



EPICENTER/EPICENTRO: RE TRACING THE PLAINS, PHOTO: HYBRIDPRESS.NET

Gloria by Allora & Calzadilla, *Epicenter/Epicentro: Re Tracing the Plains* by John Hitchcock in collaboration with The Dirty Printmakers of America

JESSICA L. HORTON | UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

Gloria. Allora & Calzadilla. United States Pavilion of La Biennale de Venezia, the 54th International Art Exhibition. Venice, Italy. 4 June–27 November 2011.

Epicenter/Epicentro: Re Tracing the Plains. John Hitchcock in collaboration with The Dirty Printmakers of America. Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati, Università Ca' Foscari. Venice, Italy. 1–4 June 2011.

Gloria



ALLORA & CALZADILLA, *TRACK AND FIELD*, 2011

PHOTO: JESSICA L. HORTON

A 60-ton overturned military tank nearly eclipses visitors' view of the stately white dome of the United States Pavilion during the 54th International Art exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. At regular intervals throughout the exhibition, a US track and field athlete jogs on a treadmill imbedded in the tank's right track. The violent squealing and grating of the rotating chains fills the air of the Giardini, one of two main biennale exhibition sites, overpowering the soundtracks of neighboring country pavilions. In *Track and Field* (2011), Puerto Rico-based artistic duo Allora & Calzadilla do away with subtlety in favor of a direct invocation of the imposing specter of American militarism (fig. 1). Here, as in the other pieces on view in the pavilion, they treat nationalism first and foremost as an aesthetic language that expresses itself through the military machine, ritualized bodies, and official architecture. The installations and performances inside the pavilion further the

artists' investigations of "bio-power" and technology, deforming and repurposing bodies and materials in conjunctions that are at once ominous and comical.

In the US Pavilion, Allora & Calzadilla need their characteristic humor more than ever. As a pair of artists who have staked a reputation on their critical treatment of colonial and militarist histories while living in a US colony, they occupy a position laced with absurdity: "representing" the US at the most famous (and expensive) of international art biennales, in a pavilion underwritten by the State Department. The scenario calls to mind Rebecca Belmore's commission for the Canadian Pavilion in 2005. As a highly political artist of Anishinaabe heritage living in a settler-colonial territory, Belmore was driven to confront the paradoxes of national endorsement in the Canadian Pavilion head-on in an evocative video work. In *Fountain* (2005), Belmore projected a video featuring her own bodily struggles offshore of a polluted industrial beach in Vancouver onto a sheet of falling water, thus experientially linking the Pavilion in Venice with the politically charged landscape of southwestern Canada.¹ Similarly, the six new pieces in *Gloria*,

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commissioned by Lisa D. Freiman of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, grapple with nationalism not as an *external* force, but as a language endemic to the physical and ideological frames of the exhibition space.



ALLORA & CALZADILLA, *BODY IN FLIGHT* (TOP: DELTA, BOTTOM: AMERICAN), 2011

PHOTO: JESSICA L. HORTON

Still, the most compelling pieces are those that reference the Pavilion only obliquely. In *Body in Flight (Delta)* and *Body in Flight (American)* (2011), meticulously carved wooden replicas of first class seats offered by competing airlines become props for spectacular gymnastics performed by female and male members of the USA Olympic team, respectively (fig. 2 & 3). The precise translation of every fold and crease of pliable seating into hardwood emphasizes the underlying scripting of bodies mundanely shaped by technologies such as jet planes. On the one hand, the performances exaggeratedly quote gendered rituals and symbols. The male gymnast drops stiffly, as in a military drill, or emulates the rigid motions of an airplane propeller; the female performer's hands gesture with the intricate flourishes of a stewardess explicating the safety card. Undergirding the work are obvious parallels between international sports competitions and the pavilions of the Giardini, where "art stars" of various nationalities gather in government sanctioned spaces to outshine their neighbors. Still, *Body in Flight* pair cannot be reduced to such equivalencies. Allora & Calzadilla also explore aesthetic excesses, for example, through the marvelous technique of woodcarving applied with delicate care to an airplane seat. The movements of the dancers likewise exceed any overt political message, endowing the implied uniformity of the airplane module with the grace of modern dance.²



ALLORA & CALZADILLA, *ALGORITHM*, 2011

PHOTO: JESSICA L. HORTON

In an adjoining room, visitors approach an ATM machine imbedded in a giant pipe organ (*Algorithm*, 2011) (fig. 4). As visitors punch buttons and take out cash, each minuscule gesture generates a unique sound from the organ. On the one hand, the piece is governed by a gross logic: more money = louder noise = more artistic experience. Yet the strange and lovely sounds, ever changing, suggest more creative possibilities than we are accustomed to associating with calculated monetary exchanges.

In *Armed Freedom Lying on a Sunbed* (2011), Allora & Calzadilla have symbolically toppled a bronze replica of the Statue of Freedom that had stood atop the US Capitol since 1863 and shoved its gleaming surface into a glowing neon tanning bed. The installation succinctly calls attention to the resonances between the

Pavilion dome that looms overhead and the capitol's architecture. But unlike the performances, there is no reason to linger and ponder further; the political message, like the joke, is a one-liner.

