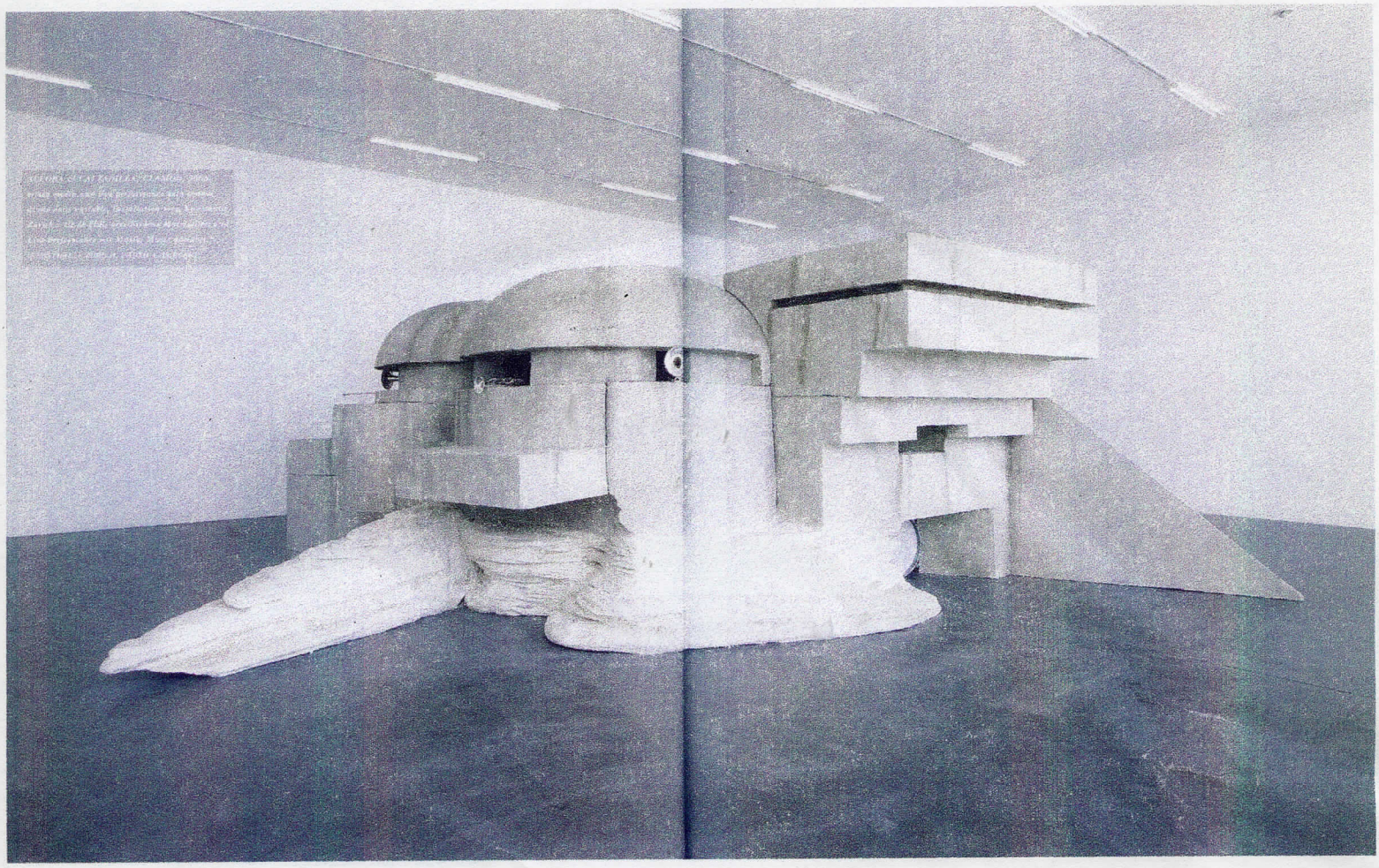
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Walker, Hamza, "Wake Up Call" Parkett, No. 80, 2007



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Allora & Calzadilla

Wake Up Call

HAMZA WALKER

And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets.

The Book of Revelations 8:2

The trumpet comes with a lot of cultural baggage and *Revelations* is a case in point. With deep pre-musical origins, the trumpet is a relatively universal artifact appearing in different cultures at different moments in history. *Revelations* was written well before the trumpet would become the musical contraption it is today. Its allegorical significance in the Bible was strictly a function of its use in making formal ceremonial announcements. But even as it evolved into a musical instrument, the trumpet never lost its stately patrimony becoming perhaps the only instrument with a built-in military repertoire. When Walter Pater wrote "all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music,"[1] he did not have in mind the non-musical portion of the trumpet's history. That would have ruined his notion of music as a purely autonomous art. Or would it?

