

**GLORIA**

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## ALLORA & CALZADILLA

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U.S. Commissioner  
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Essays by

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# RECUPERATING PER- FORM- ANCE

## IN THE ART OF JENNIFER ALLORA AND GUILLERMO CALZADILLA, TRAINED BODIES DO THEIR THING.

Pianists play pianos. Fishermen pilot boats. Opera singers sing. Dancers dance. In the U.S. Pavilion at the 54th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia runners run; gymnasts practice muscular, gravity-defying routines; and you, the Biennale visitor, go through a maneuver in which *you* have been well-schooled: plugging into global economic networks with a swipe and some taps at an ATM. While Allora & Calzadilla are known for the complex constellations of historical research, art historical reference, and free-form wordplay that surround their works, there is an equally distinctive though less-remarked upon aspect of their art: their use of performance by others.

**THE READIEST** associations with the term “performance” are works in which artists use their own person as material or medium: Chris Burden wiggling nude over broken glass, Joseph Beuys caged with a coyote, Karen Finley covering herself in chocolate. But there is a much broader history of art conceived as an action to be performed by someone else. This is generally the case, of course, in conventional choreography or musical composition, but it also characterizes certain developments in twentieth-century avant-garde production, such as Fluxus (“The audience is invited to dance a tango” is the full score of a 1964 piece by Ben Vautier). More recently, the activities of attendants became elements of installation art, as in Ann Hamilton’s composed environments. In fact, the last two decades have seen a widespread tendency toward what Claire Bishop identifies as outsourced or delegated performance, as when Santiago Sierra hires day laborers to act as human columns beneath a sculpture, for instance, or when Vanessa Beecroft puts fashion models on display. At stake in much delegated art, Bishop suggests, are “the aesthetics and politics of employing other people to do the work of the performer.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop, quoted in Cherie Federico, “Double Agent: Exploring Ethics, Performance, and Authenticity,” *Aesthetica* (April–May 2008): 27.

**ALLORA & CALZADILLA** could be considered delegators—they hire performers to enact particular activities while they themselves remain behind the scenes—but they couldn't be more different from the artists in whose works, Bishop points out, "we are always looking at people who have been paid to perform some aspect of themselves (rather than a skill or talent): gender, sexuality, ethnicity, economic status, disability, etc."<sup>2</sup> For it is precisely a "skill or talent" that Allora & Calzadilla ask the gymnasts, runners, singers, pianists, and dancers in their works to demonstrate. More significantly, the artists ultimately ask the performers to reinvent these skills or talents themselves.

## VARIATIONS

Allora & Calzadilla practice an aesthetics of inversion. An upturned table, a supine statue, behind-the-back drumming, and an upside-down tank are just a few examples of reorientation in their art. So, even though their 2008 work *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on "Ode to Joy" for a Prepared Piano* is generally described as a punctured piano in which a pianist stands, it seems more useful to think of it inversely, as a pianist with a piano around her [FIG. 1]. In any case, it is an artwork in which a skilled musician's normal relationship with the instrument is turned inside out. For this piece, Allora & Calzadilla commissioned several pianists to create a twenty-five-minute version of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (the "Ode to Joy") for a Bechstein on wheels, which had been cored like an apple. With this, the artists found a path between the playfulness of John Cage's prepared pianos and the legacy of avant-gardists who have reduced the instruments to splinters. And though Allora & Calzadilla's prepared piano can never be un-prepared, it is not destroyed. It can—and must—be played.

**THE PIANIST** threads herself through the hole so that the piano extends around her, an absurdist hoop skirt. She bends forward to reach the keys, on which she plays the notoriously difficult composition upside down and backward, while at the same time pushing the huge instrument through the gallery along a predetermined path. It's not a graceful image. The artists take the dignified, frontal encounter between maestro and instrument and give us a hunchbacked, scuttling hybrid. The performer curls over the keyboard in a posture that recalls vomiting or being punched in the gut, and because of the way she must throw her weight into the piano to move it, her feet half grip, half drag along the ground. The masterly pianist is made over as a baby in a giant walker—or better, perhaps, a physical therapy patient being supported as the process of walking is relearned.

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2 Claire Bishop in Julie Austin, interview with Claire Bishop, "Trauma, Antagonism and the Bodies of Others: A Dialogue on Delegated Performance," *Performance Paradigm* 5, no. 1 (May 2009), <http://www.performance-paradigm.net/category/journal/issue-5.1>.

