

Allora
&
Calzadilla

**Specters
of
Noon**

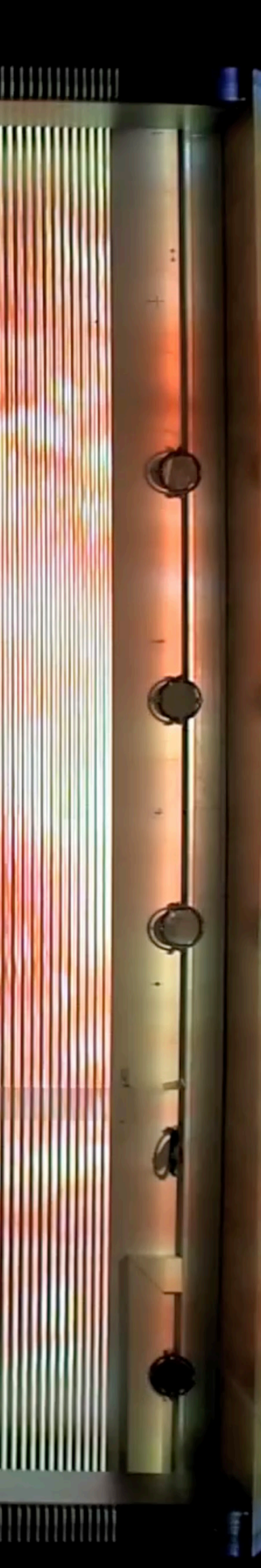


Specters of Noon, 2020

Laser projection with audio

**Duration TBA, projected daily at
solar noon**

Courtesy of the artists



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 allegedly can overcome its victims. This work is activated at solar noon, a precise time linked to the sun’s physical location that changes as the season progresses. A fleeting apparition, the work remains visible for only a few minutes.

To create *Specters of Noon*, Allora & Calzadilla consulted a myriad of that sources explore the theme of midday: writings by poets and philosophers, popular folklore, and Christian thought ranging from Saint Jerome to Dante. 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 midday—and images of “zombie ants.” Infected by a poisonous fungus that causes them to bite a leaf at solar noon and die, the insect’s corpse sprouts a strange and flowering fungus. Accompanying these flashing and surreal images is a voiceover of a selection of midday musings by Walter Benjamin, Roger Callois, Aimé Césaire, E.M. Cioran, and Gabriele D’Annunzio.

Specters of Noon

Elizabeth DeLoughrey

The creator sets atremble a blaze that fills light with countless troubling beings who are always on the brink of visibility.

—Roger Caillois

To manifest a demon at high noon is to reawaken the animacy of light. When the sun is at its apex and nothing casts a shadow, time seems to be suspended; for ancient Greeks this was the temporal threshold, an opening to the possibility of spirit possession as the violent merger between the human and the divine. The Greeks were wary of the slumbering god Pan and his associated nymphs who, if disturbed during the noontide torpor of Mediterranean heat, would torment and possess their mortal visitors. The cloven-hoofed Pan encapsulated the Arcadian idyll of sexuality, fertility, and music and was “notorious for his noontime assaults,” while the shape-shifting Empousai of Greek mythology, aligned with Hecate and unbridled seducers of men, also appeared at high noon to consume their victims’ flesh and blood. As the interstitial marker between morning and night, midday was understood as a temporal caesura, a moment of often violent transition between mortal and divine, a time for libations to the dead, of epiphany, spirit or erotic possession, as well as an opening to the sacred that filled the ancient Greeks with “nympholeptic terror.”

The noontime demon is characterized by its shapeshifting over time and space. With the rise of Christianity, this specter metamorphized to take possession of devout ascetics. Monastic scholars in the Egyptian desert blamed their disenfranchisement with the Christian church on the noonday demon, the daemon meridianus that instilled a soul and body-sucking apathy they termed *acedia*. The original Greek word, *akēdia* (ακηδία), refers to the lack of care in not burying one’s dead, a suggestive origin for the spectral haunting of midday. Roger Caillois, French theorist of ritual and the sacred, describes the condition: “At noon, it would seem that life takes a pause, organic matter returns to an inorganic state, and everything blazes pointlessly and without ardor in a futile desire for luxury and display. Activity of any kind seems to involve unpleasant and risible agitation. All heartbeats have come to a halt.” Not having shed its Greek origins, pious sufferers of *acedia* were also overcome with carnal desire—the noontide specter transformed into “vampires and succubi arising at the hour of the dead to feed on blood and sperm.”

