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Allora & Calzadilla's Art of Response-ability
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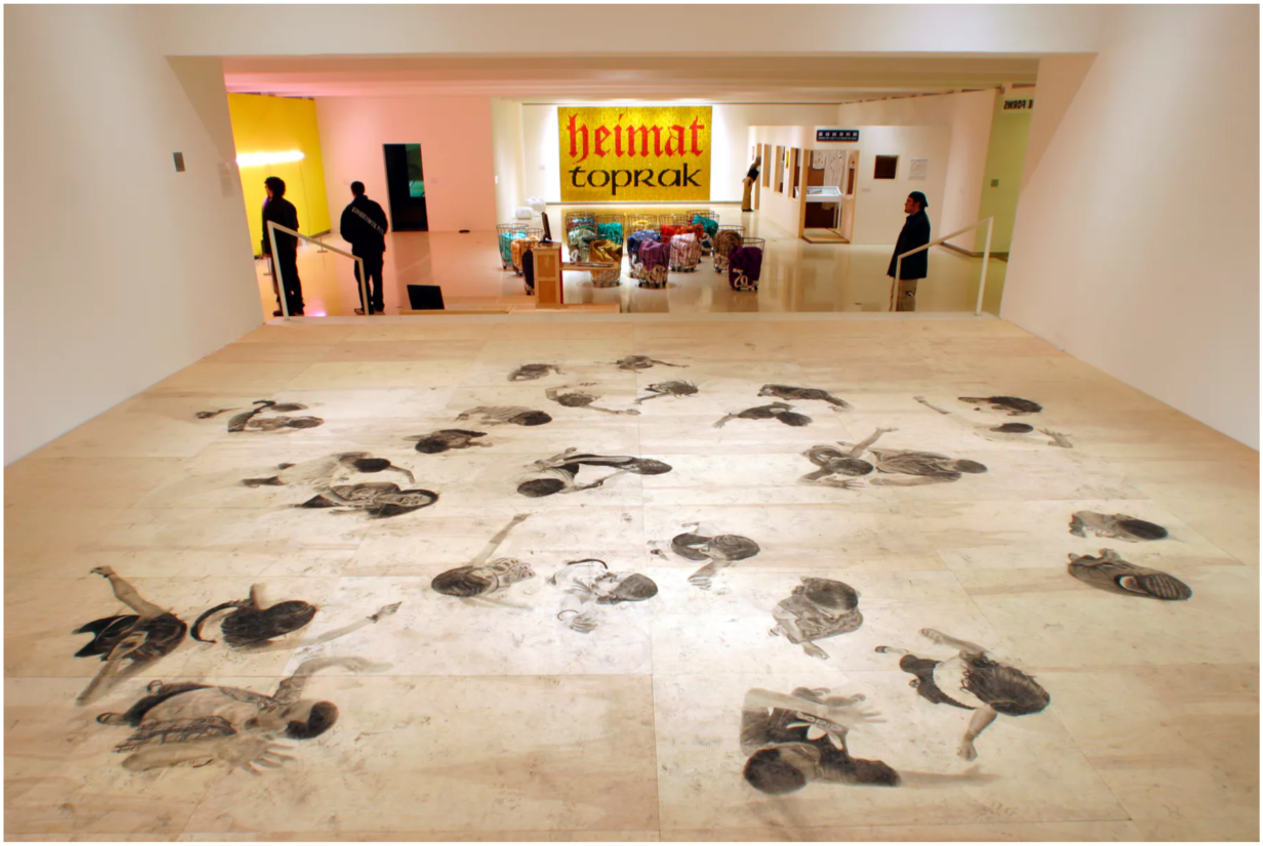

Installation view of *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*, with Allora & Calzadilla's *Charcoal Dance Floor* (2001) in foreground

BY
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Allora & Calzadilla: Chalk will be presented in the Walker's Gallery 7 from February 14, 2019 through February 2, 2020.

