



Dona Altemus: Holding Hyphenated Spaces

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Exhibition curated by William Cordova
January 17 - April 26, 2021

"The appropriation of space is a political act, that access to space is fundamentally related to social status and power, and that changing the allocation of space is inherently related to changing society"
-Leslie Kanes Weisman
(Discrimination by Design)

Under the Bridge Art Space is pleased to present, Dona Altemus: Holding Hyphenated Spaces. For this exhibition, Altemus has produced a site specific installation that focuses on anthropological narratives by intersecting architecture, allegory and historical phenomena. Cultivating and drawing from scientific and mathematical principles, she illuminates the infinite possibilities and algorithmic nature of the human condition. Her work dwells in and out of repetition, creating harmonic tempos and rhymes. Constantly assembling labyrinths to problem solve. But then as author, Jorge Luis Borges once stated, "there is no need to build a labyrinth when the entire universe is one." Altemus has defined the cosmic scale of her work as constantly "unfolding via the potential of shapes to create an alternate experience where the questions of role and place are revealed on a single surface.

-William Cordova



Raute. 2020. Duct tape on wood

William Cordova is a cultural practitioner BFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago MFA, Yale University.

Dona Altemus: Sunflecks Topology

[E]ffectivity refers both to the senses' access to the things of the world (being affected or moved by them) and to the mind's capacity to resolve the manifold into the basic tools (categories) that the understanding has available for the "higher" moments of cognition—that is, abstraction and reflection—as well as for the task of knowledge—that is, determination. ... Among existing things, humanity is highest in the figuring of determinacy because it alone shares in the determining powers of universal reason, since it alone has free will, or self-determination. Though humanity, in Kant's formulation, already refers only to Europeans, the closing of humanity's ethical boundaries occurs in the nineteenth century, both in Hegel's revision of the Kantian program and in the deployment by scientists of man and society of the tools of scientific reason to account for human difference.

-Denise Ferreira da Silva¹

Topology is rubber-sheet geometry. In 2D topology a circle and a square are the same. A circle made with a rubber band can be stretched into a square. Topologists study Möbius strips and Klein bottles, for example, structures without "inside" or "outside." Topology is about how spaces are connected. Topological spaces vary from familiar manifolds to some very "exotic" mathematical constructions. Making a manifold is like making a flat map of a sphere (the Earth). A manifold is a topological space that resembles "Euclidean" geometry near each point.

Artist Dona Altemus uses "Euclidean" geometry (circles, triangles, squares) that often signals simplification, yet she does so in a quasi-topological spirit that embraces the messiness of interconnectedness. Indeed her art calls out the gaslighting of the art historical canon (white supremacist patriarchy). I work at the Guggenheim Kandinsky's temple, where visitors often ask, "Who was the first artist to make abstract art?" They debate: Kandinsky! No, Malevich! No, Af Klint! Well, actually countless unnamed Indigenous artists on every continent since the Paleolithic era. So the height of European modernist innovation was actually invented by ancient BIPOC.

Euclid (c. 350 BC) got credit for geometry, but we know that people were doing it at least since 18,000 BC on what's now considered Congolese land and that the "Pythagorean" theorem (c. 500 BC) was first known in Babylon and Egypt (c. 1900 BC) and developed by the Hindu mathematician Baudhayana (c. 800 BC). What appears to be truly ancient Greek, then, is not so much geometry as cultural appropriation, but perhaps my criticism is irresponsibly anachronistic. Regardless, Altemus's art quietly conveys relativity of time, place, and systematic oppression. The entry points for Altemus's viewers are endless, which is her aim. Everyone's world is full of geometry and it always has been. Geometry is a means to get both personal and universal.

She chooses to work with plywood², pegboard³, and thrifted Tupperware⁴ as anti-elite materials. "Anyone can make this stuff," her art suggests, "and make meaning from it." And since shapes are all around us, it's about building conversations with other people by making observations and comparisons together as well as sharing information. Radical listening is required. Learning in real time is humbling.

Her wood and clay are of the earth. She's also thinking about archaeological digs. She braided her clay. Braid theory is part of topology, too. Here it may connote blonde milkmaid/beer maid plaits (atop dirndls at Alpine dairy farms or Oktoberfest⁵) as well as the complex geometric braids that were coded escape routes for enslaved Black people, for example. Generational trauma, resilience, joy, and beauty. Motherhood and agriculture as unpaid intellectual labor.

To make *To stay in the sha(dow)llow* (2020), Altemus photographed an imperfect tinfoil grid floating in the fake turquoise of a pool for a moment before it sank. With this picture of the aluminum's fragility and the moment's evanescence, the artist protagonizes the grid's shadow on the pool basin, trying to get viewers to look beyond the shiny surfaces.

For her, the shadow is "a cast or representation of the real thing, like the difference between a persona and a person."

Charles and Ray Eames's 1977 film *Powers of Ten* illustrates the universe as an arena of both continuity and change, of everyday picnics and cosmic mystery. It begins with a close-up of a person sleeping near a Chicago lake, seen from three feet above. The frame steadily zooms out until it reveals the edge of the known universe. Then, at a rate of 10-to-the-tenth meters per second, the film takes us toward Earth again, continuing back to the napper's hand and inside it, eventually down to the subatomic level. Macro and micro mirror each other; the entire universe and the inside of a proton look uncannily alike.

