

Allora &
Calzadilla

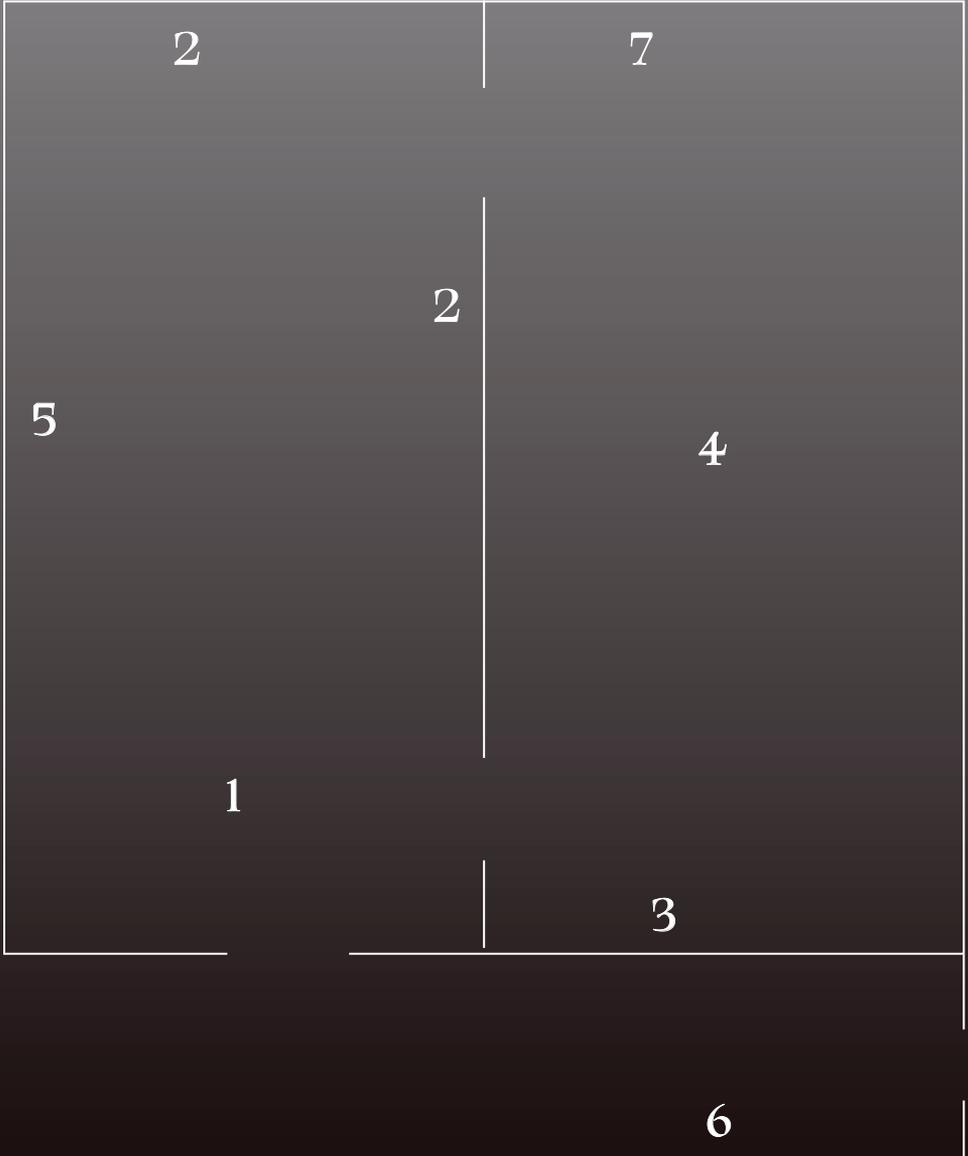
Specters
of Noon

For centuries, noon has been considered a most forbidding hour, the time when shadows shorten and specters emerge. Early Christian monks living in the harsh conditions of the Egyptian desert took a particular interest in the perceived dangers of this time of day. In the 4th century, Evagrius Ponticus warned of the *demonium meridianum* or “noontime devil.” Also known as the demon of acedia, it besieges the soul during midday, when, according to Evagrius, the hours listlessly drag and delirious visions momentarily reign in the bright light.

