

Allora and Calzadilla

By Carlos Motta

BOMB Magazine, September 2009

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.

—Isak Dinesen

Since 1995, artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla have collaboratively produced an expansive interdisciplinary body of work. Their videos, sound pieces, installations, sculptures, photographs, performances, and social interventions reflect on and use contemporary and historical socio-political conditions and events as a point of departure. I first became interested in their work when I encountered *Landmarks* and *Returning a Sound*, two pieces made in response to the civil disobedience campaign in Vieques, Puerto Rico, which lyrically addressed the particular history of US militaristic ideology and intervention on the island. Allora and Calzadilla's particular approach to the political is closely connected to their determined site-specificity. Their manipulation of objects, sound, and environments would be impossible without their preceding research and thoughtful response to the sites where they produce and show their work.

An Allora and Calzadilla project begins with this “hands-on” involvement before being transformed into an affective work that makes sophisticated use of metaphor and language as narrative and aesthetic devices. Two pieces especially indicative of this are *Chalk*, a monumental social intervention in Lima's central square where artists distributed enormous pieces of chalk amongst the public, who used it to write temporary messages (political and otherwise) on the plaza's pavement; and *Hope Hippo*, a life-scale hippopotamus made of mud for the 2005 Venice Biennale, on top of which a volunteer read the daily newspaper and blew a whistle upon encountering an instance of social injustice in the news. But I think their recent piece *Stop, Repair, Prepare* represents their greatest synthesis of conceptual rigor, political awareness, and sensitivity to form. This sculptural

performance consists of a grand piano with a hole in its body through which a pianist stands and plays Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" (the anthem of the European Union as well as the inauguration song for a Nazi propaganda building) while laboriously pushing the instrument around the space.

This interview was conducted by email over a period of two weeks between New York and Berlin, while the duo was preparing their new exhibition for the Temporäre Kunsthalle.

Carlos Motta: There is currently a cacophony of sounds and images being produced in Honduras—the effects of the military coup, which ousted Manuel Zelaya from presidency yesterday. The national anthem is being sung by pro- and anti-*golpistas* alike, shifting its meaning to fit their respective ideological stands. Crowds are joining to form spontaneous choirs, screaming slogans of support and/or resistance. Militarism and the media are reproducing an aesthetic of antagonism, a spectacle of politics. Several of your recent projects address the aesthetics and political implications of sound and music associated with militarism and war. Could you share your thoughts on conflict as an *aesthetic force*? And expand on your engagement with it as artists and as activists?

Guillermo Calzadilla: We see a fundamental relationship between violence and form in the sense that the creation of all forms entails a certain violence—the exclusion of everything the said form is not. The idea of “conflict as an aesthetic force” is much more troubling for us, as it asks how social violence in the form of conflict affects sensory values and taste. This is a provocative question that opens up new angles we hadn't considered before in the relation of our work to militarism and music.

Jennifer Allora: One example of the direct influence of military conflict on musical aesthetics is the “alla turca” musical style of the late 18th and 19th centuries. This was popular among Western classical composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn, who attempted to imitate the sounds of the

Turkish *mehterhane* (Janissary bands) with the sounds of bass drums, triangles, and cymbals folded into their scores. It is argued that these “exotic” sounds first entered Viennese classical music culture after the 1683 Ottoman siege of Vienna.

Another example, this time from the First World War is the 369th Regiment. This was the first African-American combat unit consisting of musicians recruited from Harlem to Puerto Rico, led by James Reese Europe, a famous ragtime composer and bandleader. Known as the “Harlem Hell fighters,” they formed a military band and performed for the troops, government officials, and French civilians while on duty in France in 1918 and 1919. They are largely responsible for bringing jazz music to France.

GC: There are endless examples of these kinds of cross-cultural influences brought about by military conflicts, but these are just a few of the many ways in which the history of war has affected the history of music.

