

Art Review
October 2007
p. 82-85

ALLORA & CALZADILLA

Power Plays

The American-Cuban duo are upending contemporary art
into the world of global politics with impish humour.

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portrait LEIGH JOHNSON

TO CONSIDER OUR EXPERIENCE OF POLITICAL REALITY today can provoke a strange mix of emotions. On the one hand, it seems as if a world of crisis and degradation surrounds us, but always up close, claustrophobically nearby: never has the image of a world in various states of trouble been so readily present, transmitted to us, all too transparently, from the four corners of the globe.

On the other hand, this suffocating sense of presence is matched by an equally overbearing sense of helplessness in the face of the apparently unstoppable chain of world events. Even things that happen down the street are ramped up to global significance. Floods in England? It's global warming. Disaffected young British Asian men suicide-bomb the London Underground? It's the global clash of civilisations. A little girl disappears in Portugal? It's the global threat of international paedophile networks. The political experience of reality is, for most of us, a threatening spectacle of fear, at once too close and too far away.

That art can respond to politics is both a wish and a demand. But what kind of art emerges when the experience of politics seems so present, yet so immobile in terms of how we might affect it? It's this contemporary absurdity of political reality that has, over the last few years, provided the context for a number of artists who confront political issues by exploiting art's capacity for spectacle, as much as acknowledging the limits of its ability to effect actual change. Artists like

Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn approach art as a polemical, rhetorical space in which the impasse of political and social change are represented and countered by an art of experience. And it's this same hyperawareness of the dysfunction of politics that sets the scene for the collaborative work of the American-Cuban duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, whose work has steadily won a following for its subtle, biting and often humorous navigation of the strange scene of globalised politics, and how art can do things with and to it. With their inclusion in this year's Istanbul Biennial, and a solo exhibition at London's Lisson Gallery this month, the Puerto Rico-based artists' playful brand of political art further explores the margins of globalisation and its discontents.

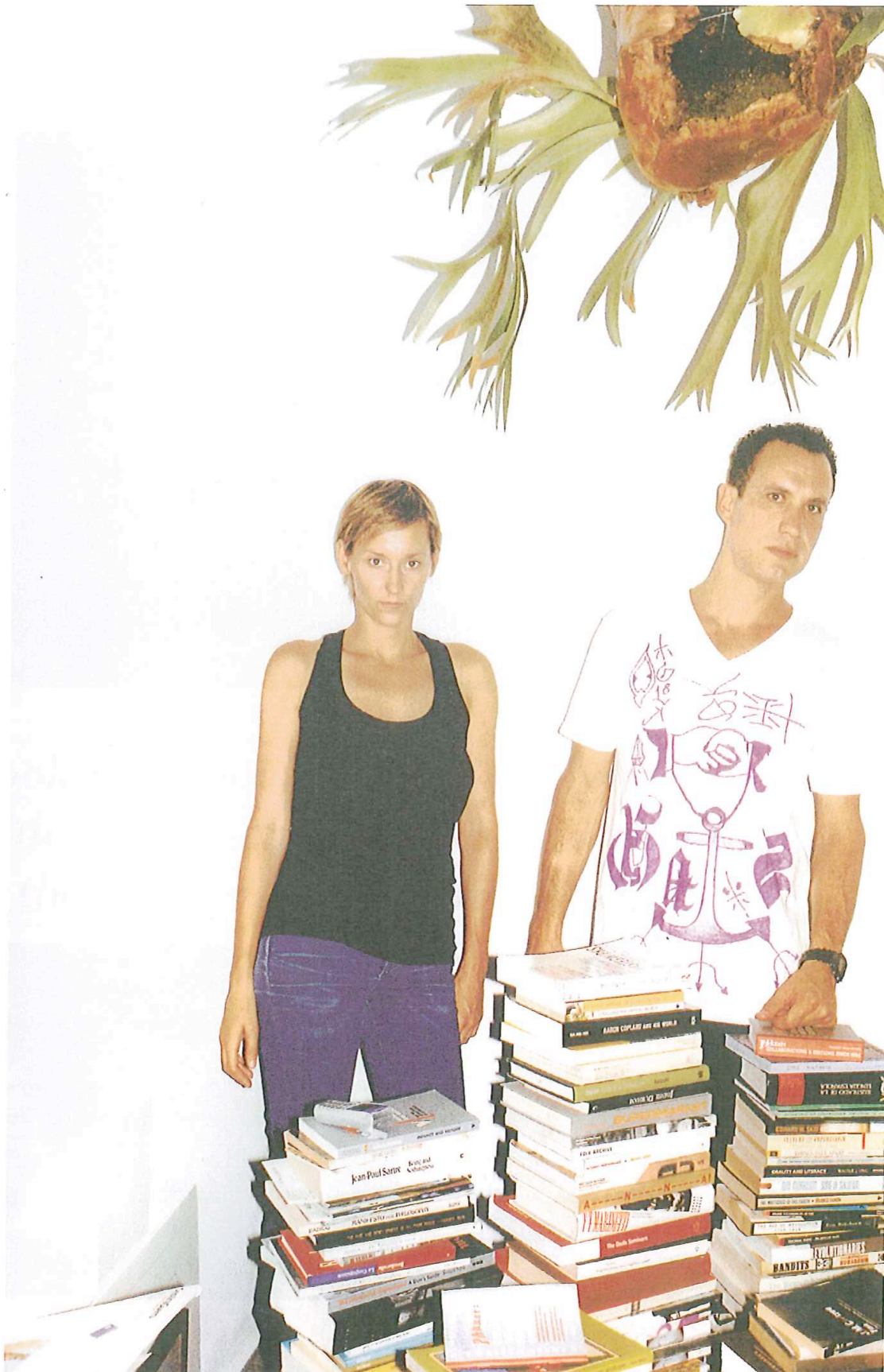
Allora and Calzadilla's approach fuses a keen sense of the particular cultures and histories of modern art with a curiosity about how these might re-engage with the political situations of today, a strategy of redeployment that renews attention to artistic histories, but also seeks to dissolve them into something non-artistic, something perhaps politically active. Early works like *Chalk* (2002) and *Puerto Rican Light* (1998/2003), for example, suggest how art appears and disappears according to context, and how political content emerges as a something unforeseen, provoked by the form of the artwork. In *Chalk*, produced for Peru's 2002 Lima Biennial, the artists scattered 24 weighty, oversize sticks of white chalk across Lima's Plaza de Armas,