No matter how symbolic, music, as an arrangement of sound that is inherently abstract, could never be said to literally represent anything, making it a conspicuous platform from which to critique the tension between aesthetics and politics. Throwing this age-old divide into high relief has become Allora and Calzadilla's trademark *modus operandi*. Their interest in music no doubt stems from its supposed immunity to the debate between artwork taking up issues of social justice versus artwork reduced exclusively to formal concerns. Their recent spate of projects, RETURNING A SOUND (2004), CLAMOR (2006), and WAKE UP (2007), were all brassy affairs featuring a combination of music and performative elements. In each case, the artists looked to music "as an irreducible form of political speech,"[2] one that while maintaining its autonomy could not fail to signify the saber rattling escapades of state.

On that topic, from their native Puerto Rico, Allora and Calzadilla need only look next door to the island of Vieques. Used by the U.S. military as a bombing test site, Vieques is known for the vehement protests staged by its residents. RETURNING A SOUND is a video documenting a Vieques resident's road trip to sites formerly off limits via a moped whose exhaust pipe was outfitted with a trumpet. The driver's deadpan, Chaplinesque expression blithely offsets the absurdity of an exhaust-powered trumpet whose change in pitch (corresponding

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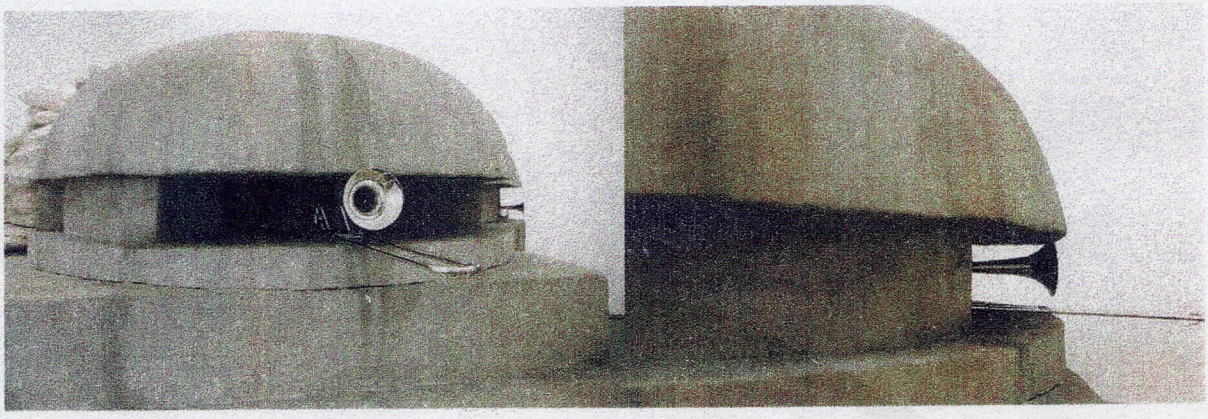
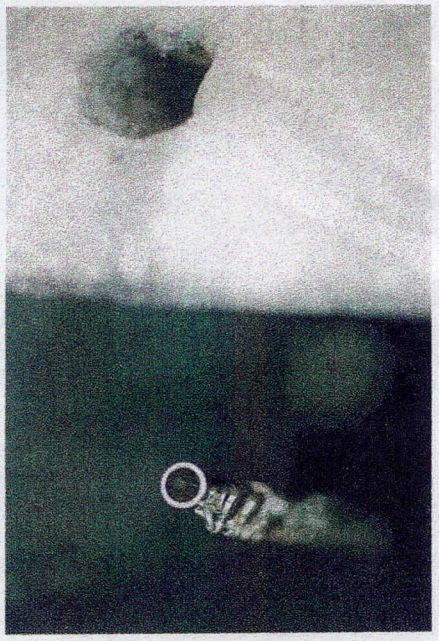


ALLORA & CALZADILLA. CLAMOR, 2006, details, mixed media and live performance with sound, dimensions variable / GEZETER, Details, verschiedene Materialien und Live-Performance mit Musik, Masse variabel.



to a shift in gears) provides an element of slapstick. The military is invoked insofar as the work speaks through an instrument familiar for its capacity to signal, only now it has been reduced to the steady vibrato of a single note; a shrill drone in return for explosions. Given the success of the civil disobedience campaign in ending sixty years of military activity, RETURNING A SOUND was in part a victory lap. But at the same time it could be said to signal the military's retreat; it was also a call for residents to remain vigilant as ownership of the contested land was transferred from the military not to the local authorities but to the U.S. Department of the Interior. For many residents, the term "wildlife refuge" was a not-so-subtle code for neglect of the non-benign variety.