For this exhibition, four years in the making, the artistic duo Allora & Calzadilla conceived of seven works that together evoke the spirit of acedia. They drew inspiration from the Menil Collection’s archives and holdings of Surrealist works of art and the shared connections between Houston and their home of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Both port cities have been deeply impacted by energy commerce and the economic, ecological, and political effects of a changing climate. In addition to sounds, cast light, novel use of sculptural materials, and performances, Allora & Calzadilla have created an atmosphere of bewilderment, a manifestation of noon’s hold over humankind. According to the artists, “This affliction in many ways seems to summarize the contemporary moment in which one finds oneself feeling supremely awake, animated, immersed in very strong sensations and feelings, but not alive. Acedia makes the present intolerable and the future impossible to imagine.”

Gallery Map

- 1. Blackout
- 2. Manifest
- 3. Specters of Noon
- 4. Entelechy
- 5. Cadastre
- 6. Graft
- 7. Penumbra



1 *Blackout*, 2020

Power transformer, bronze, electricity,
vocalists

10 ft. ½ in. × 7 ft. 4 in. × 7 ft. 1 in.

(3 × 2.3 × 2.2 m)

Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, New York and
London

Blackout consists of an electrical transformer from the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority that exploded during Hurricane María in 2017. After cutting the transformer's steel exterior in half to expose its inner workings, the artists cast half of the structure in bronze. The reflective surface of the destroyed coils of conductive wire, radiator pipes, and insulators next to the matte metal creates a sculptural division that references the exhibition's theme of the day divided by solar noon (halfway between dawn and sunset). The deep hum of reverberating electricity buried in the relic will serve as a tuning device for a live vocal performance of a score composed by David Lang and inspired by the sounds of electricity and a volatile power grid.





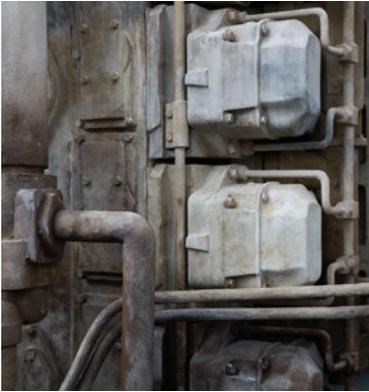
2 *Manifest*, 2020

Bat and bird guano

Side A: 15 × 7 × 3 ½ ft. (4.5 × 2.1 × 1 m)

Side B: 15 ft. × 6 ft. 10 in. × 3 ft. 3 in.
(4.5 × 2 × 1 m)

Commissioned by Leslie and Brad Bucher for exhibition at the Menil Collection; courtesy of Lisson Gallery, New York and London



In *Manifest*, two sides of a single cargo ship engine from the American company Crowley Maritime Corporation are cast in bird and bat guano and form two totemic wall reliefs. Seabird and bat fertilizer was of great importance to the indigenous peoples of the Antilles and was instrumental to agricultural development and population growth in North America and Europe from the colonization period onwards. The nutrient-rich substance, a potent form of latent energy, creates an unlikely acoustic paneling that absorbs sonic energy in the room.

By combining dung and engines, Allora & Calzadilla reference two legislative measures that have been directly tied to Puerto Rico's economic struggles as an unincorporated territory of the United States, a status that allows no representation in the federal government. The first is the Jones Act of 1920, which stipulates that only United States-built-and-crewed ships can carry goods and passengers between U.S. ports. This stipulation suppresses market competition and creates higher costs for Puerto Rican consumers. The second is the Guano Islands Act of 1856, which allowed American citizens to claim unoccupied islands with guano deposits as United States possessions. Part of the interventionist policies that grew out of the 19th-century idea of Manifest Destiny, this act created the legal framework for a kind of territorial expansion, specifically the creation of unincorporated territories, which Puerto Rico was later designated.

