research and capitalist agro-industry) that have been grafted together into a kind of hybrid, monstrous organism whose viability is uncertain.

Y&J: The title of which you appropriated from Jean Arp's famous work of 1938, a key example of sculptural organicism in which the art object is molded in such a way as to suggest an interior vital force bringing dead matter to life. Complicating such vitalism, you mobilized avant-garde techniques of fragmentation and disjunction in order to open onto the geopolitical genealogy of "organic form"—how has this set of world-historical and aesthetic problems been modified in the new work? How are we to understand this titular supplement of "survival"?

JA: Among other things, we take "survival," after Derrida, to mean the simultaneous destruction and remainder of an entity, a hovering between life and death in which the being in question can only endure on the condition of a certain loss of self-identity.

GC: Indeed, the growth and survival of the transplanted plants that comprise *GROWTH (SURVIVAL)* are literally dependent on a series of Light Emitting Diode (LED) signs by Jenny Holzer that are installed along with the trans-plant in the gallery, providing the only source of light or heat. Interestingly, LED is the technology used by NASA in artificially recreating the processes of photosynthesis and heliotropism in space laboratories, which is related to NASA's longstanding concern with determining the minimal conditions of biological survival in alien, extraterrestrial environments.

Y&J: Let's return to the political and ecological implications of your interest in this trope of survival in a moment. It bears mentioning that *GROWTH (SURVIVAL)* encrypts yet another reference to an earlier work of yours whose survival was also contingent upon the work of another art-historical ancestor, though in an almost inverted way. Your earlier work *PUERTO RICAN LIGHT* (1998–2003) staged a kind of intergenerational parasitism with the minimalist sculptor Dan Flavin. There, you collected several hundred hours worth of sunlight from Puerto Rico in a photovoltaic battery that was then transplanted to New York, where this energy reserve was used to temporarily power Flavin's 1969

PUERTO RICAN LIGHT, whose coloristic composition was purportedly inspired by the artist's encounter with a sublime tropical sunset while on vacation in the politically fraught locus of Puerto Rico. This work shares with *GROWTH (SURVIVAL)* a dense interweaving of the issues of intergenerational art-historical exchange, postcolonial geographical dislocation, and the etymological metaphors of *photos* (Gk. < light) and *helios* (Gk. < sun). Indeed, the word "metaphor" itself involves questions of travel and dislocation. To pose a rather broad question, what role does metaphor play in your work, whether at the level of your play with titles, materials, or concepts?

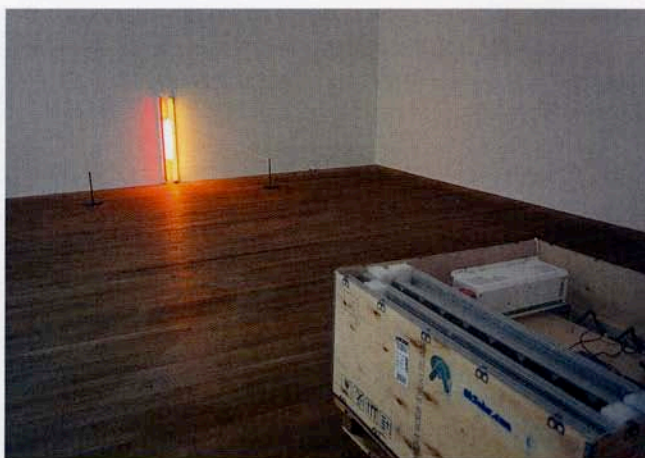
GC: We've already touched a bit on how we understand the metaphor of survival as a question of both biological existence and historical memory, but for us it's crucial that such a trope become operative at the level of a work's materials and materiality—our use of actual living organisms in the gallery for instance. That said, materiality and metaphoricity constitute a couple. In other words, a material is never simply self-evident in its meaning; it is always marked with histories, cultures, and politics that are at once irreducible to and indissociable from the material in question. Any material is going to have the weight of history inscribed in it. The time of the world is there; geologically, geopolitically, there is always an allegorical dimension to materials. A tropical plant, for instance, cannot be treated as a bare biological life without effacing its colonial genealogy, even though we are quite interested in the actual temporalities and processes of the living organism as a sculptural problematic.

Y&J: In other words, you contaminate biomorphism with the biopolitical. Among the various art-historical progenitors of this interest in the non-self-identity and historicity of artistic materials would be the Arte Povera artists. Against the arguably positivist investment by American Minimalists in the sheerly physical or phenomenological properties of this or that industrial material—Plexiglas, lead, neon, felt—Arte Povera insisted on the mnemonic and cultural overdetermination of the materials they used, which often included living, organic, or natural materials of some sort. Has Arte Povera been a reference at all in your thinking and practice? Jannis Kounellis, in particular, comes to mind, not only in the trans-plants of *GROWTH* but also in a work such as *HOPE HIPPO* (2005), a mimetically rendered sculpture of a hippopotamus made for the 2005 Venice Biennale—it was made of mud from the canal, right?

