PUERTO RICAN LIGHT TO ALLORA & CALZADILLA

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Coming of age in the 1990s, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla are part of a generation of artists examining the legacy of Minimalism, the mid-1960’s art movement that revived geometric abstraction and innovated the production of installation art and site-specific projects. Contemporary re-significations of Minimalism, either through direct appropriation or quotation of icons of the movement, arise from a prevailing belief among young artists that while minimalist modes of display remain valid in the twenty-first century, the arch formalism promoted by its innovators warrants critique. In their new installation, *Puerto Rican Light* (2003), Allora & Calzadilla literally represent Dan Flavin’s 1965 sculpture, *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)*. Through this act of appropriation, they expose the metaphorical dimensions of a medium that Flavin once described as a “...psychologically indifferent decoration.”

A major figure in the minimalist movement, Dan Flavin became prominent in 1963 with his *The Diagonal of Personal Ecstasy* (*The Diagonal of May 25th*), a work consisting of a commercial fluorescent lamp hung at a 45 degree angle to the floor. The diagonal of personal ecstasy struck Flavin’s colleagues and critics as a work of art that revived Marcel Duchamp’s transgressive readymade gesture for a new generation. But as Flavin began developing large-scale projects, his light installations became more invested in appealing to the eye than provoking spectators to question the meaning of the work. At the same time, Flavin never stopped investing his works with meaning through his choice of titles: nearly all of his installations are dedicated to people, places, or events that were important to him. Nevertheless, Flavin was reluctant to discuss the role that symbolism played in his pieces, stressing instead the way he worked his material to achieve certain technical effects: “Electric light is just another instrument,” he wrote. “I have no desire to contrive fantasies mediumistically or sociologically over it. Future art and the lack of that would surely reduce such squandered speculations to silly trivia anyhow...”

Taking note of the contradictions and evasions in Flavin’s practices, Allora & Calzadilla describe their own *Puerto Rican Light* as a way of “supplementing” their predecessor’s work. Their intervention consists of making Flavin’s fluorescent-light work, *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)*, run on a ton of solar batteries that were charged by actual Puerto Rican sunlight. This act of transforming the sculpture’s nominal subject—Puerto Rico’s light—into a physical presence within an installation using solar batteries turns the minimalist adage that “matter matters” on its head. Rather than allowing the sculpture to exhibit “plain power” by hiding its electric wiring, as Flavin would have done, Allora & Calzadilla force the spectator to consider the source from which the work draws its energy. Perhaps even more significantly, Allora & Calzadilla reveal that *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)* may function as a metaphor for the island and people of Puerto Rico; their re-presentation of Flavin’s work affirms that Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans vitally matter.

Allora & Calzadilla’s interest in creating a project dealing with *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)* began several years ago when they saw it reproduced in a catalog. According to Jennifer Allora, the tropically colored sculpture composed of red, pink, and yellow lights set off a chain of associations related to an epiphany the couple had in Puerto Rico while looking at the sun’s reflection over the ocean: “We were watching the sunset over the ocean and...began talking about this phenomenon, in particular, how the line of reflection on the water was seemingly connecting with us,” writes Allora. “What was striking about this observation was that the very line of connection between ourselves and the sun on the horizon was simultaneously the
threshold of our common experience...it was impossible for us to see it connect with anyone else no matter how close together we stood.” The artists’ realization that they could not “see” the sun’s reflection connecting to others, but that other human beings were nevertheless witnessing the same phenomenon, inspired a series of projects that would make their viewers conscious of the limits of their own perception. Their first undertaking was *Seeing Otherwise* (1999), a digitally manipulated photograph that portrayed the reflection of the sun’s rays deflected away from the spectator’s sight-line to expose the problematic of “seeing with the wisdom of, or being wise to, the other.”

The viewer’s experience of the photographic series *Seeing Otherwise* is, in some ways, similar to looking at photographs of Flavin’s sculpture *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)*: both images expose the paradox of seeing light as something that is all around us but only visible via reflections and shadows. In *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)*, Flavin manipulated the red, pink, and yellow tubes to cast a green shadow on the wall, an effect that in photographs, at least, looks like an independent or “other” ray of light that emanates from the three tubes but does not “reflect” the color of any one of them. However, Flavin did not intend his sculptures to be appreciated as photographs. The connection one wants to pose between Allora & Calzadilla’s objectives and those of Flavin appears somewhat specious at second glance.

By 1965, Flavin was developing proposals for exhibiting his lights in site-specific contexts. At that time he was beginning to regard his installations as “situations” in which light, color, and architectural space were integrated so that spectators experienced a sense of boundlessness that approximated Kant’s description of the Sublime. Flavin later regretted describing his work in terms of Kantian aesthetics because, among other reasons, he didn’t subscribe to such restrictive categories of aesthetic experience. In “The Critique of Judgment,” Kant specified that the ideal sites for encountering the Sublime are found in nature. Furthermore, because the Sublime reveals the finiteness of human understanding vis-à-vis the immensity of God’s universe, sublime encounters are likely to provoke terror and induce life-altering changes in a subject’s outlook.