**NEUROLOGISTS HAVE** learned that the brain of someone who has suffered a neurological injury can often develop ways around the signal-blocking damage, not only compensating for lost function but actually shifting the pathways for that function to different parts of the brain. The music in *Stop, Repair, Prepare* demonstrates a similar kind of compensatory creativity. The instrument is missing the whole center section of its strings, and so the music—already denatured by the transposition from full orchestra and choir to single piano—limps along, with passages displaced into the high and low reaches of the keyboard or reduced from melody to percussive tapping. The analogy to neurological recuperation is more than metaphorical. These work-arounds are unique to each player, who must be a veteran musician, with mind and muscle honed by untold hours and years of practice, but at the same time an experimenter willing to recondition radically his or her body and brain. Imagining this process of relearning makes *Stop, Repair, Prepare* seem less about a carefully prepared piano than about a laboriously prepared piano player. "Oh god," says pianist Amir Khosrowpour, of learning to play backward and upside down for *Stop, Repair, Prepare*. "It was terrible. Panic attacks. Extreme frustration. Wondering why the hell I agreed to take on this project." It took months of practice "before things started to click, before my brain began to figure out which way was up and which way was down."<sup>3</sup>

## REHABILITATING WARRIORS

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have generated a peculiar, bloodless genre of war photography. In such images, we see soldiers engaged with specialized equipment in the half-athletic, half-clinical environment of stateside physical therapy rooms [FIG. 2].<sup>4</sup> Their wounds are healed over but their bodies are often terribly transformed—limbs missing, a skull scooped out, or a face burned partially away. They walk between handrails or on treadmills, or work with the flashcards and adapted writing tools that visualize recovery from brain injury. Politically undecidable, these images can be interpreted in terms of determination, heroism, and resilience—qualities that make the wars seem recoverable—or as damning depictions of what foreign policy wreaks at the level of individual bodies and lives. In either case, each pictured body is haunted by unseen others: by fallen comrades who did not survive, by those still fighting, and by the thousands and thousands of Iraqi and Afghani victims of these wars who are unlikely to have access to the technology and expertise such images showcase. Meanwhile, neither martyred nor triumphant—or perhaps both—the recuperating soldiers embody the grueling mental-physical work of relearning.

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3 Amir Khosrowpour, e-mail interview with the author, February 11, 2011.

4 Such imagery is extensive among representations of the current wars. See Tyler Hicks's "The Wounded," photo-essay accompanying the story "A New Kind of Care in a

New Era of Casualties" by Erik Eckholm in the *New York Times* online, January 31, 2006, and Ruth Fremson's "After Surviving, Learning to Live," accompanying Lizette Alvarez's "Spirit Intact, Soldier Reclaims His Life," *New York Times* online, July 2, 2010.



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1. **Allora & Calzadilla** *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on “Ode to Joy” for a Prepared Piano*, 2008; prepared Bechstein piano, pianist (Amir Khosrowpour shown); 40 × 67 × 84 in. (101.6 × 170.2 × 213.4 cm); installation view, Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2009 2. A NASA-developed “anti-gravity” treadmill, V.A. Medical Center, Palo Alto, California

**IN SPITE** of the formal rhyme of the contraption-supported body and the shared conceptual ground in the idea of retraining, it might seem gratuitous to compare such imagery with an artwork about, of all things, piano practice. But Allora & Calzadilla’s *Stop, Repair, Prepare* is in fact, like much of their work, a meditation on the way war and militarism suffuse and even drive culture, particularly music. At the heart of the “Ode to Joy” is a Turkish military march, reflecting the vogue for the music of Ottoman army bands in early nineteenth-century Europe. Ironically, given the long struggle over the accession of Turkey to the European Union, the Ode is the official music of that body. It has also been, among other things, the national anthem of Ian Smith’s apartheid Rhodesia, the one Western musical composition accepted in China during the Cultural Revolution, and the piece chosen to celebrate Adolf Hitler’s birthday. The Haus der Kunst in Munich where Allora & Calzadilla first presented *Stop, Repair, Prepare* was built by the Nazis, and the “Ode to Joy” was played at the building’s official opening. The artists chose a Bechstein because a photograph they found in the Haus der Kunst’s archive shows the interior furnished with that make of piano – unsurprisingly, since the Bechstein family were dedicated supporters of Hitler.

**IT WAS** as a refugee of World War II that Walter Benjamin wrote his theses on the philosophy of history, including the famous aphorism: “There is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism.”<sup>5</sup> He calls on the historian to “brush history against the grain” to uncover the darker side of cultural treasure. But what is to be done once the barbaric has been brought to light? So-called revisionist histories of artworks are sometimes understood to be pure condemnations, as if the revisionist’s aim was to put out of circulation art tainted by the uses to which it has been put. But even as they ask us to stop, repair, and prepare, Allora & Calzadilla nowhere ask us to label, reduce, or abandon. This is why the performance element of their work matters. Attending to the skilled performance at the center of their meditation on the “Ode to Joy” suggests a different attitude toward the histories borne in and by works of art, insofar as *Stop, Repair, Prepare* becomes an image of radical relearning. Relearning is never the same as learning—the new knowledge will always be ghosted by the having-known—but a limping transformation is transformation just the same. In effect, the piece treats “Ode to Joy” itself as a kind of convalescent, rewiring pathways around its historical scars.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1968), 256.