JA: And vice versa...from Aeolian kite flutes used during the Han dynasty, whose sounds emitted were thought to be warnings from the gods, petrifying the enemy and causing them to flee, to the Scottish Great Highland Bagpipe, the only instrument to be declared a weapon of war, music has served as both a psychological weapon and a way to communicate in battle.

GC: Right...also, take the current Iraq war- loudspeaker assaults during PSYOP missions make use of pop, heavy metal, rap and rock music as a sonic weapon blasted onto buildings to prevent insurgents from sleeping and for its perceived cultural offensiveness. Music is used here directly as a weapon to detract the opponents’ ability to fight and to increase the possibility of surrender.

CM: How did your interest in this subject begin?

JA: We first became interested in this question during our involvement with the civil disobedience campaign in Vieques, Puerto Rico that ultimately led to the closure of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility, a 60-year-old military

ammunitions storage facility and multiple warfare practice range supporting large-scale virtual war scenarios from land, air, and sea. *Vieques Libre*, as it was popularly known, was a grassroots movement that grew to include an international network of support for Peace and Environmental Justice not only for the inhabitants of Vieques who were exposed to toxic levels of contamination, land expropriation, and environmental degradation, but also for the thousands of innocent civilians whose lives were destroyed as a result of US-led military conflicts that were prepared for in Vieques.

GC: As artists, we became interested in questions related to the sonic violence that marked this space, as it was exposed to ear-splitting detonations up to 250 days out of the year. The first work we made in that regard was *Returning a Sound*, which we filmed just after the military lands were (semi)-opened to the public in 2003.

JA: We decided to make a work that acknowledged the achievement of the Peace and Justice campaign, while at the same time, pointing to the new stakes. The video addresses not only the landscape of Vieques, but also its soundscape, which for residents of the island remains marked by the memory of the sonic violence of the bombing. It follows Homar, a civil disobedient and activist, as he traverses the demilitarized island on a moped that has a trumpet welded to the muffler. The noise-reducing device is diverted from its original purpose and instead produces a resounding call to attention. It becomes a counter-instrument whose emissions follow not from a preconceived score, but from the jolts of the road and the discontinuous acceleration of the bike's engine as Homar acoustically re-territorializes areas of the island formerly exposed to sonic blasts.

GC: The atonality of the trumpet's call—it variously evokes the siren of an ambulance, Luigi Russolo's Futurist *Intonarumori* and even experimental salsa or jazz—puts it at odds with the musical convention we might typically expect to mark a popular victory and an affinity with a “land,” namely an *anthem*. We were interested in the idea of an anthem as a commemorative structure, but we were

not satisfied with the conservative connotations of the word. We preferred the more open set of associations that the Greek etymology of the word offered, *anti-phonos* (sounding in answer), a composite of *anti-* (in return) and *phonos* (voice). The title of the work excavates the etymological origins of the word in order to unsettle it from within. The anthem thus entails a kind of answerability to a sonic event that precedes the one who answers. This primitive definition marks a potential dissonance in a genre associated with the harmonious “voice of the people,” a figure normally tied to the principle of territorial co-belonging. Yet in Vieques, the future of the reclaimed land remains uncertain and is largely insulated from democratic claims. *Returning a Sound* at once celebrates a victory and registers its precariousness, calling for an unheard-of vigilance.

CM: I am interested in your statement above: “The idea of ‘conflict as an aesthetic force’ is much more troubling for us, as it asks how social violence in the form of conflict affects sensory values and taste.” I hear the sound in *Returning a Sound* as *metaphor* and think of metaphor in the context of your work as a prime aesthetic resource that conceptually assists you to address *conflict* from the perspective of sensibility and taste, as opposed to, let’s say, discourse and rhetoric. Can you expand on the role of metaphor in your work and its relation to the way you influence form?

