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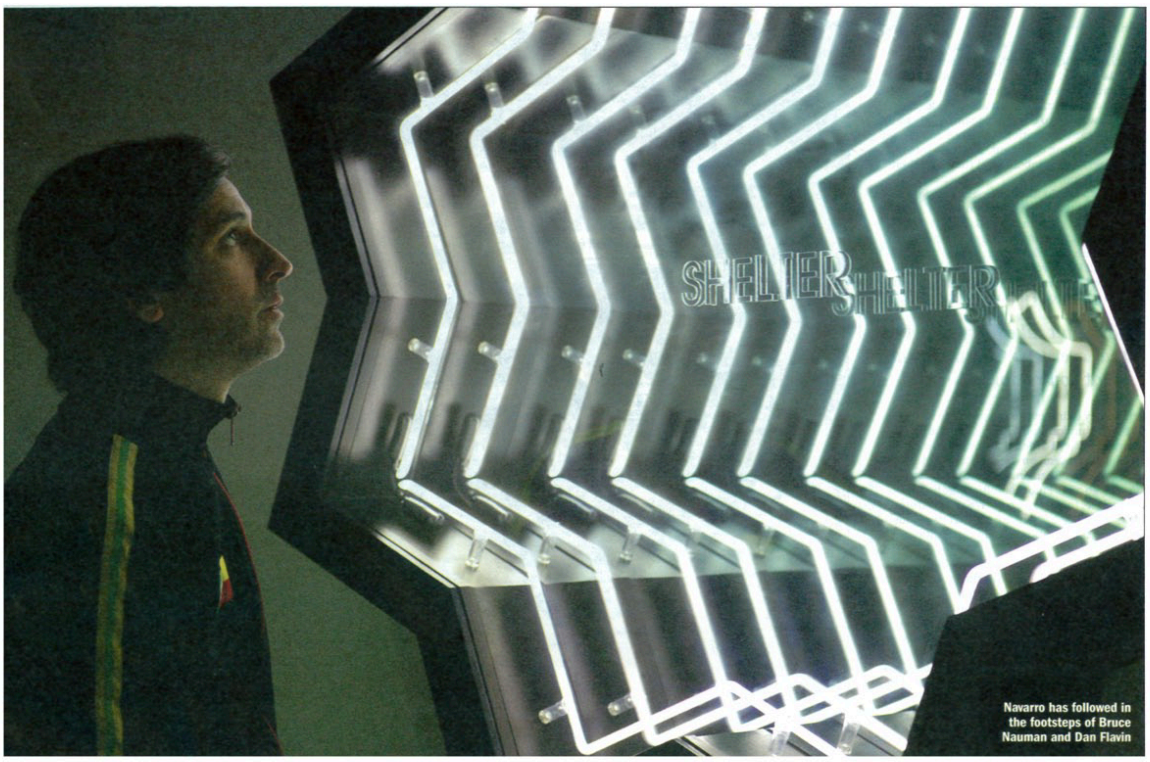
IVAN NAVARRO

THE ART NEWSPAPER, February 2014



Navarro has followed in the footsteps of Bruce Nauman and Dan Flavin

SHINING *a light on* HISTORY

Iván Navarro uses neon and fluorescent strip lights to reflect on the troubled recent past of his native Chile, and this month, he brings his vibrant work to New York's Madison Square Park. By **Pac Pobric**

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The artist Iván Navarro works in a narrow studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The space is cramped but not disorganised, and when I arrive, Navarro's assistant is at work in a room that could not comfortably fit many more. But the artist's office, a room off to one side, seems disproportionately large and open, more like a philosopher's study than an administrative bureau. I know that Navarro is interested in the history of conceptual art and Minimalism, so it makes sense: sharp ideas are fostered more easily in uncluttered space.