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DAN FLAVIN, *PUERTO RICAN LIGHT (TO JEANNIE BLAKE)*, 1965, and ALLORA & CALZADILLA, *PUERTO RICAN LIGHT*, 1998–2003, battery bank containing solar panels, batteries, inverter / *PUERTORIKANISCHES LICHT*, Batterie mit Solarzellen, Batterien, Inverter.

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JA: Yes. This is a perfect case in which the physical properties of a sculptural material—mud—are constitutively marked by history and culture. Not in the sense of a grand artistic tradition, such as granite or bronze, but rather in the sense of the waste products and detritus of a city that have accumulated over hundreds of years as sediment at the bottom of the Venice canal. We literally delved into the dregs of history in order to conjure up the hippopotamus (Latin < river horse) as a kind of monstrous, counter-memorial figure to the triumphalist equestrian monuments that populate the public spaces of the city. And, yes, one point of reference was indeed Kounellis' 12 CAVALLI (1969).

Y&J: Where the artist lined the gallery with a series of horses—an exemplary subject of classical Italian sculpture—transforming the sculptural object into a *biogranic* shit-machine producing serial piles of dung... a rather different take on “process” than American post-minimalists! HOPE HIPPO also brings us to another recurrent trope in your work, that of animality or creaturehood, and its unstable relationship to the realm of the human. We see this in your *SPEECH-AIMER* (2003), in which participants wore a precariously shared *parangolé* of monster masks based on pre-historic marine organisms (each mask contained a voice amplifier and a laser that could be aimed in any direction, making the entire environment a potential “target” of address) or again in the video *SWEAT GLANDS SWEAT LANDS* (2006), which involves the roasting of a pig on a spit

that has been collaged onto the accelerator of a stationary automobile like some sort of perverse Duchampian sacrifice-machine. Most recently, you presented a new video *AMPHIBIOUS (LOGIN/LOGOUT)*, 2005, in the ICP “Eco-topia” exhibition, which stars a cluster of turtles set adrift on a log along the currents of the Pearl River in Southern China.

JA: Yes, the question of animality is crucial for us as an art-historical, philosophical, and ethico-political problem. What is the difference between human and inhuman marks, the tracks or traces made by those creatures supposedly invested with self-consciousness, subjectivity, and those putatively animated by nothing other than a base struggle for survival? What are the economies of antagonism, identification, fear, and desire that mark human-animal relations? Without positing some ideal of inter-species reconciliation, we are interested in destabilizing this relationship and mining its metaphorical and poetic possibilities. In *AMPHIBIOUS*, we framed the turtles as both the serialized objects of a distributional sculpture and as silent, strangely anthropomorphic witnesses to the ecological devastation wrought on the natural and human landscape by the market-driven hyperindustrialization of the Pearl River Delta.

Y&J: There might be a connection between the turtles' river-bound *dérive* and the hybrid protest-vehicle featured in *UNDER DISCUSSION* (2005), which also involved a dimension of ecological witness-bearing—albeit in the context of Vieques, the Puerto Rican island that was used for decades

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as a weapons-testing range by the US Navy until the latter was pressured to leave by a civil disobedience campaign in 2002.

JA: We worked with the campaign you mention, but we also wanted to follow up with the situation there after the apparent success of the civil disobedients. The Navy did vacate the island, but the contaminated sections were turned over to the department of the interior and marked as a wildlife preserve rather than given to the local municipality where its future could be democratically debated. In the aftermath of the well-publicized direct-action campaign, local nongovernmental activists have been struggling with how a) to ensure accountability from the government to remediate the areas in question and b) to propose plans for the sustainable development of the island.

GC: Drawing in equal measure from the constructivist

imperative of public functionality and the critical absurdity of surrealist collage, in *UNDER DISCUSSION* we retrofitted a conference table with an outboard motor and asked a local activist—the son of a fisherman-activist from the 1970s, actually—to pilot it around what had once been communal fishing areas directly off the contaminated part of the island that are currently unfishable because of the government's refusal to perform environmental remediation.

Y&J: Refusing to reduce politics to a rational negotiation within a predetermined procedural framework of government, this work recalls the disruptive tactical media interventions of Greenpeace in the 1970s, and it complicates the empty signifier of “sustainability” so frequently cited by policymakers, activists, and artists concerned with environmental issues. As formalized in the UN's *Our Common Future* report of 1987, “sustainability entails development that

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meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own."¹⁾

GC: In Vieques, this concept takes on specific political stakes: sustainability for whom, and on what terms? Our concern is that any attention to the lives of current and future generations must be marked by the memory of the dead, whose traces precariously survive in the present.

Y & J: A key figure cited in most discussions of art and ecological sustainability is Joseph Beuys, whose late work was preoccupied with what he called an "Energy Plan for Western Man," the iterations of which included his I LOVE AMERICA AND AMERICA LOVES ME (1974) and his tree-planting project for the 1982 documenta. For many critics, the nail in the coffin of any productive engagement with Beuys was hammered more than twenty years ago by Benjamin Buchloh in his 1980 article published in *Artforum*, "The Twilight of the Idol,"²⁾ where the artist is denounced

for his rhetoric of mysticism and shamanism, his sense of art as a medium of collective healing and harmonization. In past interviews, you've cited Beuys as a point of reference for your work; can you elaborate, in light of both the Buchlohian critique and the recent renaissance of enthusiasm for the artist?