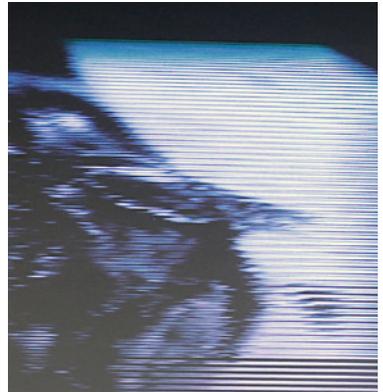
3 *Specters of Noon*, 2020

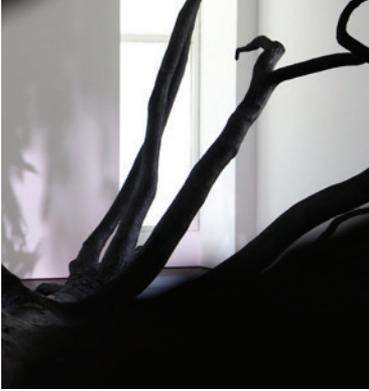
Laser projection with audio, run daily at solar noon

Commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation

As the French Surrealist writer Roger Caillois described noon in 1936, “This is the moment when the sun, at its zenith, divides the day into equal parts, each governed by the opposing signs of rise and decline. This, then, is the moment when the forces of life and light yield to the powers of death and darkness.” Allora & Calzadilla’s laser projection *Specters of Noon* is an invocation of the “noontime devil” and the related crisis in a person’s mood that takes place during midday when the sun is at its hottest and highest. Indecision, panic, and dread are among the menacing attributes that can allegedly overcome its victims. This work is activated at solar noon, a precise time linked to the sun’s physical location that changes as the seasons progress. A fleeting apparition, the work remains visible for only a few minutes.

To create *Specters of Noon*, Allora & Calzadilla consulted a myriad of sources, ranging from Saint Jerome to Dante, that explore the theme of midday: writings by poets and philosophers, popular folklore, and Christian thought. The images formed by the lasers include found footage of dogs chasing a deer in a river—a nod to the mythological subject of Diana, who transformed the hunter Acteon into a stag at noon—and images of “zombie ants.” After the insects are infected by a poisonous fungus that causes them to bite a leaf at solar noon and die, their corpses then sprout a strange and flowering fungus. Accompanying these flashing and surreal images are computer-generated voice-overs reading a selection of midday musings by Walter Benjamin, Roger Caillois, Aimé Césaire, E.M. Cioran, and Gabriele D’Annunzio.





4 *Entelechy*, 2020

Coal, vocalists

14 ft. 3 in. × 31 ft. 2 in. × 48 ft. 5 in.

(4.3 x 9.5 × 14.8 m)

Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris,
and Lisson Gallery, New York and London

Entelechy is a monumental coal sculpture cast from a pine tree felled by lightning. It references the type of petrified tree that might be found in coal deposits, sources of potential energy. Allora & Calzadilla selected a Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) to make the work. This species is found in the forest of Montignac, France, where, in 1940, a group of teenagers discovered a tree uprooted after a storm. The hole in the ground revealed the now-famous Lascaux Cave, an underground cavern covered in prehistoric drawings. The artists were inspired by theorist and Surrealist author Georges Bataille's account of this event. He described the cave as a place of wonder and identified it with the birth of art, the beginning of a new conception of prehistory, and, by extension, the history of humanity. Vocalists will perform on this tree. The musical score, composed by David Lang, references the only image of a human figure found in the cave, that of a hybrid of a bird and a man.

5 *Cadastre* (Meter Number 18257262, Consumption Charge 36.9kWh × \$0.02564, Rider FCA-Fuel Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh × \$0.053323, Rider PPCA-Purchase Power Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh × \$0.016752, Rider CILTA-Municipalities Adjusted 36.9kWh × \$0.002376, Rider SUBA Subsidies \$1.084), 2019

Iron filings on linen

6 ft. × 70 ft. (1.8 × 21.3 m)

Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Cadastre takes electromagnetism, one of the four fundamental forces of nature, as its subject and medium. To make the work, Allora & Calzadilla sifted iron filings onto a canvas positioned above an array of electrified copper cables. When the electrical breaker was turned on, the iron particles self-organized into lines and shapes determined by the charged poles of the electromagnetic force field. For the artists, the space between these dual poles in *Cadastre*, bounded by an unbreakable tension, is a manifestation of midday's equally powerful force. The parenthetical component of the work's title, a lengthy sequence of numbers and letters that they took from the electric bill from their San Juan studio, refers to the politics related to the generation, ownership, and distribution of electricity. It is part of the artists' ongoing interest in using electricity in their art to probe the many facets and figures involved in energy consumption in Puerto Rico, from the oil futures market and transnational holders of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority's bond debt to the local consumers who suffer the consequences of the bankrupt power authority's fiscal mismanagement.