Navarro often uses electric light in his work, and it features in his new commission for Madison Square Park, which opens later this month. He considers himself a sculptor, a word studiously chosen for its conventional weight. "I like the idea of connecting to a tradition," he tells me. He recognises that other contemporary artists may be reluctant to use such customary terms and that many art schools have even jettisoned their sculpture programmes in favour of courses in "object-making". But Navarro doesn't feel the need for a new vocabulary. He looks back, for example, to the Madí movement, led by a group of abstract artists in Argentina in the 1940s, and specifically to the Hungarian-born Argentine Gyula Kosice, who was an early adopter of neon and light as sculptural tools. "They never thought it wasn't sculpture," Navarro says of Kosice and his colleagues. "They always saw it as being connected to classical tradition." Navarro has his own classicists, and he names Bruce Nauman and Dan Flavin as important influences on his work. Looking at his art, it is clear what lessons he absorbed: from Nauman, Navarro learned that the repeated use of a word, lit brightly in neon, intensifies its abstraction and potential meaninglessness; from Flavin, that light art, like all art, strikes viewers viscerally and that it can never be a purely conceptual conceit.

Navarro was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1972, and his nation's history animates his art, though the connections many critics have drawn are perhaps too obvious. His work is often discussed in relation to the bloody Chilean military coup of 1973, which uprooted a budding socialist government led by the democratically elected president Salvador Allende and replaced it with the ruthless dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Navarro's fluorescent and neon sculptures are said to illustrate the use of electricity as an instrument of torture by the Chilean junta, or the government's use of planned power cuts as a tool of oppression. But Navarro is not interested in making overt statements. "The work should make you ask questions," he says, "and that's what's interesting to me."

Navarro is a cautious speaker and his Chilean accent emphasises his careful choice of words. He moves slowly from one idea to another, as if to make absolutely certain that the thoughts are connected. He sometimes winds back to refine, and often gestures to ask whether his point was clear. The musician Nutria NN once said that Navarro was "a man of few words", but that's not exactly true. When he finds a link, he makes it swiftly and exactly, with a precision that matche the conceptual clarity his work strives for.

Biography

IVÁN NAVARRO

Born: Santiago, Chile, 1972
Education: Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, Santiago, 1991-95
Lives and works: New York
Represented by: Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York; Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris; Egeran Galeri, Istanbul
Selected solo exhibitions: 2014 Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York; Gallery Hyundai, Seoul **2013** "Where Is the Next War?", Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris **2012** "Nacht und Nebel", Fondazione Volume, Rome **2011** "The UNO Fence", "Prospect.2" at UNO Gallery, New Orleans
Selected group shows: 2013 Media Arts Biennale, Santiago, Chile; "Light Show", Hayward Gallery, London **2012** "Neon—Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?", La Maison Rouge, Paris **2010** Cairo International Biennial, Egypt **2009** "Threshold", Chilean Pavilion, 53rd Venice Biennale

Navarro seems to know better than most artists that his intentions will not always be immediately apparent to viewers. "You can't take for granted that everyone will understand what you're doing," he says, even if, like any artist, he hopes that "people will see the work and make connections". That's what tradition enables: clear links between past and present, an uninterrupted dialogue. He looks to Flavin or Nauman because they elucidate his work by speaking to it directly.

But what tradition do these artists come from? If Flavin and Nauman draw on any well, it is the one poisoned by Marcel Duchamp. His readymades raised the question—if not for the first time, at least for the first time explicitly—of what exactly art is or could be. That was the end of tradition by definition, because nothing could be taken for granted again, and it's exactly what Navarro recognises when he says that he cannot be certain that viewers will understand his intentions. The philosopher Stanley Cavell may have put it best, back in 1969, when he said that, with the advent of Modernism, the artist's intention has "taken on a more naked role in our acceptance of his works than in earlier periods".

This situation directly informs Navarro's work. Last year, an idea came to him for a work based on an infamous moment in the history of football's World Cup. On 21 November 1973, just two months after the military coup, Chile's national team was scheduled to play the second leg of a World Cup play-off against the USSR in Santiago, the winner of which would advance to the following year's World Cup. The teams had already met in the first leg in Moscow, two weeks after the coup (the result was a 0-0 draw), but the Russians objected to the choice of stadium for the return leg: the Estadio Nacional was where Pinochet's regime had taken people to be tortured and murdered during the coup. They petitioned the tournament's governing body, the International Federation of Association Football (Fifa), to move the venue, but Fifa refused and the Russians did not turn up. A bizarre event was then played out: instead of the usual sanction for an absent side (a 3-0 victory awarded to the other team), Chile took the field, sang the national anthem and played against a missing opponent, scoring—into an empty net—the symbolic goal that took them to the World Cup.

