

See,

Hear,



How *Eduardo Navarro's*
works retrain the senses

BY SARAH DEMEUSE

Touch.



OPPOSITE PAGE
We Who Spin Around You, 2016, action documentation, commissioned by High Line Art, New York. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Liz Ligon

THIS PAGE ABOVE
Sound Mirror, 2016, installation view at 32nd Bienal de São Paulo. Courtesy: the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo; photograph: Gui Gomes

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Poema Volcánico (Volcanic Poem), action documentation, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Fundación Bienal de Cuenca; photograph: Paul Navarette

TO DESCRIBE EDUARDO NAVARRO AS A SCULPTOR would be misleading. Although most of his practice involves objects that have a distinctly handmade and low-tech material aesthetic, and encompasses sculptural elements, the finished works impose an unusual choreography on the human body. Indeed, they might best be defined as forms of 'treatment'.

Stemming from the Latin *trahere* (to drag), the word 'treatment' has various meanings. It can be used to refer to points of view (treatment of a subject) or to physical or psychological interaction (treatment of a person). This connection between the corporeal and the psychological is crucial to Navarro's work.

Over the last few years, Navarro has been developing a practice which puts the human sensorial realm on a par with that of non-human entities. Take *Sound Mirror*, which the artist made in 2016 for the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo. Resembling an oversized brass gramophone horn, it was



placed next to a palm tree growing in the park outside the biennial venue. The horn's earpiece snaked from the tree into the building, allowing visitors to put their ears up to it and listen to the palm. We may be used to seeing such greenery through car windows or on postcards, but it's another matter to try to listen to it. Watching visitors use this 'hearing aid', I was reminded of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's book *The Little Prince* (1943) and the image of the prince, alone, tending to a flower on his distant planet. Not dissimilarly, here was a single human being in living connection with a plant, isolated from the surrounding hubbub of the exhibition space.

While the artist's project for Frieze New York in 2016, *Instructions from the Sky* – in which four dancers wearing silver body suits with mirror-disc tutus chased the clouds passing overhead – introduced funny, alien-looking humans into an environment that might ordinarily be expected to be serious, *Timeless Alex*, which Navarro produced for the 2015 New Museum Triennial in New York, forced an even more literal relation with an 'other'. Based on Lonesome George, the giant Galápagos Island turtle whose body is now displayed in New York's American Museum of Natural History, the costume comprises a suit of turtle 'skin' to be inhabited by an adult human. Navarro himself wore *Timeless Alex* for two and a half hours as he slowly crawled across the rooftop of a Lower East Side building. While it would be easy to dismiss this action as a man simply dressing up as a turtle, the rooftop perambulation forced the artist to entirely alter his spatial behaviour and explore how such a creature would register and access the world: moving only on all fours, unable to turn his head and carrying a shell on his back. In a similar vein, Navarro's project for the 2015 Sharjah Biennial is, possibly, the work that most successfully impedes regular bodily behaviour. *XYZ* is a game, with hardly any rules, designed to be played blindfolded on a court with a giant ball. In order to move the ball around the court, competing groups have to develop spatial awareness and strategies that rely on scent and sound, tuning into those senses and making collective decisions based on non-visual information.

THIS PAGE
XYZ, 2015, action
documentation.
Courtesy: the artist and
Sharjah Art Foundation

OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE
OCTOPIA, 2016, action
documentation.
Courtesy: the artist and
Museo Tamayo,
Mexico City;
photograph: Enrique
Macias

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW
Instructions from
the Sky, 2016, action
documentation.
Courtesy: the artist
and Frieze New
York; photograph:
Timothy Schenck

Many of Navarro's works require a time commitment or consistent behaviour from the audience; just as with most forms of treatment, the outcome is arrived at gradually. In fact, the slow nature of his practice has led Navarro to declare himself an 'anti-internet' artist. Another such example is *Horses Don't Lie* (2013), first shown at the 9th Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre (where, in the interests of full disclosure, I was a curatorial collaborator). The piece comprises wooden equine harnesses, papier-mâché headpieces and leather body suits, which are worn by performers as they 'graze' in a field outdoors over a span of three hours. As with *Timeless Alex*, the work requires participants to make slow, almost negligible movements – partly dictated by the harnesses, partly invented by the body wearing it – and these actions take place at a distance from the audience. Only by spending significant time with the piece, can its development be observed.