The picnic in the Eames's opening scene was originally supposed to be filmed on a Miami golf course like the ones in the suburban Miami area called Kendall where Altemus was raised. One of the key artworks in her exhibition is an understated, black-and-white family photo⁶ of a field in Kendall, of the foundation of her father's house being dug and constructed, which represents gentrification for her. It also doubles back to our relationship with the earth, archaeology, and the native pine trees in the background (not the expected palms). Her pointed juxtaposition of distinct representations of Miami portrays this place as manifold in every sense of the word. Kendall isn't a neighborhood or a city, although the U.S. Census has defined its boundaries. The geometry of mapping (a topological "manifold") can be both abstract and violent—redistricting, redlining, property lines, etc. For Altemus, it's about "how we measure the earth, latitude and longitude, silent and political ... it's hypnotizing."

In her installation *Sunflecks* (2017-present), the exhibition's focal point, Altemus has stained plywood triangles in a range of browns, then arranged them quilt-like, in a way that functions subtly as arrows pointing visitors to a hidden Bavarian flag⁷

(referencing her German background as well as the patterns in her nearby photo⁸ of a Miami seashore that features a geodesic dome, a tetrahedron kite, and a beach umbrella). Geometric abstraction as wayfinding leads visitors to her anti-racist refusal to pass despite her ambiguous ethnicity and Miami English. Anglo people raised in Miami relish speaking an English dialect indebted to the peculiarities of Cuban Spanish.

In 1956 the U.S. premiere of *Waiting for Godot* was staged in Miami. Samuel Beckett's play is an absurdist, abstract allegory that bridges modernism and postmodernism. Audiences search for meanings. Perhaps the compulsion to narrate meaninglessness is meaning in itself, which is both heartbreaking and exhilarating. What are Cuban-Americans and other exiles in Miami waiting for — even they don't know. That existential paradox colors Miami just like Cuban Spanish tints how Anglo Miamians speak. But that sense of waiting, of a suspended reality, is as palpable in Miami as is the sensation of breathing humidity and Altemus's irreverent and aching beautiful pool photograph.

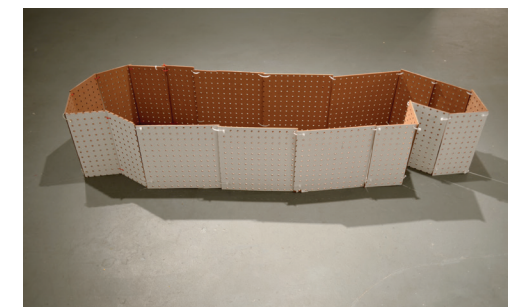
"There is a type of classism or illusion of hierarchies in having a pool in Miami," says exhibition curator William Cordova, "A city surrounded by canals and rivers and where everything is approximately 2 to 30 minutes driving time from the beach. Altemus reveals the difference between an illusion of reality and a fluid reality highlighted by her intervention, the aluminum foil, which refracts a shadow drawing and reflects sunlight all at once. Dual existences shape Miami even if not always for the better. Altemus is suggesting how reality exists for some people in certain self-constructed landscapes and how she, as an artist, is constructing another within the waters other fluid space. Echoing in some manner Gabriel Orozco's *Isla en la Isla (Island within an Island)*, 1993. From one city to another."

Amy Rosenblum-Martín,
New York City, 2021

¹ Denise Ferreira da Silva. "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value." e-flux, Journal #79 - February 2017. Accessed February 5, 2021: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or>

on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/
² Dona Altemus *Sunflecks* 2017-present
³ Dona Altemus *Make shift complex* 2018-present
⁴ Dona Altemus *untitled (asterisk)* 2017
⁵ Nazis instrumentalized the folkloric dirndl-and-braids aesthetic to promote their ideal of the German woman as industrious and fertile.
⁶ Robert M. Altemus *Where a Tree Once Stood* 1940
⁷ Dona Altemus *Raute* 2020
⁸ Dona Altemus *untitled (in some way, shape or form)* 2020

Amy Rosenblum-Martín is an independent curator in New York. Formerly a staff curator at PAMM (when it was MAM) and The Bronx Museum, she has also worked for MoMA, MoMA PS1, the Guggenheim, The Met, MCA Chicago, The Hirshhorn, MACBA (Barcelona), Reina Sofía (Madrid), National Portrait Gallery (London) and Kunsthau Bregenz (Austria) as well as MIT, NYU, The New School, and Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.



Make shift complex. 2018-ongoing
Peg board and zip ties

Dona Altemus was born in Miami, FL. BFA, New World School of the Arts, Miami, FL, (2012) MFA, University of Delaware, DE (2018).

Group exhibitions: Cadence, University of Delaware (2018), Transphysics, Art & Cultural Center of Hollywood, FL (2016), Outlaw Culture or Higher Ground, Bridge Red Studios, North Miami, FL (2019), and the AIM BIENNIAL, South Florida (2020). Solo exhibitions: (2016), Interlace, Hartford Community College, MD (2018), and Model Undertone, Mosquera Orthodontics, Miami, FL (2019).

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Image on cover: *Untitled (in some way, shape or form)*
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