Navarro sought an elusive sense of closure. "The project was to bring a team from Chile and a team from Russia and to make the game finally happen," he says. "We were trying to get an actual venue, a stadium, and make it a public event. And I was working on the project very intensely, but eventually, they told me that the sponsors, the people who ran the stadium, didn't get it. They didn't even say 'no' to the idea. They just didn't understand." And how could they, given the heavy burden that history had placed on Chile? Last year, on the 40th anniversary of the coup, Juan Guzmán, the first Chilean prosecutor to go after Pinochet following the fall of the regime, told a reporter: "We are far from being reconciled. There are too many wounds open and the situation is still very emotional."

> *"You can't take for granted that everyone will understand what you're doing"*

This month, Navarro's latest installation—a set of three water towers, each propped up on eight-foot stilts—will go on display in Madison Square Park in New York. (The show is organised by the Madison Square Park Conservancy and the curator Brooke Kamin Rapaport.) The idea came to him at the opening of the park's show of work by Giuseppe Penone ("Ideas of Stone [Idee di Pietra]", until 9 February). Walking in the park, Navarro saw that it was surrounded by water towers crowning the buildings above. "I was interested in finding an icon, or a symbol of the city," he says. "And I felt the water towers were a pretty good one, especially because they are so particular to New York. It's not something you see in Berlin or Paris."

The winding path from the idea to its realisation can be long and full of diversions. When I ask Navarro how he came to the show's title, "This Land Is Your Land", which he borrowed from a song by the American folk singer Woody Guthrie, he careens through a number of sources. He pulls out a book on art and anarchy and opens it at a drawing from 1897 by the Belgian artist Théo van Rysselberghe, depicting migrant labourers ("it's one of the first portraits of temporary workers"). Then he shows me a group of albums, including a French edition of songs from the Mexican revolution of 1910-20

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("'La Cucaracha' is really a song about immigration and it comes from this period"). Finally, he gets to the Chilean folk singer Violeta Parra. "She was the Woody Guthrie of Chile," he says. "She was the first person to make archives of folk music in Chile, and that was so recently – only in the 1950s. There were no recordings before then."

Navarro's question is the same as Parra's: is it possible to prevent history from being lost? His reflections on immigration make sense. There is hardly a better metaphor for the collapse of tradition. New places, new customs, rules and etiquette; they all put a great strain on continuity. Old habits die away and new ones are adopted. New cultures become naturalised. And although some traditions may die hard, none ever remains the same after being uprooted.

As I get ready to leave, I apologise to Navarro for asking questions I knew other reporters had asked. I tell him this is because I know that answers can change and that an artist can always see old work in a new way. "Yes," he smiles. "But mostly you just forget what you already knew."

• *"Iván Navarro: This Land Is Your Land", Madison Square Park, New York, 20 February-13 April*

Navarro works on the installation that is due to be unveiled in Madison Square Park this month

Selected works: from Olympic pictograms to an electric chair

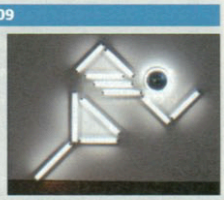
You Sit, You Die, 2002

Torture was widespread in Pinochet's Chile, and electric chairs were a widespread form of punishment. But this work looks beyond Navarro's homeland: a sheet of printed paper, in place of a canvas seat, names each person executed in the state of Florida between 1924 and 2001. "It's very fragile," Navarro says, pointing to the fact that the work is held together by shoelaces. But that's part of the idea. As much as Navarro looks towards Minimalism or the work of Dan Flavin, he also reacts against their emphasis on power and abstraction.

The Armory Fence, 2011

When Navarro enclosed Paul Kasmin's stand at the 2011 Armory Show in New York, the point was clear: politics come down to access. Navarro told the *Wall Street Journal* that he wanted to create something people could see but not enter. It was a knowing jab at the art-fair phenomenon, a carnival where art dealers and fair directors ingratiate themselves with the oligarchy.

Nowhere Man 1, 2009



Navarro is as interested in design as he is in fine art. In 2010, he designed the face of a watch for the Swiss designer Swatch. One year earlier, he took the form of this work from the German designer Otl Aicher's pictograms for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. But the sculpture has even deeper roots. "The pictograms are designed according to classical proportions, ones drawn by Leonardo and Dürer," he says. "And fluorescent lights fit exactly the same proportions."