

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Campbell-Johnston, Rachel, "Clamor at Serpentine Gallery", Times online, from: The Times, April 10, 2007

From **The Times**

April 10, 2007

## Clamor at Serpentine Gallery

**A polystyrene bunker concealing a band playing martial music very loudly? No wonder the antiwar sculpture bound for the Serpentine Gallery is called Clamor. Our correspondent meets its creators**

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Is it a work of art or an act of war? A forthcoming Serpentine show may make you wonder. An installation called *Clamor* will be set up in this tranquil Kensington Gardens site.

"So what can I expect?" I asked someone who saw it a few months ago at a Miami art fair. She paused for a few seconds before replying: "Well, it's a piece that quite literally shatters the peace."



*Clamor* is by Jennifer Allora, aged 33, and Guillermo Calzadilla, 36, an artistic duo who first met as students on an international programme in Florence. He was from Cuba, she from the United States. "But it was like there was this chemistry between us," Allora says. "We just talked and talked and talked."

Clearly, 12 years later, the conversation has still not finished. Though both returned to their respective colleges to complete the final years of their degrees, they arranged to meet up again as soon as they had finished and have been together — both as artists and lovers — ever since.

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"The fact that there is always another person with you, who sees things from a point of view that is not your own, means that there is always this questioning," says Calzadilla. It is this constant questioning that provides the restlessly shifting foundation for their probing works. *Clamor* is certainly not an easy work to make sense of. Sculpture, sound and performance all come together in one piece. And it's pretty visually disconcerting. It looks different from every angle. One moment you are confronting what looks like a Dalek's head, the next you are standing by what seems to be a stratified chalk cliff.

"It's a hybrid structure," Allora explains, "but you can recognise in it several different types of military architecture, from the natural rock formations that would offer a vantage point, through the bunker or the tank turret, to the rubble of a city in ruins." But sonically this art work is even more disturbing. This is a piece that you hear before you see it. From deep inside it there issues an ear-assaulting cacophony, a head-shattering maelstrom of military music. This, you realise with amazement as you draw closer to the work and see the end of a flute poking out of a gun slit, for instance, or the slide to a trombone poking out through a gap, is played by a live band secreted within the dark interior of the structure.

"We have been accumulating musical scores from across the world," the artists explain. "Anything from patriotic songs, through battle marches to the tunes that the soldiers currently fighting in Iraq are listening to."

The last range, apparently, from country music to Eminem. Listen a while and you might pick up anything from the strains of Twisted Sister's *We're Not Gonna Take It*, one of the songs blasted at the palace of President Manuel Noriega during the United States's invasion of Panama 1989 to the theme song of *Barney* — the "I love you, you love me" ditty — which was used as an accompaniment to torture in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

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Occasionally, Allora says, two tunes might harmonise for a few moments. A ballad from the October Revolution, for instance, might line up with a march from the American Civil War. The overlap will breed new meanings and associations. But then it will all collapse again into clashing dissonance.

So this, it becomes clear, is an art work about war. But what on earth can it add? Conflict, of course, has always aroused the creative imagination. From Trajan's column to Goya's dark etchings, war has inspired stirring images. It has a barbarity and a beauty, a horror and a humanity that ignite fierce feelings. And for the artist it presents a powerful creative allure.

But nowadays it sometimes seems that everyone, from Turner Prize contenders such as Langlands & Bell, Yinka Shonibare or Mark Wallinger to their lesser known contemporaries who turn up for group shows in local galleries, is dealing with some aspect of the subject. Can they add to the arguments that we seem to be constantly rehearsing on television and radio in newspapers, at dinner parties and in pubs? "War is a bad thing" seems to be the generally accepted point in creative circles — except perhaps in the case of Damien Hirst, who was pilloried for pointing out the parallels between creation and destruction when the World Trade Centre was attacked.

If Allora and Calzadilla are jumping on a bandwagon then it is certainly a very loud one. This is a pair that knows how to make a point. At the last Venice Biennale, for instance, their installation in which a person sat reading the paper on the back of a life-sized hippo was probably the most photographed work.

That's why they use humour as a tool — though not in the sense of the comical joke. "Completely the opposite," insists Allora. "This is laughter as a result of discovering something new, a new way of seeing or understanding."

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"We like the potential of transformation that humour contains," says Calzadilla. "That a work can affect you physiologically to such an extent that it can produce an internal explosion in your body in the form of laughter."

Their artworks have always included an anarchic element of the absurd — from their very first piece, which involved the people of Lima in complicated collaborations with a giant stick of chalk (the performance ended, apparently, when the military intervened) to this new work at the Serpentine in which there is something innately ludicrous about the notion of an entire orchestra trapped inside an apparently impenetrable (polystyrene) bunker.

But *Clamor* is a direct development of a series of works that the artists have been doing over the past few years on the island of Vieques, just off Puerto Rico, where they are based. Large sections of this island were appropriated by the US military for weapons testing, resulting in the protests and civil disobedience that the couple have supported with performances involving anything from welding a trumpet to the exhaust of a motorcycle to motoring round the island's perimeters on an upturned conference table with an outboard motor attached. Now they want to move outwards from this local field of conflict and explore the wider parameters of warfare. "We wanted to create a theatre of thought like that which has surrounded the theatres of war throughout human civilisation," says Allora.

Ever since skin drums first marshalled primitive tribes, human conflicts have had a musical accompaniment. Many musical instruments, the artists explain, were originally used to command people to fight. "Now," says Allora, "at a time when war seems to have become the means through which political ends are achieved, when it has become the way that human beings are deciding to resolve their conflicts, we want to look at what makes people engage in this kind of behaviour, as well as what culture has to do with making people react in this way."

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Culture has an important role to play, not least in the current climate in which we are engaged in a war less of nations than of civilisations; in which we are fighting not over boundaries but over beliefs. *Clamor* is a montage of ideas that encourages its visitors to contemplate symbols of political power — symbols less common than flags or uniforms, but equally influential. It asks us to question how these can be manipulated for good or ill.

But, like all the most resonant art works, it remains ambiguous. The visitor is trapped in a no-man's land between attraction and repulsion. He is lured onwards by curiosity and driven back by the cacophony. This is a piece in which you can hear yourself think.

*Clamor* will be at the Serpentine Gallery, London W2 (020-7402 6075), April 17-29