Allora & Calzadilla’s insight regarding the limits of their perception while watching the sunset in Puerto Rico has the earmarks of a sublime revelation, and the stunning photograph *Seeing Otherwise*, which gave visual form to the revelation, can likewise be considered a sublime image. However, Flavin’s sculpture *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)*, as well as many of his other works, seems to fall into the category that Kant called The Beautiful. The Beautiful is experienced through contemplating “art,” i.e., objects appreciated for their formal properties rather than their utilitarian purposes. Not only do Flavin’s fluorescent lights flaunt their non-utilitarian status by hanging on walls rather than ceilings, such that you would not mistake them for reading lamps, but the tubes are positioned to envelop the body with light, promoting a sense of wholeness within an environment designed for aesthetic appreciation.

Commenting on one of Flavin’s corridor pieces, *Untitled (to Jan and Ron Greenberg)*, from 1972-73, Jonathan Crary notes that the internal paradoxes and contradictions in Flavin’s installations prevent them from simply being pretty spectacles. He notes that Flavin tends to interrupt the viewer’s sensation of being in the presence of an unmediated light source by casting shadows that simulate the size and solidity of the fluorescent tube but permit one to see through it. The green shadow cast in *Puerto Rican Light (to
Jeanie Blake) is an example of this. This interplay between presence and absence in Flavin’s work can promote an awareness of the limitations of human perception. "Within Flavin’s architectural schema, the vertical aperture becomes the hinge of the work’s logic of exchangeability and duplication," writes Crary. "Our own perception of the piece is inseparable from an ambulatory experience of its chromatically distinct but otherwise identical faces, which ceaselessly fold in on one another, like a Duchampian structure of reversibility."  

Once we compare Flavin’s trick of simultaneously building and shattering the illusion of light’s immateriality in Puerto Rican Light to Jeanie Blake to a similar experience before Allora & Calzadilla’s Puerto Rican Light, the younger artists’ enterprise of converting sunlight into matter, and matter into simulacrum, borders on an absurd redundancy. Why did they bother to do this? What is the point? In truth, one cannot fully appreciate the serious intentions behind Allora & Calzadilla’s project without considering the intellectual and physical labor that went into its construction. The sculpture is the end result of a long process. The artists and the exhibition curator investigated the mechanics of gathering enough solar power to light Flavin’s lamps for the duration of the show. Like mad scientists, Allora & Calzadilla took delight in spending hours calculating how to transform light into energy. After much consideration and discussion, a battery bank was designed and manufactured in Florida that could hold enough energy to power the Flavin piece for 360 hours—considering that the sculpture would be lit for 6 hours a day, 5 days a week, for twelve weeks. In short, it would be lit for the duration of the exhibition. To gather and store the sunlight, the Americas Society sought institutional collaborators in Puerto Rico. With Michy Marxauch of M&M Projects acting as a liaison between institutions, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in San Juan agreed to place the battery bank (containing batteries and solar panels) in their gardens. Needless to say, the job of convincing one of Dan Flavin’s collectors to lend a work was another feat that took great deal of conviction and persistence on the part of the curator. What pulled everyone involved in this project together was the greater goal of exhibiting some of the vanguard art coming out of Puerto Rico. 

As part of a band of artists tagged by critic Manuel Alvarez Lezama as Los Novisomos or "the Newest Ones," Allora & Calzadilla are contributing to a renaissance on the island, which may soon outstrip Havana as the Caribbean’s cultural capital. New institutions like the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico now offer unparalleled facilities for exhibiting large-scale indoor projects. Meanwhile, an ambitious new program called the Puerto Rico Public Art Project is getting underway that promises to bring 65 new works to the island’s streets and plazas over the next five years. By creating a project in New York that makes a direct connection with Puerto Rico, Allora & Calzadilla are promoting an alternative image of the island: unlike the vast array of kitsch artifacts that stereotype Puerto Rico as merely a sunny vacation spot, Allora & Calzadilla’s Puerto Rican Light represents Puerto Rico’s sunlight as material and as a metaphor for intellectual illumination and artistic production. But this work also makes a direct connection to the past. And, I could not help but wonder what Puerto Rico’s light may have signified to Dan Flavin.