JA: Metaphor, for us, is a primary resource in questioning the limits and boundaries of all so-called “truths.” By means of creative combination or substitution, metaphors can produce new insights and meaning. Because metaphor has the ability to *transform*, it can be a powerful tool when applied to the social arena where meaning is consensually fixed. It can become a tangible force in reshaping how the world appears to us, thus opening new possibilities for subjective, individual, and communal identifications. We see this function as both aesthetic—shaping form to create new sensibilities and perceptions—and political—making possible new meanings which can influence peoples’ choices in how they relate to a given subject.

GC: We're also interested in the excessive potential of metaphor—that is for a thing to represent something other than what it is. This unformed potential of metaphor is very important for us. It's what makes it monstrous.

CM: Metaphor's ability to transform aids it in reaching us affectively. Your recent piece *Stop, Repair, Prepare* for example is very moving. The poignant simplicity (and originality) of the gesture of having performers play Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from inside-out an early G. Bechstein piano is very successful in articulating the political weight and associations of this piece of music. But its greatest strength to me lies beyond its contextual references; it lies literally in the sound of the piano's open "guts." Can you speak about affect in your art, and about the relation between affect and the political in your work?

JA: Sound has played a major role in many of our works. It is a very interesting territory to explore because of, as you mentioned, its affective nature. Sound literally touches. The vibrations produced by sound move tiny bones inside our ears. This stimulation is registered first as an intensity (affect) to which the body responds with feelings, emotion, and cognition. The sensorial experience of sound—physical, bodily effects—unformed, unstructured and prior to any attribution of particular meaning is perhaps what people refer to when they say a musical experience is "moving." How our senses, our emotions, our beliefs, and our judgments are mediated through affects and resonances constitute a very rich line of inquiry within the larger terrain of the bio-politics of embodiment, especially since it foregrounds the body as the material site from which people are connected to each other and to the world at large.

GC: Also, we're interested in the violence embedded in the transmission of affects and the role that sound has historically played in the way bodies effect one another ... what arouses affect? How can affect be mobilized or engineered as a social force? As artists, we are interested in practices that foreground the material nature of sense and that place the body in the center of public forms of subjectivity linked to the organization of power.

CM: *Stop, Repair, Prepare* seems to be a work that addresses both the affective nature of sound and the “material nature of sense,” as you describe it above. I would be interested in learning more about the process of making this piece, as well as about its conceptual and art historical references (you’ve talked about Gordon Matta-Clark’s work as an important predecessor), and how it may have opened new grounds for your work in the future; it seems to me that it successfully bridges several of your interests.

GC: *Stop, Repair, Prepare* developed over a long period of time. We had the idea of making a hole through the body of a grand piano for a long time, but it wasn’t until 2008 that the work took its final form. After making a series of works which took more of a constructivist approach to sculpture, such as *Clamor* and *Sediments, Sentiments (Figures of Speech)*, we really wanted to return to the traditions of the readymade and assemblage, so this idea of a grand piano with a hole in the center of it stood out from our notebooks as an appealing object to pursue.

JA: Since around 2005 we had been looking closely at the history of music’s relationship to warfare and had amassed a great deal of research on the subject. One of the subjects, which we mentioned earlier in this interview, was the influence of Janissary music on western classical music. We had actually traveled to Turkey a few times starting in 2006 to develop a short film for the 2007 Istanbul Biennial and so had become more familiar not only with its rich history, but also current geo-political questions. Turkey has always played such an important role as a link between Eastern and Western cultures, but at that time, three years into the Iraq War, facing such challenging questions about what constitutes a healthy democratic state, what are the limits of freedom of expression (especially with regard to religious expression and the secular state), what are the limits of state sovereignty (the Kurdish question), what role should Turkey play as a regional actor in the Middle East, and finally, its status within the European Union, it was especially interesting to us.

GC: Having learned that the musical anthem of the European Union was Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," which includes a Turkish march as part of its score, we felt that we finally found the right piece of music for our piano idea. We considered proposing the piece for the Istanbul Biennial, but after doing some research into the technical aspects of making this happen we realized it would be much too difficult in the time left before the exhibition, and so kept it aside for a later time.

