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JULY 2016 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Role Reversal: Eduardo Navarro at the New Museum

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Eduardo Navarro performance view, The New Museum, New York, NY, Images courtesy of the artist

Role Reversal: Eduardo Navarro at the New Museum

By **DOROTHY HOWARD**, MAY 2015

“I felt misunderstood when I was quoted saying the turtle is the opposite of the internet. The quote positions my work as if I think the internet is fast and the turtle is slow, a romantic notion, as if the work is in opposition of the speed of contemporary life,” said Argentine artist Eduardo Navarro to me, as we sat outside of a coffee shop in Union Square. “But I like thinking the work is about how a turtle learns by processing information and translating it into it's own experience throughout its life, especially those turtles that reach 150 years old. Processing information takes a lot of time. I’m interested in the way information is internalized and then transformed into something different.”

We were discussing *Timeless Alex* (2015), Navarro’s May 3rd performance for the the 2015 New Museum Triennial, “Surround Audience (<http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/the-generational-triennial>),” curated by New Museum Curator Lauren Cornell and artist Ryan Trecartin. The prosthetic shell and full skin are part of the ongoing exhibition, while the performance took place on the roof of New Inc., with viewers perched high above on the 7th floor balcony of the New Museum.

Lonesome George, the last of the Pinta Island tortoise and costume’s namesake, became extinct after feral goats were introduced to the Galápagos island. For *Timeless Alex* (2015) Eduardo made his turtle shell out of chicken wire and frame, slightly larger in scale than the original he viewed at the Museum of Natural History earlier this year. It’s an object which was made to seem viably real from up close and far away.

While sipping cappuccinos, Eduardo and I discussed the humanism of the extinction debate and his experience trying to transform into a turtle during Sunday’s performance.

Eduardo Navarro: I became interested in the idea of the last turtle and the desperate challenge of a lot of specialists dealing with this deadline of conserving the last of a species. The idea of the last one is interesting in terms of reaching the number one in a species, and then zero. Zero was the original point of departure. It's like drawing a circle that disappears when you connect the two lines. Extinction is related to the idea of having control of nature, that we understand what nature wants. But I think this is an illusion and there is a need to control now, now that control is lost.

Dorothy Howard: Humanism has caused us to do really bad things to the environment. Would you say that getting away from the anthropocentric is an environmentalist gesture that recognizes that humanism is part of the problem?

Eduardo Navarro: The idea of saving nature is a very humanistic way of seeing nature. Society is very bipolar, you can only be doing things either wrong or doing something right. After you do something wrong you have to fix it. It's a very teenager-like approach, first destroying and then becoming obsessed with what you destroyed. I connect this feeling I have with Lonesome George in some way. We think we know what's best for the turtle, the species has to be saved, I agree, but what was very interesting in this case was how the turtle refused to mate and departed taking his species with him.

Dorothy Howard: Yeah— I remember this writer that wrote about what would happen to Manhattan over time if humans were suddenly all at once deleted from the earth. It's a deeply nihilistic text. But the first thing that would happen is lower Manhattan would flood, and then slowly things would overgrow. The city became entirely green faster than you would think. But another question; your work form a dialogue with understandings of the autistic mind. How has Temple Grandin, who you cite on the performance release, informed the work? Specifically, in the release you describe pursuing a mental state during the performance mirroring how the turtle “thinks in pictures”.



Eduardo Navarro performance view, The New Museum, New York, NY, Images courtesy of the artist

Eduardo Navarro: Temple Grandin is known for her work as an animal behavior expert that consulted with the livestock industry about humane conditions for animals. It was very interesting for me to know she can't think abstractly because her head is like Google, as she has said herself and that's why she can focus entirely on sensorial details like animals do. She describes how animals think in pictures because of their lack of language. For example she could go out to a slaughterhouse and crawl around on her hands and knees and understand how a yellow raincoat could be stressing the pigs as they went inside the barn to be shocked. She would tell the slaughterhouse "remove the yellow raincoat" and the pigs were less frightened. This idea of thinking in pictures allowed me to re-understand how we see with our thoughts and not with our senses.