The apex of Navarro's experimentation in this vein was the large-scale wooden octopus skeleton, *OCTOPIA*, presented at the Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, in 2016. The structure, worn by no less than 80 dancers, embodied collective, minimal yet co-ordinated movement. Over the course of 30 minutes, viewers sitting on the steps outside the museum saw a gradual shift from near-stasis to undulating tentacles. At times, *OCTOPIA*'s movement was only perceptible thanks to the creaking of the wooden structure.

Treatments are administered through a variety of means: words, bodily actions, potions and tools. Their end results, however, are often invisible, producing only an internal improvement for the person to whom they are administered. Navarro similarly looks to the object-instrument that enables treatment rather than to the final outcome for the person being treated. *Tratamiento Homeopático para el Río de la Plata* (Homeopathic Treatment for the River Plate), for instance, was a large tripod topped by an acrylic sphere, which the artist installed, between December 2013 and February 2014, to dispense a homeopathic solution (Nux Vomica) into the river. During the course of the treatment, Navarro had water samples taken periodically and photographed the crystals that each specimen produced.¹ These images replaced the more usual scientific statistical measurements, suggesting that the effects of such treatments may be perceived on an entirely visual plane.

Navarro continued this exploration of how measurements are recorded in *Poema Volcánico* (Volcano Poem), a work made during two descents into the crater of the Guagua Pichincha volcano near Quito, Ecuador, for the Cuenca Biennial in 2014. The artist used litmus strips to devise a 'typewriter': a bamboo structure placed inside a wicker basket that he lowered into a crevice so the volcanic vapours could react with the paper. In order to carry the strips into the crater, Navarro made and wore a flame-resistant suit and designed the basket like a backpack. Rather than being effective tools for use in a volcano, the 'typewriter' and its accompanying infrastructural inventions retool their user. In an age in which drones can be deployed to capture images from the depths of the Earth, Navarro's homemade contraptions, by contrast, test the limits of the human body in a very tangible way: the artist has to undertake a concerted physical effort to record the minimal 'poem' produced by the volcanic gases. What comes to the fore is a sense of touch, both literal and metaphorical: Navarro touching the volcano, the volcano touching the paper. *Poema Volcánico* reminds us that impact, whether in the disaster scenarios played out on the weather channel or in science-fiction films, is essentially about bodily encounters.



For both *Tratamiento Homeopático para el Río de la Plata* and *Poema Volcánico*, Navarro consulted with specialists to realize his ideas: a volcanologist told him how sulphur reacts with litmus strips; a historian informed him about the significance of the River Plate to the history of Buenos Aires; and a homeopath gave him the correct dosage of Nux Vomica. The artist's proposals, many of which start out as pencil drawings accompanied by a single-sentence caption, find concrete form thanks to his collaboration with experts working in different fields. The same can be said about the choreographers and dancers who mobilize *OCTOPIA* or *Horses Don't Lie*, or even the players who develop the ball-game in *XYZ*: they all bring some form of knowledge that is essential to the final realization of the work. *We Who Spin Around You* (2016), created for High Line Art in New York, in which the audience wore visors that allowed them to look into the sun while an astrophysicist informed them about our nearest star, is another such instance of the artist's impetus for knowledge-sharing.

Navarro's work has variously been interpreted as speculative realist or as exemplary of someone with an interest in the anthropocene. Yet, the artist himself does not subscribe to such overarching theories. Rather, his practice stems from a phenomenological question about bodily perception: how have human interactions with the world evolved since prehistoric times and how, by extension, have those interactions shaped the discourse surrounding human rights and political ideology?

If Navarro's work can be understood as a form of 'treatment', it should not be confused with therapy: it does not make you feel good or 'whole' again. It may create a fleeting pause in the hectic pace of our daily lives, but chances are you won't hear anything when you listen to the palm tree and you may well grow bored with watching the slow-moving turtle. Yet, is it not in those very moments of stillness that the first tentative steps towards healing often begin? And could it be that now, more than ever, as we reside in our fake-news bubbles, we need to retrain our senses to rely on first-hand perception, helping us to devise a treatment to heal this ailing planet? ●



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1 This photographic register was a clear reference to Masaru Emoto, a Japanese guru and proponent of the idea that human consciousness affects water and its crystalline formations. Emoto has published several volumes of such photographs to signal the molecular reactions of water to human behaviour.

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EDUARDO NAVARRO lives and works in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Recent solo exhibitions include: Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (2016); *Ensayo de Situación*, Di Tella University, Buenos Aires (2014); and *Faena Art Center*, Buenos Aires (2013). His work has also been featured in major international exhibitions including: 31st Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (2016); New Museum Triennial, New York, USA, and 12th Sharjah Biennial, UAE (both 2015); and 9th Mercosul Biennial, Brazil (2013).