A final work brings the generalized issues of nationalism and bodies explored in *Gloria* to bear on a perennial topic in Allora & Calzadilla's oeuvre: the occupation and subsequent ousting of the US military on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. In *Half Mast/Full Mast* (2010), the artists have carefully aligned the vertical shaft of a flagpole to connect the screens of a two channel video. Behind the pole(s), changing scenes of lush green forests, a herd of wild horses crossing a field, a classroom, and dilapidated buildings give a sense of the varied landscapes in Vieques. As the camera lingers on the tableaux, a gymnast enters the frame, grasps the pole, and raises his body horizontally like a flag. This human banner alternately "flies" at half or full mast, depending on whether the gymnast enters the bottom or top screen. The piece forms a brilliant triad with the artists' two previous works concerning Vieques, *Returning a Sound* (2004) and *Under Discussion* (2005). Each involves bodily reterritorialization, simultaneously acknowledging the ongoing environmental and psychological traces of the US occupation and insisting on the creative persistence of local life on the island, both human and otherwise.

Epicenter/Epicentro: Re Tracing the Plains



EPICENTER/EPICENTRO: *RE TRACING THE PLAINS*, 2011

PHOTO: HYBRIDPRESS.NET

Tanks and territory are the subjects of another "American" art exhibition in Venice. In several video and installation works, John Hitchcock, an artist of Comanche heritage who grew up on Native American lands in Oklahoma, grapples, in collaboration with The Dirty Printmakers of America, with the global implications of the ongoing US military presence at nearby Fort Sill, built in 1869 during the Indian Wars. *Epicenter/Epicentro: Re Tracing the Plains* is a grassroots exhibition effort, lacking the prestige, slickness, and wealth of the American Pavilion.³ Curated by art historian Nancy Marie Mithlo from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, *Epicenter* occupies a small gallery space run by the Università Ca' Foscari on a quiet stretch of waterfront far from the bustling Grand Canal. There, it served to critically extend Allora & Calzadilla's discussions of nationalism and militarism to less visible spaces on the island of Venice. The exhibition was preceded by several weeks of print

giveaway events and temporary projections of key symbols in Hitchcock's work on top of religious architecture around Venice (fig. 5).

At the core of *Epicenter* is a heap of indistinguishable pieces of black felt printed with silver paint, which spill outward into the distinct shapes of buffalo skulls, deer heads, and army tanks. Together they form the loose outline of a ship on

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EPICENTER/EPICENTRO: RE TRACING THE PLAINS, 2011

PHOTO: JESSICA L. HORTON

the gallery floor. From this base sprout three flags, also made of felt, printed with the repeated insignia of deer head and buffalo skull. On the third flag, the image of the military tank is pointedly replaced by the head of a horse, an animal that, following its introduction by the Spanish into the Western Hemisphere, played an important role in warfare and resistance among the Comanche and other groups indigenous to the American plains (fig. 6). The preferred vessel of pirates, conquistadors, and everyday Venetians, the boat communicates a hybridized and shifting authority dispersed among symbols of warfare, indigenous America, and global travel. A series of Hitchcock's videos projected in small-scale on a nearby wall fill the gallery space with a roar of bombs, indigenous drums, heavy metal music, and antiquated wartime radio broadcasts. Images of marching soldiers, talking heads, the atom bomb, and indigenous buffalo dancers flash onto the

screen. Repeatedly, the layers are overlaid with a flashing red target intersected by the image of a buffalo (fig. 7). Like the installation, the videos propose an ambivalent relationship between symbols with multiple resonances, invoking the history of Native religious dance, tools of warfare and transport, the decline of buffalo populations, and the converse proliferation of deer in the United States (one exception being Hitchcock's current home of Wisconsin, where deer populations are disappearing at alarming rates due to chronic wasting disease).



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PHOTO: HYBRIDPRESS.NET

The overwhelming jumble of sound and images in *Epicenter* undermine the neat, clean lines of nationalist aesthetics so effectively highlighted in *Gloria*. Through its referential excesses, the exhibition marks a disturbance of the clarity necessary for the unilateral exercise of power and enactment of national belonging. More significantly, the flashing, heavy metal aesthetic of the video and installation create an unexpected platform for the emergence of indigenous themes and symbols inside the military war machine. One need only consider historically the enormous participation of Native Americans in the US military to recognize the significance of this gesture. Or, thinking of the presence of Fort Sill on traditional Native American land, we might say that it is US nationalism that occupies the terrain of indigenous meanings, the conflation resulting in their mutual deformation. The quadrate target used to violently frame the sacred buffalo also evokes the four sacred directions in

many Native American religions; the drums of the 1894 Buffalo Dance blend with the thuds of contemporary metal music; hard-edged imagery of skulls and tanks gives way to touchable felt. *Epicenter* takes such imbrications as the starting point for any conversation about the entwined geopolitical futures of culturally distinct peoples, in Venice or elsewhere.

Together, *Gloria* and *Epicenter* treat nationalism and militarism not only as sites of death and closure, but as unavoidable forces shaping contemporary artistic and political action. There is always room for both deformity and transcendence.

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Notes

¹ Jann Bailey and Scott Watson. 2005. *Rebecca Belmore: Fountain*. Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, the University of British Columbia.

² The choreography for these performances is a collaboration between Allora & Calzadilla, gymnast David Durante, and modern dance choreographer Rebecca Davis.

³ *Epicenter* is the sixth installment of exhibitions opened alongside the Venice Biennale by curator and art historian Nancy Marie Mithlo and collaborators (Indigenous Arts Action Alliance, or IA3) since 1999. This year, the group opted not to pay the hefty price tag to gain official "collateral" status within the Biennale proper. The exhibition also included works by the printmakers' collective, The Dirty Printmakers of America. For full documentation, see the exhibition website. Accessed 3 June 2011: <https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/jhitchcock/venice/venice.html>.

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