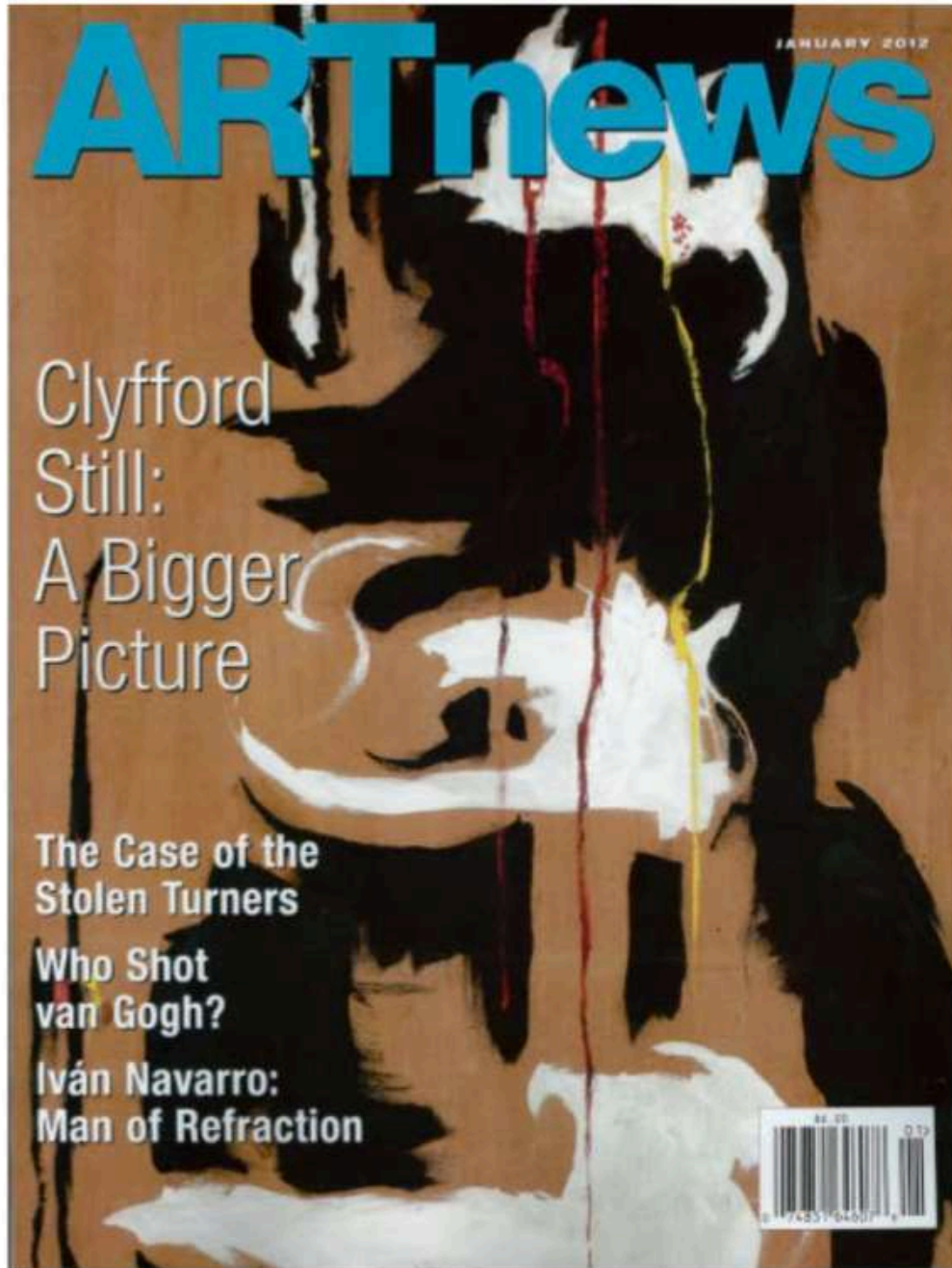


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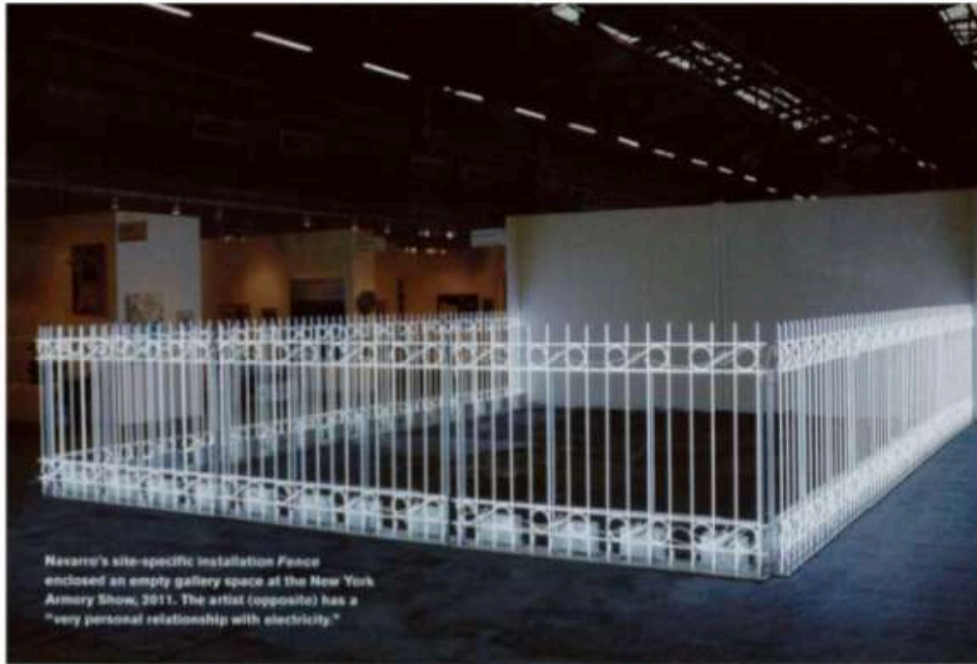


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USING LIGHT, MIRRORS, AND NEON AND WITH A SENSIBILITY AT ONCE POLITICAL AND POETIC, **IVÁN NAVARRO** CREATES GLOWING GATEWAYS OF ENDLESS SPACE

Man of Refraction



BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

ELECTRIC LIGHT is an essential element of a piece by Iván Navarro. He may use glowing fluorescent rods to construct iconic modernist chairs or—with the aid of mirrors—outline doorways leading into dark, seemingly infinite spaces. Drawn to the seductive possibilities of artificial light as a medium, the 39-year-old Chilean-born artist has a very personal relationship with electricity that infuses all his work with a layer of social commentary.

Growing up in Santiago under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, Navarro was accustomed to the power being cut off in the evening by the government to keep people in their homes and enforce curfews. "You needed a flashlight to get to the radio, which was like an altar in

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between, created an infinite projection. "It's very mysterious and you don't see a reflection of yourself," says Navarro, stressing that it doesn't work without the light. "It's a trick."

The use of mirrors opened a realm of metaphoric spaces for Navarro. In 2006, he made a wall of 13 one-way mirrored doorways limned in neon and matched to the rainbow colors of Ellsworth Kelly's flat serial canvases, *Spectrum 5*. Titled *Death Row*, Navarro's mirrored wall lures viewers to these glowing gateways of endless space with their suggestion of an ominous fate (and a touch of science fiction and nightclub glamour thrown in).

That same year, Navarro built *Die Again (Monument for Tony Smith)*, a 12-foot, black-painted plywood cube referring to Smith's 1962 Minimalist steel piece *Die*. In Navarro's version, viewers can actually enter the cube, where they will find themselves in a chamber with five triangles of white neon embedded in a star formation in the floor, which seems to descend interminably, while they listen to the Beatles singing the wistful "Nowhere Man."

"Minimalism was the American art of the moment in the 1960s and '70s," Navarro says, "but in South America formalism wasn't part of the avant-garde. Everything was full of social content. In a way, it was very easy for me to take on this Minimal reference and put in all the social content that was missing."