## LISTENING TO DANCE

Skill has been artistically suspect for several decades. In the 1960s the de-skilling impulse was made especially clear in dance, as artists such as Yvonne Rainer became fascinated by the movement of performers who had no previous dance training. In her works of the mid-1960s highly skilled, professional dancers might perform alongside people working well outside their artistic comfort zone (including painter Robert Rauschenberg and sculptor Robert Morris). Rainer experimented with teaching complicated choreography to beginning dancers – not, à la *Dancing with the Stars*, to bring them toward a normative ideal, but to generate a raw quality of movement in dance, something almost impossible for trained bodies to replicate. She conversely made work that consists solely of ordinary movement. Her brilliant *We Shall Run* (1963) might be difficult to remember and tiring to perform, but the only kind of movement it requires is an easy jog [FIG. 3]. Even when Rainer worked with highly trained dancers, one of her goals was to develop what she called a “tasklike” quality of movement. The aim was to interrupt the circuits of narcissism and desire, exhibitionism and admiration that constitute the conventional relationship between performer and viewer. She wanted to bring the superhuman performer down to earth.

**ALLORA & CALZADILLA** were inspired in part by this era of dance history when developing *Compass* (2009), in which the usual relationship between dancer and audience is upturned [FIG. 4–5].<sup>6</sup> In this piece, the viewer sees only a large, empty room with light filtering in along the edges of a dropped ceiling that bisects what would otherwise be a soaring space. A dancer performing an hour-long solo occupies the room’s top half. His floor is the viewer’s ceiling. There is a carefully gauged gap of only a few inches between the walls and the hanging ceiling, which ensures that the room’s two zones communicate audibly, but not visually. Conventional dance—with its raking stages, skintight costumes, and mirrored walls before which dancers train—is oriented to vision. Allora & Calzadilla developed dance to be heard.

**LIKE GYMNASTICS**, sports, opera, and even the military, forms of dance could well be added to Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s list of what he calls, after Foucault, apparatuses:

Not only... prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses – one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face.<sup>7</sup>

Used to shape, train, and orient human beings, apparatuses are the cultural mechanisms that make a living being into a subject, to the extent that anyone’s personal identity can be said to be the product of many of these “subjectifying” mechanisms. But not all apparatuses are equal: Whereas a church apparatus can produce a Christian, or a factory can subjectify you as a laborer, contemporary apparatuses seem to Agamben to desubjectify instead. According to him, in contemporary life we encounter ever more apparatuses (every gadget, every trend), and they are more superficial in their subjectifying work, so that rather than providing an identity, they leave us reduced, he says: to a phone number, a statistic, a couch potato.<sup>8</sup>

**AGAMBEN’S APPARATUS** describes the work done on us when we work with a given tool or system. And this operation is what Allora & Calzadilla’s use of performance pinpoints. Perhaps it is only a coincidence that the pommel horses, uneven bars, and other equipment used in competitive gymnastics are referred to as “apparatuses,” but the expert performers in Allora & Calzadilla’s art have literally been shaped by mechanisms such as opera, gymnastics, or the piano. The work of the apparatus is made audible in their voices or visible in their gestures; it is manifest in musculature and posture. However, the manner in which the artists work with these performers also puts into question some aspects of Agamben’s essay, which is marked by a dichotomy between the authentic subjectivizing of the past and the artificial, superficial version in the present, and by a highly schematic view of contemporary media. In particular, Agamben objects to the argument that says that any tool can be used for good or evil, insisting that in terms of its subjectifying function, there is only one way to use an apparatus, or rather to be used by it. That may be, Allora & Calzadilla seem to say. But what if we turn the apparatus upside down?

## MIND AS MUSCLE

Neuroplasticity is the name – or buzzword – for discoveries in neuroscience over the last forty years that together have changed the scientific understanding of the human brain and nervous system: from a finely tuned machine to a flexible and adaptive organism. As one popularizer of the term puts it, researchers have been demonstrating “that children are not always stuck with the mental abilities they are born with; that the damaged brain can often reorganize itself so that when one part fails, another can often substitute; that if brain cells die, they can at times be replaced; that many ‘circuits’ and even basic reflexes that we think are hardwired are not.”<sup>9</sup> Among humanists, neuroscience is often perceived as a threat, reducing the complexities of emotion,

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Jose Kuri and Monica Manzutto for the opportunity to experience *Compass* installed in Mexico City, and to Tom Levin for his insights.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “What Is an Apparatus?” in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Viking, 2007), xix.