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Art Review
October 2007
p. 82-85



Art Review
October 2007
p. 82-85



Returning a Sound, 2004, single-channel video with sound, 5 min 42 sec.
Photo: the artists. © the artists, 2007. Courtesy the artists and Lisson Gallery, London

heart of the capital's monumental administrative centre. What might seem like an innocuous gesture, minimalist of site-specificity, quickly turned into something else. People on the square found that, with each others' help, they could use these anonymous 'sculptures' for other purposes – to draw, write, decorate, scrawl love notes or whatever else they realised they might wish to express. Then, as laid-off government workers happened to march through, the chalking turned to slogans and protestations. Before long, riot police turned up with sanitation workers, to collect the offending chalk and wash the square dry.

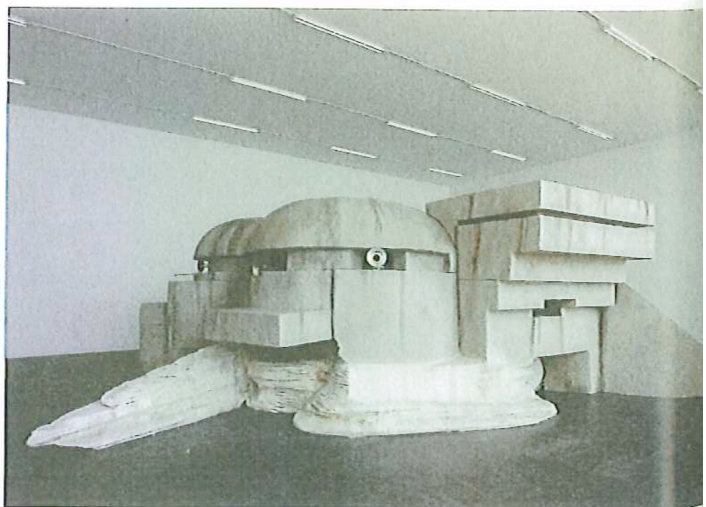
It's a work that suggests a complicated relationship between artistic expression – confined to the gallery, safely away from the 'real' world – and popular political expression – regulated and policed in the public realm. *Chalk's* success was in how the regulated notion of public art can so easily be transmuted into something politically unregulated beyond it, leaving art as an odd residue, literally to be washed away. Such questions of translation and transformation, shifting from the language of political life to the language of artistic form, apply to Allora and Calzadilla's 'gallery' works too. Borrowing Dan Flavin's 1965 fluorescent light work *Puerto Rican Light (For Jeanie Blake)*, the duo powered the neon with a battery that they had charged via solar panel in Puerto Rico before installing the piece in a show in New York. Thus Flavin's rendition of Puerto Rico's tropical sunset colours was made conditional on the power of the 'real' sun over Puerto Rico, transported to the mainland. It seems innocent enough, until one considers Puerto Rico's subject status as an 'unincorporated territory' of the US – technically citizens of the US, Puerto Rico's four million inhabitants are nonetheless prohibited from voting in US presidential elections. The formal-aesthetic romance of Flavin's original – with its hint of exotic travel among America's tropical neighbours – becomes a reflection on the economic and cultural hegemony that the US has continuously maintained in its Latin American backyard; Allora and Calzadilla's impish humour – in reversing the 'relation of power' between the US and Puerto Rico by making the canonical expression of American modernist art 'dependent' on a dumb chunk of Puerto Rican electrical storage – provides a criss-crossing of short-circuited meanings about power, dependence, artistic idealism and political pragmatism, a humour full of pathos about the immovability of US power.