GC: We are not afraid to acknowledge the indispensability of Beuys for our work, but we would also distance ourselves from the dimensions of primitivist ideology, hermetic iconography, spectacular self-promotion, and his pretensions to have transcended political antagonism in the name of an organically unified community. Our work is detached from us as artistic personalities; it has internal conceptual generators that give it a life of its own. The key thing we take from Beuys is his interest in the metaphorically, historically, and psychically laden character of materials. But rather than a one-to-one correspondence with some transcendent meaning, idea, or spiritual substance, we are



ALLORA & CALZADILLA, *AMBHIBIOUS*
(*LOGIN-LOGOUT*), 2005, 1-channel video
with sound, 6'22" / *AMPHIBISCH*
(*LOGIN-LOGOUT*), 1-Kanal-Video mit Ton.



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interested in the unstable and polysemic resonance of materials, as well as their physical properties in the post-minimalist sense.

Y&J: Felt, for instance—a key material for both Beuys and his erstwhile disciple Robert Morris—was central to the component of your Vieques project LAND MARK (1999–2003), installed at Tate Modern in 2003, in which you transferred a spectrometric satellite reading of the bomb-scarred topography of Vieques onto a set of felt carpet tiles that covered the floor of the gallery. While bearing the displaced indexical traces of a distant environmental disaster zone, the felt carpet also became a kind of shock absorber that enabled mediation with the audience.

JA: There we were playing with the double association of felt as an insulating, compressed material with a certain familiar texture, as well as the verb “to feel,” both in the sense of an active process of handling a specific object or material as well as the passive sense of being affected by a force that comes from outside oneself—in the way one might feel an earthquake, or, in the case of Vieques, the blast of a carpet-bombing raid.

GC: Moreover, we did not want to glorify nor make a beautiful image of destruction, but rather to expose this image to undoing, making it vulnerable/flexible in its own constitution. The pieces that together made up the compositional graphic of the floor were not fixed to each other in any manner, so that the entire simulated terrain potentially could come undone, through simply shifting or moving any of its individual parts. The intention for this unstable arrangement was to allow for the possibility of re-structuring, re-configuration, and change. It was meant to mimic the actual status of the land represented, its undefined future after the departure of the Navy.

Y&J: The projects we have discussed thus far have roamed across the art-historical landscape in terms of their formal, technical, and political inspiration, from constructivist equipment design to the materialist poetics of Arte Povera. Your work is obviously not medium-specific in any traditional sense. In other words, you would identify as not sculptors, poets, photographers, architects, or musicians, even as you have substantially engaged each of these traditions. That said, do you feel you have a medium?

JA: We are certainly interested in the problems and concepts that adhere mnemonically to particular mediums—any work of sculpture, for instance, must confront questions of scale, volume, materiality, installation, the relation

between aesthetic objects, perceiving subjects, and spatio-architectural containers.

GC: Sculpture is a heterogeneous tradition that we involuntarily inherit, but also take pleasure in drawing from, exploring, manipulating, rearticulating, in light of contemporary socio-political conditions. This is what we might call the responsibility of forms. But you are right that we do not simply identify as sculptors. Why, as historians, would it be important or interesting for you to identify us with a medium? We don't think we would want our work to be reduced to one! We get the sense you mean something different.

Y&J: We are thinking of what Rosalind Krauss has called the “post-medium condition.” Rather than a purely self-contained tradition—painting or sculpture, for instance—a medium for Krauss would need to account for an entire oeuvre, a whole problem-set taken up in a seeming heterogeneous variety of ways without collapsing into a de-differentiated field of “multimedia”; it would be a kind of framing device that is irreducible to neither a sheer physical support nor a set of immaterial ideas posited by the artist independently of the object itself. Our question is motivated by a resistance to the recent emergence of a neo-situationist impulse in contemporary art that calls for artists to dissolve their practice into an expanded field of activist counter-publicity; from this position, art loses its specificity and is judged according to political ends that are external to its own aesthetic or formal means, which is to say, its media and mediums. You are sympathetic to this impulse, but refuse to be assimilated to it altogether.

GC: Perhaps we could say that our medium is the trace—a mnemonic problematic of marking and effacement, preservation and destruction, life and death that unsettles any linear relation between past, present, and future.

Y&J: Trace as medium—one informed by the memory of past generations and those yet to come.

JA: Yes, a medium that resonates, materially and metaphorically, with the politico-ecological imperative of sustainability. At stake is the survival of both art as a discipline and life itself as a biopolitical object under historical conditions of extreme duress.

1) United Nations, *Our Common Future: A Report from the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 1.

2) Benjamin Buchloh, “Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol,” *Artforum International* (January 1980), pp. 35–43.