As Swiss artist Thomas Hirschorn once said, "I don't make political art; I make art politically." Since 1995, this sentiment has permeated the work of Philadelphia-born Jennifer Allora and Havana-born Guillermo Calzadilla, who together create poetic and smartly subversive conceptual art that exposes the machinations of power, rethinks notions of "public" art, and cleverly dismantles some of the assumptions engrained in mainstream western culture.

Among their early works is *Chalk* (1998), a set of 12 monumental pieces of chalk intended to be left in public spaces and activated by citizens. The work was famously shut down in 2002 by officials in Peru after protesters used the 54-inch sticks to write statements critical of the government in a plaza near the president's mansion. Related works from early in Allora and Calzadilla's career include *Chalk Monuments* (2002), in which the pair took likenesses from statuary in their home island of Puerto Rico–including Christopher Columbus and Ponce de

Leon–and cast them as chalk miniatures, thus inverting their monumental power; and *Landmark (Vieques)* (2003), created as part of the resistance movement against the US Navy's 60-year use of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques as a bombing range. Each is designed, in Allora's words, to "detonate some sort of chain of events" or provoke individual questioning.

Featured in the Walker's 2003 exhibition *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*, Allora and Calzadilla were artists in residence from December 2003 to October 2004, developing "Radio Re-Volt: One Person .00One Watt," a project in which they imagined a network of micro-radio stations across the Twin Cities and hosted transmitter-building workshops to help realize it. In the ten years since, the pair has exhibited their work worldwide through solo shows in Zurich, Munich, Indianapolis, and elsewhere; group shows like documenta 13; and high-profile honors, including representing the United States at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 (their five-installation work *Gloria* included, among other elements, a flipped-over 52-ton army tank on which was mounted a jogging treadmill complete with Olympic runner).

To commemorate both the Walker's acquisition of the now-iconic work *Chalk* earlier this year and the tenth anniversary of the Radio Re-Volt residency, we present an archival interview with Allora and Calzadilla from 2004 on a range of topics—from their thinking on "response-ability" and the role of artists in social movements to Puerto Rico's vibrant history of "emergency designs."

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, photographed at the Walker in 2004. Photo: Cameron Wittig

Paul Schmelzer: Your work—which is presented in museums, but also in government squares and on streets—straddles the line between art and activism. How do you define those terms?

Guillermo Calzadilla: For us it's important to put into crisis the very terminology you're speaking about—activism and art—by extending and complicating the understanding, the meaning, and the use of these terms. For example, for us the word "protest" means a proactive testing. To test something actively. That shouldn't be exclusively relegated to marches and demonstrations in the street but should be included in all fields of knowledge—science, art, all of it. The political or critical dimension is that it can serve as a space for personal questioning, to question preconceived notions of truth or political positions. Art at that level can be really powerful.

Jennifer Allora: Another word that we like is the word "responsibility," the idea of being able to respond to something. As artists our role is to facilitate vehicles or devices that enable people to respond to a so-called frozen situation. For us the potential of art is to insert something into a situation to stir things up, cause a catalytic change, or detonate a chain of events.

Calzadilla: Or to make visible frictions, conflicts, and balances. To make visible things that were not represented.

Schmelzer: When discussing socially engaged art, a curator recently told me his job was about building a canon, not doing "social work." You don't seem to shy away from the idea that art can function in society.

Allora: Because we're part of society. We live in these times, too. A part of what an artist's experience is is being part of a community, being part of a group, or not part of a community. It's natural and ethical to want to insert yourself within that reality and not think you can remove yourself just by saying, "We don't need to deal with these issues. Ours is a meta-role and we're supposed to step back and reflect." Throughout history we've seen movements of artists who have constantly engaged with their times and what was happening in a more direct way. To me, that's a natural thing.

Allora & Calzadilla, *Chalk*, 1998

Schmelzer: When you say that "responsibility is about the ability to respond," you're really talking about reshaping basic notions of the world. That doesn't really have the same meaning we've socially agreed upon. Are there other words that you've redefined in your own way?