While he uses the work of other artists as departure points, the figure whose influence he points to as seminal for him is Gordon Matta-Clark. "When I planned all those pieces, my intellectual interest was to open up spaces in the architecture, and I was thinking about the cuts Matta-Clark made in actual buildings," Navarro says. He is also interested in how Matta-Clark, an American, went to Santiago in 1971 in search of his long-absent Chilean father, artist Roberto Matta. His father's friend, the director of the Museo de Bellas Artes, told him Matta was in Paris but suggested he do a project at the museum. Matta-Clark created a now-legendary piece (unfortunately, undocumented) using mirrors that connected the dome of the museum with the bathroom in the basement. "Matta-Clark is a real inspiration in every sense," says Navarro.

Navarro's interest in words as objects and metaphors is reflected in another group of sculptures, based on the form of a pedestal. Instead of the usual cubic or cylindrical plinth supporting a sculpture, in these works the sculpture is inverted, with words such as "ECHO," "DIE," "HIDE," and "BED" spelled out in neon and replicated through mirrors into their depths. Navarro points out that every letter in these words is vertically symmetrical; in the sculpture, only the top half of the letter is actual neon tubing while the bottom half is reflection. "The duality is literal," says Navarro. "One half is real and the other half is illusion. The word is only completed in its representation."

NAVARRO WAS surprised to be asked to represent Chile at the 2009 Venice Biennale, having left his country more than a decade earlier. "I said I'll do it, but I'm not going to say Chile is the most beautiful country in South

America," he recalls. He included the pedestal piece *Bed*, suggestive of domestic comfort in name but antithetical to what a bed is physically, and a video/sculpture piece entitled *Resistance*, a stationary bicycle that viewers could pedal, generating electricity to power a chair made of fluorescent tubes attached behind the bicycle, similar to a pedicab.

The accompanying video shows a cyclist toting an empty glowing chair through the streets of New York. In Venice, the bicycle was pointed toward the wall of doors in *Death Row*. "The idea was you were pedaling in front of the doors but you weren't moving anywhere because the bike was stationary and the doors were just an illusion," says Navarro, of his artistic statement about a nation he felt had lost its identity.

"Venice was his first important public breakthrough as an artist," says curator Dan Cameron, who first met Navarro in Santiago in 1994, when Cameron was working with Dittborn on a show for the New Museum in New York. Navarro was the only student Dittborn insisted he see. "There is something I find profoundly Chilean in Iván's work," says Cameron. "It has a kind of humility that looks outward and tries to find connections with a larger world that has to do not just with Chile's political history in the last 50 years. Chile's one of the most geographically isolated countries in the world, and life at the periphery is something that's understood as part of the fabric of life. I think that kind of distance and farawayness is there in Iván's work."

Cameron included Navarro in Prospect.2, the latest iteration of the New Orleans biennial he founded, which is currently on view (through January 29). Navarro installed a seven-foot-high white neon fence enclosing the empty interior space of a gallery in the St. Claude Art District. "It's a way to control the circulation; it's sort of like a prison," says Navarro. "It's a way of inviting people to appreciate the piece from the outside."

Navarro also inverted the way people typically look at skyscrapers in his show earlier this year at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, where his editioned sculptures begin at \$40,000 and his large-scale installations are priced up to \$400,000. There he showed wall pieces featuring the floor plans of Modernist towers outlined in neon and with seemingly endless space tunneling backward. It was as though viewers were positioned at the top of a building peering down into its dark bowels rather than standing outside looking up. Brancusi's *Endless Column* was his departure point, and he was drawn to certain buildings—the Flatiron and Empire State Building in New York, Lake Point Tower and Sears Tower in Chicago, and the Jumeirah Emirates Towers in Dubai—for their abstract shapes, some evoking organic forms used by Miró or Arp. He punctuated many of the works with single words in the center of the space—"burden," "decay," "desert," "shelter"—suggesting the opposite of the utopian optimism typically embodied in such buildings.

"The height of these supermodern buildings represents some kind of power—economic power or political power," says Navarro. "They're symbols. But when you rework a symbol, it becomes an abstraction. It's about the movement between reality and illusion." ■

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