As Calzadilla put it while discussing the recent presentation of their sculpture/installation/performance *Clamor* (2006) at the

Serpentine Gallery this April, they're interested in humour "not as a joke, as a one-dimensional thing, but humour as a disarming thing: you laugh because it's absurd. You see two things that you would never put together, but you laugh because you understand something that you already knew in a different way." *Clamor*, like their more recent installation *Wake Up* (2007), at the Renaissance Society in Chicago (which concealed brass instrumentalists behind the walls of the gallery, all improvising on the tune of the reveille), ensconces various trumpeters in a mocked-up military bunker, each discordantly playing a variety of military tunes of differing histories and origins. *Clamor* presents an idiotic display of pomp and defiance, as the hidden performers make their martial music safely protected from... who exactly? The ever-so dangerous audience of contemporary art?

In Allora and Calzadilla's works, these forms of politicised address, or of politicised inscription (as with *Chalk*), become deliberately unstable, which puts into question the process of 'identification', of who is addressing whom. Allora and Calzadilla's various trumpets take aesthetic (musical) form and cut it in and out of its implicitly social and political investments, investments which alternate between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian positions. So in these various reversals, the relation between power and powerlessness is dramatised by an artistic language. *Returning a Sound* (2004), one of a number of works made about and on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, follows a man on a moped with a trumpet welded to its exhaust, pattering round the island landscape. Vieques, partly occupied by the US Navy for wargames and munitions testing since the 1940s, was finally relinquished in 2003, after decades of protest by the islanders, over both the loss of their livelihoods and the environmental degradation caused by years of bombing. Rather than foot the bill for the cleanup, the US government redesignated the military areas as 'wildlife reserves', further preventing the islanders from reoccupying the island or profiting from its development. *Returning a Sound* echoes in an empty landscape, the usually triumphant symbolism of the trumpet herald reduced to a raspberry blown at the birds; *Returning a Sound* speaks about the ambiguity of the environmentalist arguments in part used by the islanders, who those in power could turn against their interests.

Clamor, 2006, mixed media and live performance with sound, dimensions variable (installation view, Kunsthalle Zürich). Photo: A. Burger. © the artists, 2007



Art Review
October 2007
p. 82-85



There's More Than One Way to Skin a Sheep, 2007, single-channel video with sound, 6 min 40 sec.
Photo: the artists. © the artists, 2007. Courtesy the artists and Lisson Gallery, London

If political troubles can't be solved by art, it doesn't mean that art can't represent the impossibility of that resolution

Allora and Calzadilla's works address themselves to the difficulty of addressing power itself; inappropriately appropriating the language of art and art performance – at times mute, at others dumb and at still others cacophonous, bearing witness to the apparent absurdity of political hopes in an apparently postpolitical age, and yet using absurdity to refuse a political world empty of alternatives. Their new film for the Istanbul Biennial, *There's More Than One Way to Skin a Sheep* (2007), follows the bicycle perambulations through Istanbul of a Tulum player – the Tulum being one of the most ancient designs of bagpipe, common in rural Turkey – as he uses the Tulum to fill up the bicycle's tyre, which, blowing back, forces shrill notes onto the Istanbul streets: those on the margins of modernity and globalisation sounding their presence.

For the Lisson, the artists are working on perhaps their most ambitious sculpture-performance to date. Untitled at the time of writing, the installation will consist of a series of large truncated forms traversed by a series of tunnels. Within each tunnel there will be a professional opera singer, lying horizontally within and delivering, in an

operatic style, fragments of political speeches that, in different times and places, have defined important moments in world history. For the artists, 'the multiple dramatic performances cumulatively are meant to create a frustrated opera, an orchestra of battles, a contradictory commemorative subterranean theater driven by a combustion of verbal explosions'. A eulogy, in musical and sculptural form, for those times when political antagonism could become decisive; a weird monument to absent political energies in the present.

If political troubles can't be solved by art, it doesn't mean that art can't represent the impossibility of that resolution. Humour and melancholy are inevitable byproducts of that impossibility. Rather than using art merely to passively represent the taking of political sides, Allora and Calzadilla choose to make art that dramatises, within itself, the conditions of possibility and impossibility in political reality, the dynamics of what cannot change, and what might. :

Work by Allora & Calzadilla is on show at Lisson Gallery, London, from 10 October to 17 November