



The shack Navarro built for itinerant preachers.

A Mormon, a Psychologist, and a Fat Man . . .

Humor plays an important role in the "actions" of **Eduardo Navarro**, but **Guillermo Kuitca** notes that the young artist never makes fun of the real people he enlists in his performances

BY MEREDITH MENDELSON

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WHAT IMPRESSED GUILLERMO Kuitca about his student Eduardo Navarro was how unimpressed the young artist seemed with his instructions. "His work developed in many unpredictable ways and became completely unrelated to anything I

might have mentioned to him," says Kuitca, who included Navarro in his Buenos Aires-based studio program in 2003. "I didn't see myself in the picture, either as a mentor or teacher, and his work really amazed me."

Kuitca, who at 45 has been selected to represent his native Argentina at the 2007 Venice Biennale, transforms maps, architectural renderings, and other types of plans into complex mixed-media abstractions. His show "Acoustic Mass" last fall at his New York gallery, Sperone Westwater, featured large works on paper derived from theaters and opera houses. In these

works, which resemble exploding auditorium seating charts, the rows come apart as if sonic waves were reverberating through them. Sound is almost made visible. Kuitca's works are as carefully conceived as they are formally rigorous.

By contrast, the 27-year-old Navarro likes to leave some things to chance. He makes drawings and sculpture, but his primary medium is the "action." The idea for *The See* (2004) came to him when Mormons visited his house. Navarro built a wood shack on a large cement patio near the studio and invited the itinerant preachers there. He asked his fellow students to come by, and encouraged anyone who was interested to enter, sit down, listen, and respond. For *The 1st Marathon Against Smoking* (2005), he planned a race through



Guillermo Kuitca and his drawing *Acoustic Mass II* (Covent Garden), 2005.

Buenos Aires, made two gigantic sculptures of cigarettes as props, and then invited anti-smoking groups to take part. Navarro documented the events with photographs and video. "I am always feeling like I am not in complete control. I create 50 percent of the work," he says, "and the other 50 percent just happens."

Navarro likes the fact that the inclusion of other participants brings an unknown element to the actions, but he has another purpose in mind. "I create platforms for groups of people—often people who are not taken seriously—and expose their condition," he explains. While his motives are earnest, Navarro is not blind to the humor inherent in his work. For the absurdist *On/Off* (2004) he dressed in a fat suit and traveled to Córdoba, Argentina, with a group hoping to encounter UFOs. "I told them I was an artist," he says. "They let me join them and basically ignored me the whole time. There were two things happening—they were contacting UFOs and I was dressed up as a fat man." A friend of his recorded the trip on video.

Navarro, who lives in Buenos Aires, dropped out of architecture school in 2002 to become an artist. His earliest works, which date from that time, are inflatable plastic sculptures. "I was studying architecture and was desperate to create," he says. The sculptures "have this sense of urgency and a very low-tech appearance. I didn't have a studio, so I worked in my living room. I used my mom's hair dryer to inflate them and just took the air out of them and put them away at the end of the day." He went on to work in the studio of painter Sergio Bazán for a year and a half, and then was one of 35 students selected for Kuitca's two-year program, during which participants were provided studios and took part in twice-weekly critiques of one another's work.

In the studio Navarro often made figurative but frequently absurd or fantastic drawings that have a humorous and spontaneous quality. "His drawings are really good," says Kuitca. "He'd show up with 100 drawings that he'd done in one sitting; the same pencil, the same lines. I like that they were consistently done in one technique—it's like a direct connection to his mind at that moment. You have to have talent to do that. You have to be very focused."



Argentinian "action" artist
Eduardo Navarro.

Navarro himself sees the process as being partly about relinquishing control. "When I spend a lot of time drawing, I feel that I am opening this *matryoshka* doll, and that one drawing comes from inside the other," he says. "That takes me to this state where I don't feel that I am actually doing much, or that I have a responsibility, or anything. I just draw in the most primitive way." The graphite drawings, which the Art Palace in Austin, Texas, has sold for between \$500 and \$2,000, are the only works shown in U.S. galleries so far. Art Palace is planning a new exhibition next May, and the Dallas Center for Contemporary Art has a show scheduled for September of next year.

Last summer, for his residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, Navarro devised *Alternative Therapy #1*, brokering an exchange between a local psychologist, S. Leigh Haskell, whom he considered a collaborator, and five artists in residence, who paid her for their sessions with new works of art. He built a glassed-in replica of the psychologist's office in a wooded area by a lake. At the end of the summer, he held an "opening" in her office, where he exhibited the other artists' works along with photographs of the patients during the first and last minute of their therapy. "The therapist got to have this experience and get the art, and the artists got therapy," says Navarro. "This is often my goal—to make two things happen at once."

Such work might come across as satire or social critique in another artist's hands. Navarro's tone, however, remains neutral and genuine. "He is never judgmental or ironic. He doesn't want his work to be placed in this structure of irony or critique," says Kuitca. "That is very unusual. And even though his work may be humorous to many, it never devolves into a joke."

Sometimes the joke is on Navarro. For the marathon, he admits that although



The replica of a psychologist's office built in the woods was just one element of Navarro's *Alternative Therapy #1*, 2006.

he planned the event for 200 people, only 5 showed up. "People came to look at the art project, but not for the marathon," he says. "The whole thing was based on risk." When asked if he likes the risk factor, he pauses and laughs. "I'm really interested in it. But I'm not sure I enjoy it."

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