Born in 1933, Dan Flavin was a native New Yorker who witnessed the great migration of Puerto Ricans to the city after World War II. Throughout the 1950’s and 60’s, Puerto Ricans were the object of dread and fascination in the mass media. A major concern expressed by New York’s city planners and politicians was that the
The battery bank for Puerto Rican Light consisted of a wood crate containing solar-gel batteries and solar panels, charge controller, inverter/charger, and various cables. Here it is shown when it was received at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in San Juan, Puerto Rico.
growing numbers of Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans would disrupt the social order. Moreover, Puerto Ricans' protest marches, ethnic parades, music jams, poetry readings, and block parties threatened to make Spanish a vernacular language, upsetting cultural conservatives. Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) (1965) and an earlier painting, mira mira (to Mrs. Brody) (1960) are thus part of a constellation of cultural productions that reflected Puerto Ricans' impact on the city's visual culture. From Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story," released as a major Hollywood musical in 1961, to Garry Winogrand's hard-hitting documentary photographs of Puerto Rican barrios on Manhattan's East Side (c. 1962-1964), to Rafael Montañez Ortiz's ripped mattress sculptures that shocked the art world in 1963, Puerto Ricans were depicted as agents of change in America's Empire State. Flavin's mixed-media painting, mira, mira [to Mrs. Brody] suggests that he welcomed New York's impending latinization. The gold-hued assemblage features a crushed Spanish olive oil can set against an acrylic ground that bears the words mira mira written in script along its lower right edge.

Flavin's use of a colloquial Puerto Rican phrase meaning "look, look" articulates a desire to gain attention in the art world by posing as an (ethnic) outsider, an image that he fostered in his oftpublished autobiographical essay, "...in daylight or cool white" (1964). In the essay's opening paragraph, Flavin assumed the radical persona of a "white Negro" by drolly introducing himself as "overweight and underprivileged, a Caucasian in a Negro year." While this statement may be interpreted as expressing hostility at the gains by people of color as a result of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Flavin's political views appear to have been progressive. Among the works created in the 1960's whose titles express sympathy with (male) Blacks are: Africa (to seventy-two Negroes) (1960); To Those Who Suffer in The Congo (1961); Icon VIII (The Dead Niggers Icon); (To Blind Lemon Jefferson) (1962-1963); and Rhythm Five Pinsons, Five Robinsons (1964). Like many of his colleagues, Flavin was in favor of civil rights and against the Vietnam War. In the 1970's, Flavin dedicated a whole series of sculptures to Senator George McGovern, who ran against Richard Nixon for president in 1972.

Similar in spirit to mira mira (to Mrs. Brody), Flavin's Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) is a gaily-colored attention grabber. Its tutti-frutti hues radiate tropicalism, a variant of the Western master trope of Primitivism that designates all non-Western places, people, and things as Other. Invariably, the tropical is portrayed as a sunny paradise brimming with colorful flora and fauna. Associated with fecundity and the feminine, the tropics are the zone where "hot females" abound. Flavin's sculpture beams those tropical signifiers through a product of American industry, creating a dynamic work that manifests the clashing interests that a "modernizing" Puerto Rico posed to North Americans. The idea of developing the island on a dual track as both an outpost of the American military-industrial complex and an alluring tourist destination held sway in the postwar era. Encouraging Puerto Ricans to migrate to the United States was perceived as essential to the island's economic success. Created during the apex of the island's reconstruction as a (sub)urban jungle replete with superhighways and strip malls, Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) is an icon of an era that saw Puerto Rico's future as a shining star of the Caribbean tied to the modernist project of social progress through industrial expansion.

Flavin acknowledged that his works could illuminate the dark side of modernism's technomania, even though that was not a stated goal. Noting that the fluorescent lights were designed to someday burn out, Flavin's close colleague Robert Smithson once...
described Flavin's sculptures as visible analogues for entropy, a principle in physics that explains energy drain and inertia. In Smithson's estimation, what ultimately made Flavin a significant artist was that he shifted sculptural concerns from space to time.⁷

Allora & Calzadilla's approach to Flavin's art develops its temporal thematic into a grand statement. Their solar-powered version of Puerto Rican Light invites us to consider the post-modern era as ushering in an age threatened by global warming. Dramatizing the folly of modernism's faith in technology, Flavin's once hi-tech lamps not only look passé but abject when tethered to such a "primitive" source of energy—an allusion perhaps to our post-industrial future, in which holes in the ozone layer, caused by excessive pollution, will make us victims of the sun's radiation. It is difficult to say, of course, whether Flavin would have approved of Allora & Cazadilla's intervention, but there is no doubt that he wanted and expected his work to be "recharged" for future generations. "The lamps will go out [as they should, no doubt]," wrote Flavin. "Somehow I believe that the changing standard lighting system should support my idea within it. I will try to maintain myself this way. The medium bears the artist."⁸

ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., 77
3 Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Cazadilla, email exchange with the author, September 9, 2002.
5 Dan Flavin, "...in daylight or cool white" in Dan Flavin: The Architecture of Light, 50.
6 In a telephone interview, Ms. Blake, a former assistant at Kornblee Gallery, said that Flavin's sculpture made a great impression on her when he brought it to the gallery. She recalls saying to Flavin that the sculpture "looked Puerto Rican," prompting the title. Blake's impression of Puerto Rican color schemes was based on her yearly visits to the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York during the 1960's.
8 Dan Flavin, "Writings" in Dan Flavin: The Architecture of Light, 88.