A humorous gesture unto itself, RETURNING A SOUND's deeper meaning comes from its context, making it site-dependent if not site-specific. As one of several works for and about Vieques, RETURNING A SOUND qualifies as social sculpture. If, however, Allora and Calzadilla qualify as sculptors, it is in abiding by sculpture's dismantlement. In the wake of modernist sculpture's decisive conclusion in institutional critique, sculpture has become an altogether useless category in describing a class of activity to which

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any and everything could belong. In this regard, Allora and Calzadilla are wary of reconstituting an art object which for them is anything but a given. Based on CLAMOR, which was half military bunker and half Dadaist installation, the operative equation is: the nearer to monument the nearer to farce.

CLAMOR's opening night at The Moore Space in Miami featured a small music ensemble (trumpet, tuba, flute, trombone, and drummer) performing a host of war songs, marches, and battle hymns all inside a large structure resembling a concrete military bunker. Among the more standard fare were Barney the Dinosaur's "I Love You" and Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A" (as they were used to torture detainees in Guantanamo), and Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It" (a favorite of American forces during the 1989 invasion of Panama). Save for the trombone slide poking through an embrasure and a low window exposing the tuba's bell, the band was completely concealed. More monumental than the sculpture itself was the band's performance, which, with over three hours of music, became an endurance test. Bombast gave way to cacophony, which in turn gave way to a peripatetic tumult of disfigured nationalist fanfare. In this respect, CLAMOR's performative aspect trumped any dimension of autonomy lent by the music. It became a resolutely and pointedly figurative work whose structure referenced an authority quickly rendered by the music as parody.

WAKE UP, like CLAMOR, was clearly conceived for a gallery space. It too featured a live musical component during the opening reception and a recorded component for the duration of the exhibition. But unlike CLAMOR's representational reference to the military, WAKE UP's starkly abstract sculptural component suggested that the visual arts need no longer aspire to the condition of music for they have already arrived.

For WAKE UP, the artists commissioned seven trumpet players to write and perform interpretations of Reveille, the bugle call signaling the start of the military day. Just over ninety minutes of music, the recordings were played back over a dozen speakers inside a simple but very large drywall structure whose interior was likewise lined with several dozen three-hundred-watt bulbs. The music and light were synchronized through a computer that, along with all other hardware including the bulbs and speakers, was inside the structure hidden from view. Powered by a dimming unit used for theater productions, the bulbs cast their light through the structure's open top, their brightness determined by the amplitude of the music. Following the music, the light, in addition to changing brightness, traveled across the series of bulbs so as to be projected from different areas of the gallery. The bulbs were incandescent, their luminosity ranging from a peach glow to a brilliant white. As the music demanded, the brightness could change in a smooth continuum or flash abruptly. Although Reveille is a clear reference to dawn, the lights produced the uncanny sensation of not-too-distant explosions.

A stark white expanse of eight-foot-high drywall, WAKE UP's sculptural component could easily be taken as a permanent part of the gallery where it was installed. Completely self-contained, the structure mirrored the gallery space, becoming, quite literally, a white cube inside the white cube. Hopelessly autonomous, the only reference outside of itself was to a hefty slab of site-specificity cum institutional self-reflexivity à la Robert Morris. If modern art's apogee was in its having achieved absolute autonomy, then Allora and Calzadilla are postmodern in the literal sense of aiding and abetting Minimalism's further transition into the recesses of art history where it is just another language, or worse, style. Rather than descend into mannerism, Allora and Calzadilla reinscribe a previous generation's autonomy within a

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dialectic that derives its meaning and, indeed, strength of purpose not by acting apart from but in concert with a previously disavowed content. An autonomous art, no matter how supposedly pure, could no longer be said to function in opposition to an issue-based, representational art. In this respect, they are the children of none other than Felix Gonzalez Torres.

More than two generations removed from Minimalism proper, Allora and Calzadilla's work in general and WAKE UP in particular tacitly reveal the historical contingency of an autonomous art as a *fait accompli* of the twentieth century. Moreover, as Daniel Buren continues to make abundantly clear, the autonomous work of art may be introduced into contexts well outside the gallery and maintain its integrity as such. At issue instead is parity between an autonomous art and the social sphere as they have entered into a dialectic that continues to evolve in the wake of the 1960s, which had more than its fill of art and politics. With an ability to produce work with, for, and about the residents of the island of Vieques, on the one hand, and an exceptionally adroit addendum to a work by Dan Flavin on the other, Allora and Calzadilla have proven adept at approaching context as a sliding scale for an equilibrium between art and life which, in this equation, are never mutually exclusive of one another.

With more than a few works allowing them to qualify as "interventionists," Allora and Calzadilla wholeheartedly subscribe to a definition in which what art depends on where it is, be it in the street or in the gallery. Interventions, however, are hardly their stock-in-trade. Likewise, despite the scope and accrual of events since the 2000 presidential election debacle, they are far less beholden to the demand for a so-called "political art" than they are to strands of an art practice that modernity has left hopelessly unreconciled (as the advent of abstraction would question art's accountability, if any, to effecting social change). While their work derives a great deal of its cultural currency from the rhetoric of globalization, it is at its most powerful when considered part of a methodology in which art can enter into life and life into art regardless of whether the context is as politically charged as Vieques or as seemingly remote and autonomous as the museum gallery.