I like the idea of thinking in pictures. In terms of autism, with Temple it was interesting that she was able to re-process her condition and did not understand it as a disability. This idea of autism as a gift or opportunity to rethink sensoriality, and taking things to another realm of perception. She says that even when people are focused and attending to details, they are usually not thinking, "ok the sun is coming in from this direction." It's the idea of connecting the mind entirely to the senses and that's why she can focus entirely on details, not on abstraction.

Dorothy Howard: Yes— I've heard the present state being referred to as an era of autism politics, an autistic present in the midst also of social technologies like Instagram and Facebook. Apparently there are more cases or diagnosis of autism recently and circulating is the notion that the internet has somehow contributed to this. I mean autism means a certain cognitive and scientific thing, but when you take that word outside of its meaning what does it mean? I am thinking now of when someone described how people think of other people not as bodies in the flesh now, but as profiles- with OKCupid and Twitter, "swipe right" culture. It's as if people are carrying their profiles on top of them

like a skin, and then other people read that skin, but they are just images of the self that have been projected and read back to the self. How did your understanding of rethinking sensoriality effect the work?

Eduardo Navarro: I wanted to explore possible ways of transforming my sensorial perception. Once I heard that when they hypnotize you to become a chicken it's not that you become a chicken, It's that a chicken is playing you. When I was doing the performance that's how I felt— that it wasn't me trying to transform, but a turtle trying to become human. When I realized that after doing the performance for like 40 minutes, that's when I became more comfortable, suddenly things became a lot lighter. It's a sensation of being nowhere and everywhere.

Dorothy Howard: Now I'm thinking of that kōan prompt "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" The challenge of solving the impossible riddle takes you to a state that allows you to find these other possibilities about the relationship between bodies. Is that a feeling that resonates with the performance?

Eduardo Navarro: There are some preparations that make the performance feel ceremonial, like a impossible riddle of who becomes who. I have to put on the skin first, zip it on my back, then the shell go's on me and it's adjusted with straps crisscross on my hip, back and shoulders, then finally the head is placed over my head and adjusted on my chin and neck. Then I lay down on my knees and hands and start breathing slower and slower, then after some time something happens that I cant explain. I always really liked the way we can transform how we think when we are no longer seeing our own body. I think the turtle embodies a experience of reaching a different or new state of mind, a state of mind that perhaps connects with how animals think.*

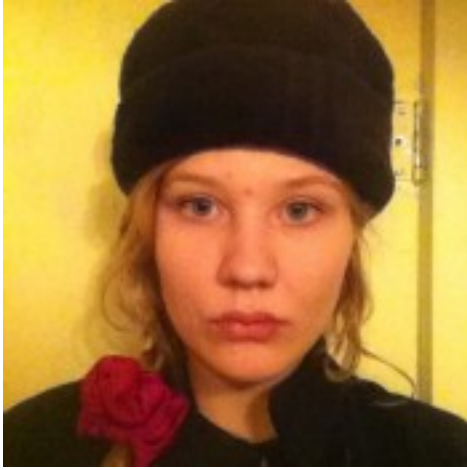
Navarro's other projects have included interventions "Horses Don't Lie" (2013), a 4-person performance for the 9th Mercosul Biennial, where he choreographed a surreal performance of horses in a field, and "Poema

Volcanico: A Journey to the Center of Printed Pictures" (2014), As well as more relational works as his "Estudio Jurídico Mercosur" (2012), a trailer providing legal consultation in the Triple Frontera region.

His performances are deeply personal, to the point where observing Navarro's transformation at the physical and cognitive might feel voyeuristic were it not for Navarro constructing such visually interesting costumes and environments in which the work is performed. All to say that Navarro offers a most pensive and enduring voice on topics of human animality, transformation, and extinction. WM



Eduardo Navarro performance view, The New Museum, New York, NY, Images courtesy of the artist



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Dorothy Howard is a critic and archivist based in Mexico City and New York. Her work has appeared in the New Inquiry, DIS magazine, the Daily Beast, and the Hypocrite Reader.

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