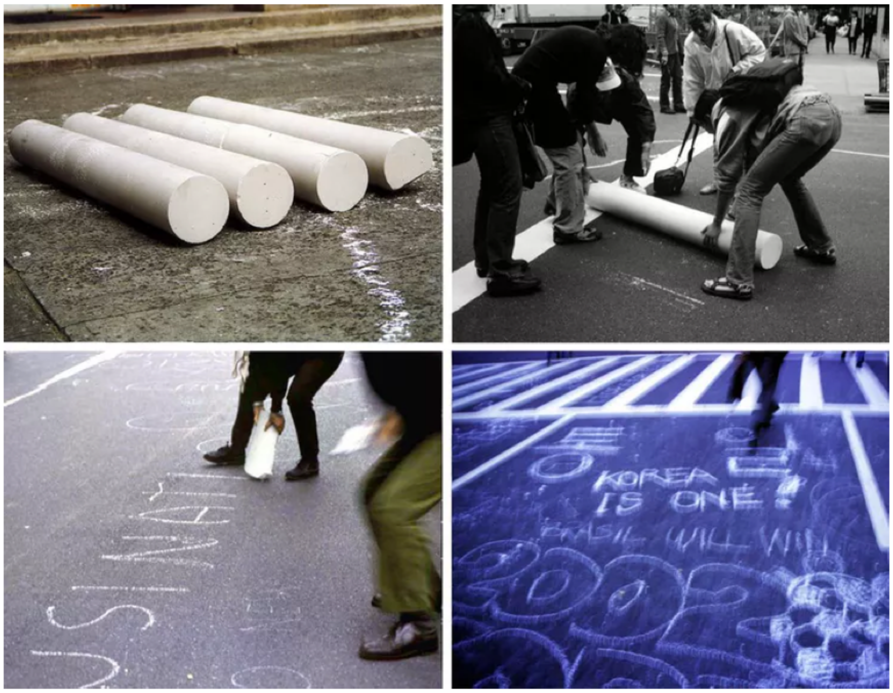
Allora: The starting point for a lot of our projects has to do with words. Because we're two people and we collaborate, a lot of our work gets formulated on a conceptual level. So one of the materials we use—just as a studio-based artist might experiment with pieces of paper—is language itself, just trying to communicate the fundamental understanding of words and what they signify and how they can be reformed. "Reform" is a great word, too. Reform means to form differently, to actually give another shape to something. "Revolt." We're proposing this project for Paris where we take all the lights on a certain street and re-volt them literally—take them from pointing downwards to going up to the sky, so that a new part of the city becomes darkened and another part becomes illuminated. There's this really interesting idea about how the dark parts of the city or the abandoned spaces are where revolutions happen.

Schmelzer: The idea of bearing witness also seems important in your work: you give chalk to people to write their stories, you give soles of shoes to people who are bearing witness to land they own–

Calzadilla: Well, we don't give the chalk to anyone in particular. The chalk is just a means; we don't have a specific end. The chalk is placed there and the context defines what may happen or may not happen with it.

Schmelzer: So whoever wants to have a voice can have a voice.

Calzadilla: Well, I don't like the idea of giving voice to anyone. People have their own voice. Who the fuck am I to give voices to people? That's very arrogant. I would just conceive it as this sculpture that has this potential in it, in which things can happen, and by placing it in a very specific way and a very specific moment, a very specific result may come out of it. And in Lima, the specific results showed the limits of free speech in a so-called democratic society.



Allora: We like to think of ourselves as critical collaborators with certain groups with which we share an identification. In the case of the civil disobedience in Vieques, there were many people doing many things: there were people who were cooking food, there were people who were bringing in water, there were the people who actually went into the bombing range. As artists, we asked, "What is our role? What are we going to contribute to this?" So that's how it came about.