WAKE UP is an unabashedly autonomous work. By virtue of Pater's statement, music not only qualifies unconditionally as a discipline meeting the most stringent demand for autonomy, it sets the bar. Yet, despite the irony in their choice of Reveille, a work that cannot fail to function metonymically as a stand-in for the military, WAKE UP represents a critical rearguard in relationship to the vogue (some might say plague) of music in the visual arts.

The history of experimentation in regard to light and sound falls into a plurality of strands. As they have come to fruition in the present, those strands have all but obscured any criticality regarding the historically rich relationship between music and the visual arts. In this respect, WAKE UP was conspicuously tidy and lean, coming across as an uncompromising capitulation to Pater. Here was an autonomous site containing an autonomous structure at the service of an autonomous form. No bones about it. That music should find its visual corollary in light, plain and simple, only underscored a paradigm of modernist transcendence and purity.

WAKE UP, however, would indulge such hyperbole only to come across as an anachronism within the modernist rubric of experimental light and sound works—works which arguably culminated in cinema. Falling outside the traditional purview of painting and sculpture, such experimental works were neither one art form nor another, all the while occupying an awkward relationship to cinema. In that regard, an unintended effect at The Renaissance Society was a crude but striking animation of shadows cast by the gallery's truss work. If, however,

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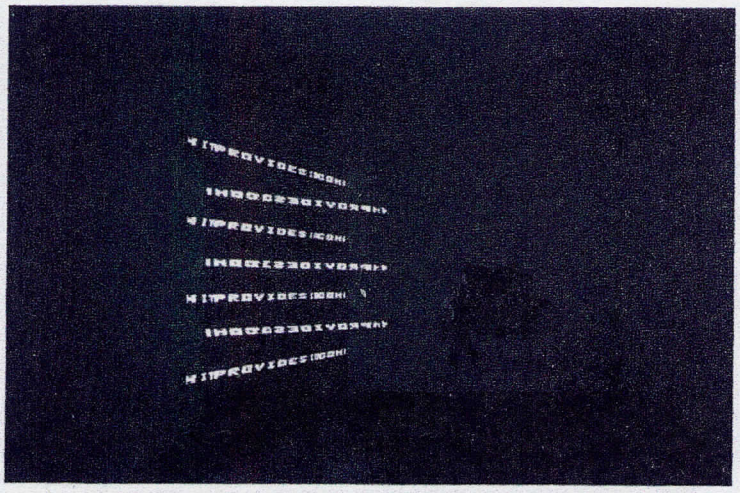

ALLORA & CALZADILLA, GROWTH (SURVIVAL), 2006/2007, grafted tropical plant and Jenny Holzer's JH725 YELLOW CORNER, 2002, dimensions variable / WACHSTUM (ÜBERLEBEN), gepfropfte tropische Pflanze und Jenny Holzers JH725 GELBE ECKE, Masse variabel.

WAKE UP is considered a contemporary experimental work, it is by virtue of the trumpet players in whose hands it becomes clear that the trumpet, if not the most sophisticated, is easily the most exquisite piece of plumbing outside the human respiratory and gastrointestinal systems.

The trumpet players represent a broad range of styles, from the starkly conceptual approach of Birgit Ulher, to the rapid-fire, lengthy post-bop phrasing of Paul Smoker, to the breathy, microphone-enhanced atmospherics of Leonel Kaplan and Franz Hautzinger. In most cases the compositions and performances bore no resemblance whatsoever to the familiar tune of Reveille. Although the musicians occasionally used Reveille in a schematic sense—as in the case of Ulher and Natsuki Tamura, whose work is divided into three sections, "A"(startle), "B"(shake), and "C"(awake)—the particular details of their approaches to Reveille pale in comparison to the deconstruction and expansion of sounds the trumpet is capable of making.

Allora and Calzadilla's work does not resolve the age-old question of art's relation to politics. It perpetually reframes the question so that it would remain reducible only as far as that of the chicken or the egg. WAKE UP is not itself a work of so-called "political art," a false category which assumes a discreet political domain. For Allora and Calzadilla politics is instead a way of looking, an attribute ascribed through a particular perspective, meaning politics are both everywhere and nowhere. Although the question of art's relationship to effecting social change is transmissible from one generation to the next, the answer is not to be found. What worked for one generation may not be applicable to the next. In this regard, it is indeed time to wake up and smell the coffee.

1) Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, originally published in 1873 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1935), p. 124.
2) From a conversation with the artist, February 2007.

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