This solar-induced crisis was understood by poets, artists, and the devout as simultaneously corporeal, psychological, and metaphysical. In Aimé Césaire’s 1942 poem “Great Noon” (Le grand midi), the Martinican Surrealist writes of a “terrifying” spirit possession that leaves the speaker with the “blood of the world” pulsing in his “keen ear.” Interestingly, the poem’s first publication in the journal *Tropiques* warns of “atomic messages” that produce “wailings and agonizing” that burst “the rose window” with “sand piling up and the fierce occultation of solitudes.” Writing amidst a world war and anticipating the nuclear age, Césaire’s prescience of the noonday demon is remarkable, helping us understand that light is energy and radiation. By the end of that year Enrico Fermi produced the first nuclear chain reaction in his Chicago laboratory, ushering in an atomic age that unleashed terrifying demons of light, including the one dropped on Nagasaki at noon on August 9, 1945. Adorno and Horkheimer might agree that the noonday demon warns us that in this age of global ecological and political crisis “our fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”

With the global standardization of time following the 1884 International Meridian

Conference, the marking of the midnight hour usurped the uncanny specters of noon, but Allora & Calzadilla reanimate the demonium meridianum every midday to enable an encounter between visitors to the gallery and the fleeting specter of animated light. The artists are well-known for their experimentation with the presence of (fluorescent) light, in the relocation of Dan Flavin's illuminated work in Puerto Rican Light/Cueva Vientos, 2015, to an Arawak cave. Due to its solar power it was the only beacon of light visible by satellite after the island's devastation by Hurricane María. Moreover, they comment on the absence of energy in their post-María installation of Blackout, 2020, a meaningful reflection on the grids that undergird the Anthropocene, albeit unevenly. The animation of the midday demon in the Menil Collection harnesses the alterity of light, reminding us that paradoxically, it cannot be seen; "its nature is to flash into existence while announcing other things [...] it is a radiance born of cosmic coherence and relationality." This draws us into an immediate and uncomfortable relationship to the midday specter, particularly when we realize the lasers in its projection technology soon became subjects of military research immediately after their discovery. The capacity of light to illuminate objects of knowledge but not itself renders it "a metaphor for seeing the invisible in the visible, for detecting the fragile imaginal garment that holds our planet and all existence together." Ultimately, our participation in the illumination of lighted matter is fundamentally ecological, which is to say a relational web of vision and experience. To visitors to the Menil Collection, the nonhuman animacy and unexpected intimacy with these specters encroaches upon human accessibility to contemporary art. This is evident in our experience with the alterity of light as well as the "countless trembling beings" described by Caillois that are unleashed at noon in this exhibit, including a sting from tropical "zombie ants."

Notes

Epigraph—Roger Caillois, "The Noon Complex," in *The Edge of Surrealism*, edited by Claudine Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 126.

1. Georgia Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 212.
2. Nicholas J. Perella, *Midday in Italian Literature: Variations on an Archetypal Theme* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 7.
3. Jean-Charles Nault, *The Noonday Devil: Acedia, the Unnamed Evil of Our Times*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 27.
4. Caillois, "The Noon Complex," 127. The early work of the Christian fathers identified this demon that distracted the devout from prayer and the path to God as one of the deadly sins (sloth) because it attacked both the corporeal and the spiritual passions (Nault, *The Noonday Devil*, 26).
5. Caillois, "The Noon Complex," 128. Remedies for the condition, according to the Abbot of Saint-Wandrille Jean-Charles Nault, include tears, prayer and work, perseverance, and regular meditation on death.
6. It was noon in Guam, where the operation was coordinated. See Eleanor Wilner's poem "High Noon at Los Alamos," about the "white fire at the heart of matter" that destroys Nagasaki, "a cursed line/with its caesura, a pause" in the destruction of time. Wilner, "High Noon at Los Alamos," in *Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1997), 191–92. See Paul Virilio's critique of military modernity's "an exaggerated love of light," in *Virilio, The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: British Film Institute, 1994), 35.
7. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1976), 3.
8. David A. Grandy, *The Speed of Light: Constancy + Cosmos* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 8. James Jerome Gibson argues that light is profoundly relational.
9. Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 343.
10. James Jerome Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979; Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986), 23.