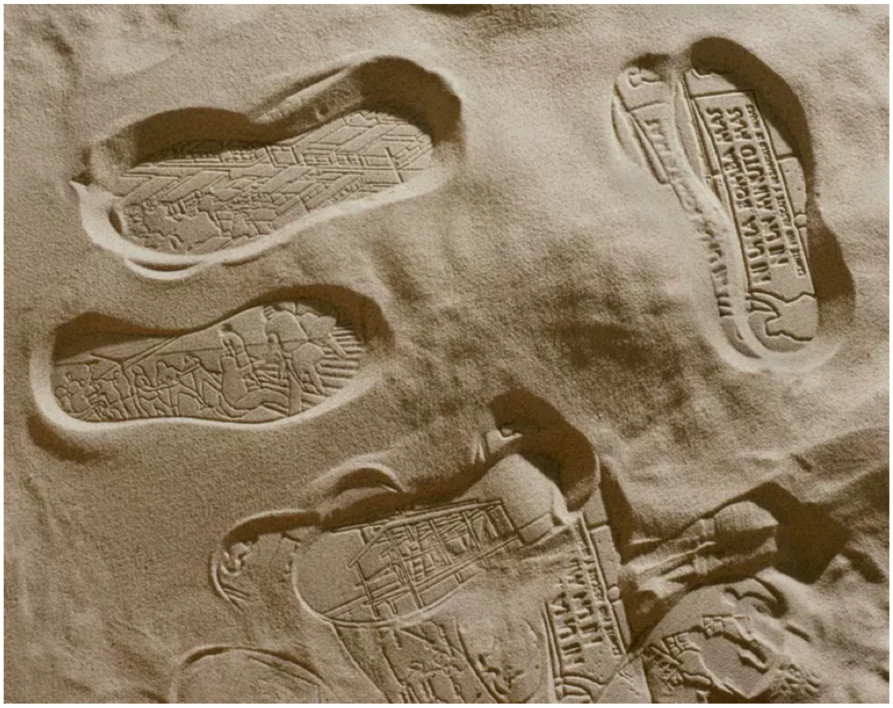
Calzadilla: The success of that movement was that there were people of different ideologies—religious, political, class—who detected a passion towards a common enemy. And they all did something about it. [After 60 years of Navy presence in Vieques–which included testing live ammunition, depleted uranium shells, napalm, and germ and chemical warfare, the US government shut down Navy operations there in 2003.]

The work, *Footprints* (2001–2002), in Vieques, came out of a long tradition of "emergency designs" to intervene within the bombing. The work was part of that specific civil disobedience in which they stopped the bombing by the US military. In that process there were all these different things. One of the many things that happened was the footprints that actually mark that land with messages that were counter-representations of the sites' current function as well as proposals for future development.

We basically made soles for shoes that could attach with Velcro to any kind of shoe. All the different organizations that worked with this civil disobedience gave us the information. They gave us signatures—very direct signatures: "I am against this" or "I want this" or "This is my position"—and historical images, biographical images, basically an archive of images that were counter-representations of the site's function. Each person had their own message underneath their shoes. They selected what they wanted to leave in their space.

Schmelzer: That theme of leaving your mark on the world and claiming ownership runs through several of your pieces. Does that have an autobiographical root?

Calzadilla: There's a famous quote by Walter Benjamin that says: we are remembered by the traces that we leave. I think that's very poetic and interesting and political at the same time.



Allora & Calzadilla, *Land Mark (Vieques)*, 2001–2002

Allora: I don't think there's anything autobiographical about it. It's a great expression, an index of one's existence in a place and what one did. A mark. How do you leave a mark? What is the mark? What is the physical, indexable imprint of your being here, or not?

Schmelzer: Your legacy.

Allora: But not in a glorified way either. It could be in the most humble way–something that could be ephemeral and disappear a second later. It's not about monumentalizing the mark. It's not like the arrogant footstep left on the moon that's going to be there forever because there's no wind. It's about something that's a transitional marking that's constantly being reclaimed and redefined and shifting. The whole project of *Land Mark* was about that idea, about how land can differentiate itself from other land by the way that it's been marked, historically, socially, politically.