JA: Around the time of the Istanbul Biennial opening we were asked to develop a project for central hall of the Haus der Kunst (House of German Art) in Munich: the Third Reich's first monumental propaganda building. We got a chance to look at the archives in the building's basement. There we found an image of a room with a Bechstein piano and tables in it. It turns out that there was a piano bar installed in the room adjacent to the central hall that would play officially approved music, of which Beethoven was no doubt included. In fact, we later learned that the "Ode to Joy" was played to inaugurate the building. It was one of Hitler's favorites.

GC: Other factors slowly emerged that made it more and more clear to us that the Haus der Kunst would be the perfect place to initially realize our piano project. One was the unique relationship that Germany has with Turkey. The largest Turkish population living abroad is located in Germany (this migration began with the "guest worker" program initiated more than 40 years ago during the post-war reconstruction period.) Finally, there was an interesting connection between Nazi Germany and the nationalistic state architecture built in Turkey in the 1940s (especially in Ankara, under the influence of Paul Bonatz, a contemporary and rival of Paul Troost, architect of the Haus der Kunst). All these associations provided a rich constellation of references within which to situate this piano work.

JA: While these factors became the impetus to realize this work in Munich, we were also interested in a more essential set of questions that we hoped this work might also provoke which are not reducible to any of these site-specific influences. One of these questions was specifically related to the music: what can “Ode to Joy” stand for today, if anything? Have the claims for “universal brotherhood” been hollowed out over the course of centuries of appropriation by disparate political and ideological agendas? What role might silence play when introduced into sections of the main melody? What does it mean to push a piano while playing? What new relations can be made between musical performance and choreography? Other questions had more to do with the work’s potential within the art historical tradition: what constitutes sculpture today? What is the relationship between object and performance? How does one deal with questions of time and duration in an exhibition? What is the relationship between site-specificity and displacement? Where might the roads lead in the expanded field of art, performance, and musical experimentation from John Cage and his peers to the present? Finally, the terrain of affect and embodiment that we spoke about earlier was also very important to us.

CM: Your work’s relationship to history and the political seem to be mediated by language, storytelling and narrative. Your projects provide alternative ways to “read” canonical interpretations of history. Also, as the answers in this interview make evident, “discourse” is essential to your practice; you carefully construct meaning by way of language in addition to your work with form. Can you talk about the role of language, speech, and narration in your work?

JA: Language has played such a central role in our practice mainly because of the fact that we collaborate. We are two people with different backgrounds, subjectivities, and ideas who must find a way to communicate in order to work together. So language has become a very obvious place to begin this dialogue.

GC: Our particular pleasure in looking into the origins of words is an extension of this. It is both useful and fascinating to us to see how words have taken different turns in meaning as they have moved through times and cultures, and inversely, in what distant universe of meaning a word began, and how those etymological beginnings might still haunt its understanding and use in the present.

JA: All the same we are interested in the ruin of language, with words that slip from their intended meanings, that work against themselves, that topple into nonsense, that push language to its silent end or beyond.

CM: You have often referred to your work as “monstrous art.” Can you expand on your use of this adjective/category/concept?

GC: We have talked in the past about the monstrous dimension of art. By that we mean the potential in an artwork to exceed the plans and purposes of its creators. For example, in the case of the piano, which is formed in such a precise manner, we are interested in the things that are unmeasurable and unformed in the work, which can go beyond our intentions, and can make the work mean something we couldn't anticipate.

JA: The etymological root of “monster” is fascinating. It derives from the Latin *monstrare*: to show.

GC: We're interested in those moments in which the work “shows” at the level of form and content something that interrupts and alters its context and predetermined meaning: the ever-present possibility within a form or matrix of a future that could be something other than an extension of the present.