6 *Graft*, 2019

Recycled polyvinyl chloride and paint

Dimensions variable

Commissioned by Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow; courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

In *Graft*, thousands of yellow blossoms, cast from the flowers of roble amarillo trees (*Tabebuia chrysantha*), an oak species native to the Caribbean, appear as though a wind has swept them across the gallery floor. Created through a fabrication process originally developed for scientific purposes, the hand-painted petals are reproduced in seven variations or degrees of decomposition, from the freshly fallen to the wilted and brown. *Graft* alludes to environmental changes that have been set in motion through the interlocking effects of colonial exploitation and climate change. Systemic depletion of Caribbean flora and fauna is one of the primary legacies of colonial rule. Nonetheless, the region remains one of 36 biodiversity hotspots, areas that support nearly 60% of the world's plant, bird, mammal, reptile, and amphibian species but that amount to just 2.4% of the earth's land surface. In their plastic and unnatural stillness, the flowers in *Graft* reflect this fragile ecological predicament.

7 *Penumbra*, 2020

Digital projection with sound

Continual loop

Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York
and Brussels

Penumbra is a virtual terrain that takes the shifting qualities of noon as its substance. The projected digital animation recreates the effect of light passing through foliage in the tropical forest of the Absalon Valley on Martinique. This Caribbean location was the site of a series of now-mythic hikes that took place in 1941 with Suzanne and Aimé Césaire. The two Martinican anticolonial poets, theoreticians, and founders of the literary journal *Tropiques* took walks there with the leader of European Surrealism, André Breton. He was among a group of temporarily interned refugees fleeing war-torn France including Jacqueline Lamba, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Wifredo Lam, André Masson, Victor Serge, and Helena Holzer. Breton described the forest in terms that also pertain to the light's movement found in *Penumbra*: "the tangle of these trees that specialize in acrobatics, boost each other into the clouds, leap over cliffs and cut moaning arches over sweet sorceresses under suction cups of sticky flowers."

Penumbra is projected in the gallery at an angle based on a real-time simulation of the sun's location overhead. The artificial light flickers across the space and intermingles with dancing patterns of the sun passing through clouds moving over the Menil. Through this interaction, two disparate places converge and create a paradox of light.

Complementing *Penumbra* is a musical composition by David Lang that is inspired by combination or "shadow" tones, which create a psycho-acoustic phenomenon perceived when two real tones form the semblance of a third.



Soundscape and Performances

A soundscape permeates the gallery space, augmenting the hypnotic atmosphere of disorientation that the artists create. It is composed by the Grammy-award-winning and Oscar-nominated composer David Lang. He has worked closely with the artists and was in residence at the Menil in August of 2020 to develop an eight-hour cycle of constantly evolving sounds that runs daily in the exhibition and, according to Lang, “sonically sculpts the day.” A combination of instrumental, vocal, and electrical recordings, it responds to the works of art.

The exhibition concludes with a series of live vocal performances created for *Entelechy* and *Blackout*. They were composed by Lang with the artists, and are led by the renowned Philadelphia-based choral master Donald Nally in collaboration with Da Camera of Houston.

Bio

Since 1995, Jennifer Allora (b. 1974, United States) and Guillermo Calzadilla (b. 1971, Cuba) have built a research-based practice that responds critically to the intersections among culture, history, and geopolitics. The duo produces interdisciplinary works combining performance, sculpture, sound, video, and photography. Allora & Calzadilla live and work in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator

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Please visit menil.org for up-to-date information about public programs and events organized in conjunction with this exhibition.

Exhibition catalogue available in January 2021. Please check menil.org or the Menil Collection Bookstore for updated information on its availability.

September 26, 2020–
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