Calzadilla: We wanted to insert this practice within a tradition of emergency designs in Puerto Rico. In the 1960s, for example, a practice developed where people gathered all different kinds of metals on the beaches and in the streets and in car shops and welded them together to make gigantic metal chains that they attached to a rope and a buoy. When the NATO forces in '78 came to practice maneuvers for 28 consecutive days—you had countries from all over the world practicing there, renting Vieques for $80 million—fishermen went out in small boats, going in front of the boats and dropping the buoys with the ropes and the metal chains. When a boat goes over a buoy, the propeller eats the rope—

Allora: The motor sucks up the chain and it clunks the motor and it makes it stop. They stopped the entire NATO fleet that way.

I wish art historians would go and look at these popular expressions of resistance—the level of creativity and dandyism and Dadaism and all this kind of vocabulary we use to try to look at this very insular canon of a particular set of Western, particularly male European artists—and apply it to different things people are doing that are so much more rich and lively.

Calzadilla: Emergency design is not to fix something permanently. It's like, you scratch your hand and it's bleeding. What do you have around you right now that you can use to stop the bleeding for a second? It's like something you need to deal with right now, immediately.

Allora: The other great example is when the NATO fleet was doing maneuvers called "amphibious practices." There's a control tower on top of a mountain and then all the beach areas that the boats bomb from the sea. The way it works is: a fleet of boats maneuver one in front of the other based on what the control tower tells them. On the side of the boats are these numbers that are like their tags—F5125, etc. The fishermen got slingshots and paintballs, so that when the boats came out, they paintballed the sides of the boats so all the numbers were blocked out. The control tower couldn't tell them what to do and all the boats stopped. What an interesting indictment: it's the US military and NATO forces, and they're totally useless when they don't have their set of commands—

Schmelzer: It's like found art, yet the intent isn't to make art.

Calzadilla: You look in art history and it fits within a tradition, but it also fits within a very creative history of Caribbean culture about how to do something with anything. Creativity and an economy of means how to do it.

Schmelzer: Let me ask you about *Chalk Monuments*. It strikes me that that's about dissolving mythologies, literally and figuratively.

Allora: We're definitely interested in this idea of taking something that is permanent, that seems incontestable, and rendering it fragile, ephemeral, open to questioning. That is the basis of our practice—to take things that seem polarized, isolated, and try to undo them in some way. Of course the monuments of a city are a clear object of interest because they're so present and, especially those particular monuments in Old San Juan in Puerto Rico, they're just so unavoidable, and the sort of arrogance of their placement in the city that, seeing them day after day, makes you want to create a structure to respond to it.

Allora & Calzadilla, *Chalk Monument*, 2001

Schmelzer: How old are they?

Allora: They're both from the 20th century. But Puerto Rico has this total colonial complex still. There's a funny story: a mayor on the other side of the harbor from San Juan wanted to use taxpayer money to buy a statue of Christopher Columbus. It was larger than the Statue of Liberty, so it would be the first thing that would welcome American cruise ships to the island. But he didn't have enough money to buy the entire monument. In fact, the story's even more complex because it was made by a Russian sculptor [Zurab Tsereteli] who wanted to give it as a gift to the people of Columbus, Ohio, but the people of Columbus didn't want it. So, while the Russian government and the sculptor decided to give it to the people of Columbus, they wanted to sell it to the Puerto Ricans. The mayor didn't have enough money to buy the whole monument, so he only bought the head. Now there's only the head of Christopher Columbus, decapitated in the plaza!