3. *Yvonne Rainer We Shall Run*, performance at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, March 7, 1965; Photo by Peter Moore, © Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA

perception, thought, and personality to chemical reactions and genetic predispositions. But the discourse of neuroplasticity suggests the opposite: that conditioning, practice, experience, and even thinking itself actually alter mental matter. Brains are changed and shaped by training—by processes of subjectification—as much as bodies are. Or, as Yvonne Rainer put it back in 1966, “the mind is a muscle.”

**WHEN KHOSROWPOUR** discusses the process of learning to read music anew in order to complete the task Allora & Calzadilla set for him, he describes becoming a beginner, again, in terms of reconfiguring his senses. “When learning a new piece, I [normally] look at the music and directly translate what I read to my fingers. Sight to muscle. It took some time to realize that I had to read the music, *hear* what it sounds like, and *then* translate to my fingers.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, to participate in *Compass*, dancers, conditioned to fine-tune the way their bodies look to an audience, had to instead consider the way they sound to one.<sup>11</sup> I am reminded of the cases that pepper the neuroplastic discourse, of patients whose brains rewire damaged senses, using the tickle of an electrode on their tongue rather than their inner ear to balance, being able to “see” images tactilely projected on the skin, or regaining use of a paralyzed arm by putting the *good* arm in a restraint. The neuroplastic analogy helps envision the radicality of those Allora & Calzadilla works in which an apparatus is turned over, displaced, reversed. When they ask performers to work under these new conditions, they ask them to unlearn and relearn—and so perhaps to resubjectify, at least a little. By contrast, what Agamben describes is an inflexible system: each apparatus corresponds to a particular subjectification, no matter how you use it.

**THE KEY** thing about the discourse of neuroplasticity is that it highlights two capacities: to be shaped and disciplined, and to recover or change. While the idea has taken hold as another marketable fountain of youth—avoid Alzheimer’s! Do Sudoku!—our neuroplasticity should be sobering as well as hope-inspiring. Yes, the brain is malleable matter... but, the brain is malleable matter. This bittersweet discourse suits the work of Allora & Calzadilla, I think, as it simultaneously suggests the possibility for real transformation and the odds against it.

**WHEN ALLORA** & Calzadilla upturn a military tank and reimagine it as an exercise machine they produce new meanings. (Is it sword into plowshare, or plowshare into sword?) But they also produce new *processes*. And while they let us observe those processes in the reinvented skills of the performers, we are also, of course, enacting them. Under the suspended floor of *Compass*, viewers are given a new, almost synesthetic sensory task: listen to dance. The artists draw you into the assignment

<sup>10</sup> Amir Khosrowpour, e-mail interview with the author, February 11, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> In the first installation of *Compass*, at the Temporäre Kunsthalle, Berlin, the dancers were trained tap dancers—one of the few forms of theatrical dance that

does attend to the sound as well as to the look of the dancing body. In Mexico City, where *Compass* was subsequently installed, trained tap dancers were not used, although to increase audibility, the performers, who came from a range of dance backgrounds, all danced in tap shoes.



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by creating, in collaboration with each performer, dances whose choreography describes very precise shapes in space and over time. These patterns are kept entirely invisible; yet in time, they become perceptible. The work your eyes usually do to track changes in a dancer's position and location can instead be done by your ears, it turns out—if you are willing to do the work of being transformed by a transformed apparatus.

**PERHAPS THE** same is true of *Algorithm*, commissioned for the 2011 Venice Biennale and consisting of an automatic banking machine crossed with a pipe organ, and here the political consequences of such relearning start to become apparent. What might happen if we could learn to hear our money moving? If our every tap at the machinery of global capital resonated around us like the voice of God? Rewiring an ATM or modifying a musical instrument makes the apparatus newly strange, and the usual way to understand the politics of such a move is through the sense of surprise Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt*: in this “alienation effect” a new distance, a space for critical consciousness is supposed to open up between the viewer and the object. But in an innovation-hungry mass-media economy, such effects are fleeting, and in the mid-twentieth century, Frankfurt School thinkers mobilized the word “recuperation” to describe the culture industry’s easy absorption of radical artistic innovations. Under different conditions, Allora & Calzadilla invite a rethinking of recuperation in relation to art, insofar as their works offer themselves up as machines for relearning: apparatuses for what might be called, paradoxically, a physical therapy of culture.

4–5. *Allora & Calzadilla Compass*, 2009; suspended wooden drop ceilings, dancers; dimensions variable; installation view, Kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2010