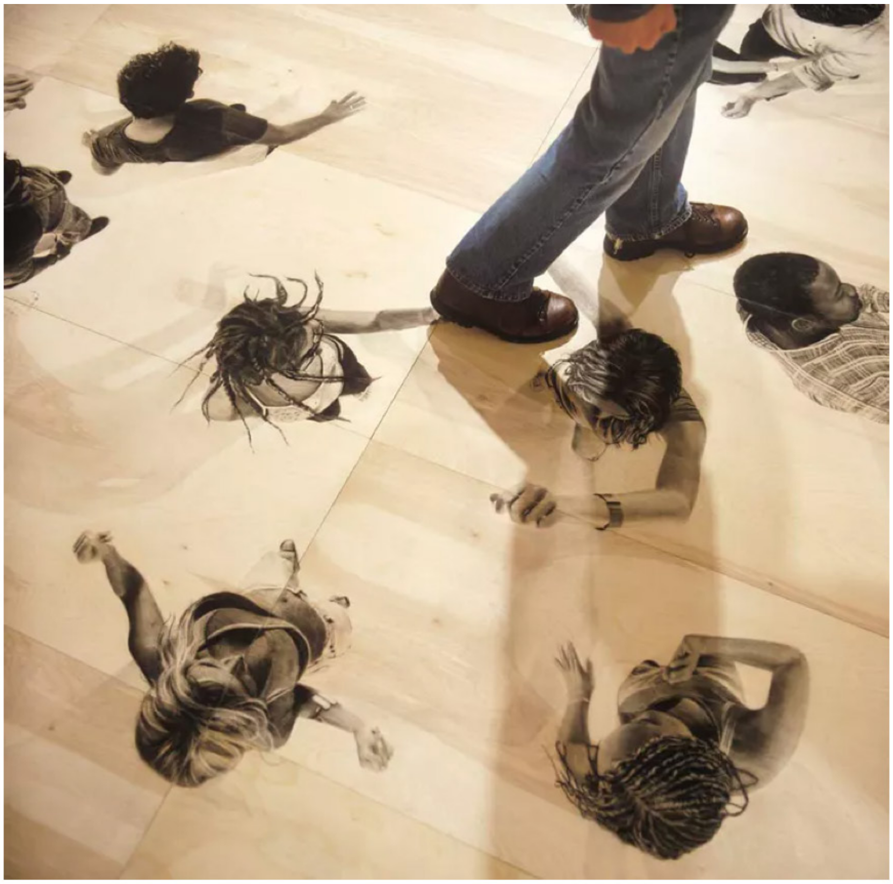
This sort of colonial mentality is really part of the culture, and it's something that really needs to be contested. That's why we thought using the discursive place of the classroom would be a really important way to link this public monument with the place these stories get generated and constructed. [After casting images of Columbus and Ponce de Leon in chalkboard-sized chalk, they distributed them to area teachers to use in their social studies and history classes.]

Schmelzer: Is your best known work to date, *Charcoal Dance Floor*, a critique of globalization?

Allora: Definitely. It was the first work we made together and we were in our early 20s and going through this process of trying to figure out our identities. We got interested in how people try to differentiate themselves through the costumes they wear and the projection of identification through clothes. There's such violence in the process of identifying; because of advertising and media and consumerism, you feel somehow compelled to have to dress in a certain way, shop in a certain way, either to affirm a certain relationship with a group or to try to distinguish yourself. So we chose to represent a space where people are in a hyper-state of expressing their individuality—a dance floor. The idea is that you would be walking around [on a floor drawing of dancers, rendered in charcoal that easily smudges underfoot] and looking at the different people, and as you look at the work, you inevitably step on the people who are dancing below. And, because we're wearing these shoes that are part of this global commodity culture, people start getting branded with all those same things that are trying to make them feel like they're different. So they've got Nike emblazoned on their face, and Adidas, and not only that but the actual shoes start to smudge all the drawings and instead of them being very clean and detail-ful, they become smudged and dirty and homogenized and erased.

Schmelzer: The idea being that, in our efforts to express our individuality by wearing youth culture's globally recognized brands—by our "hip consumerism," as Tom Frank calls it—we blend in instead of stand out?

Allora: Yeah. In the end it becomes kind of a blur.



Allora & Calzadilla, *Charcoal Dance Floor* (detail), 2001

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