

# The past, the present, the possible

## Sharjah Biennial 12





## Sight Reposes on Touch: Eduardo Navarro

We usually win games by fine-tuning the synaptic connections between our physical and intellectual abilities. A sports team wins because it sees, feels, hears and perceives things even seasoned fans can't. Eduardo Navarro's *XYZ* (2015) sets out with the desire to create a game that requires reprogramming of those honed nexuses and skills. Winning becomes almost a by-product.

This unusual situation exists because Navarro's game involves a significant sensory limitation: in *XYZ*, the players wear blindfolds. This loss of eyesight is a deprivation especially pointed in the visually privileging context of art. At the same time, Navarro intensifies the overall sensory environment – there is increased aural, tactile and olfactory input. Meanwhile, the task at hand is as simple as it gets. Players roll around a larger-than-life ball in a court marked off in the most geometrically stable of arrangements, a rectangular grid, and they clap to signal to each other their relative positions on the court. With the ball revealing its location through scent or sound, depending on its outer jacket, its dance on the grid is determined by a full range of extravisual sensory guidance.<sup>1</sup>

If Navarro's artistic proposition creates an unusual field of forces, the activity is undoubtedly a game. There is a delineated court and an arc from 'zero' to 'win'. There's a time of the game separate from time's usual flow. There are teammates and rules, and with those come desire, persistence and enthusiasm. There's smelling, touching and clapping, but none of this should be confused with free, open-ended play. What matters is the invention of effective communication methods over roleplaying or imagination.<sup>2</sup> In essence, success in this game is a function of the speed and accuracy of passes between players. In *XYZ*, the conventional climax of scoring a goal, with its subsequent outburst of applause, disperses into the individual passes and the clapping that functions as integral signal within the game itself.

Often ballgames depend on symmetry in the position of players on the court or in the court's layout itself. The terrain Navarro designed resembles a diagram for calculated symmetrical action. Yet that surface symmetry is overwritten by the nonlinearity and intensity of waves and particles emitted by the ball.<sup>3</sup> Players may start out in a symmetrical formation, but *XYZ* requires them to move out of it in unpredictable ways. Suddenly it becomes clear that the game is about the sharpening of collective perception. Forget conditioned muscle or speech: with a restricted repertoire of human expression and reception, the ball drives the process of sensory development. And, ideally, it becomes part of a player's expanded body.<sup>4</sup> When participants eventually leave the court, the ball remains on view, in hibernation, accompanied by its different sensorial jackets (olfactory, auditory, tactile).

Though *XYZ* took its final form at SB12 as a scheduled activity on the biennial's slate of educational programming, the work didn't originate as such. It had been a proposal for a field game that was, from the get-go, meant for children. Navarro did not impose the structure; rather, starting with colouring and meditation activities he did together with the children, the rules emerged. In fact, *XYZ* is not so much a game *for* children, satisfying their imagined desires, as it is a game *from* children. And it so happens that the most fitting way in which the game is played is when adults are left on the sidelines.

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The title of this essay comes from Michel Serres's *Variations on the Body* (2011).

- 1 Passing a ball may seem banal, but so might walking in a field. In *Horses don't lie*, a work made for the 9<sup>th</sup> Bienal do Mercosul in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2013, Navarro created a horse costume for dancers, which restricted their movements. The resulting choreography, observed by visitors only from afar through binoculars, slowed down and combined both a basic dance vocabulary and the normal movements of grazing horses.
- 2 Communication in the field requires adequate, equivalent responses to received information. In *Tratamiento homeopático para el Río de la Plata* (2013, Parque de la Memoria, Buenos Aires), Navarro made a large, partially mobile capsule containing homeopathic medicine for the highly contaminated Río de la Plata. Through the lens of homeopathy, the work posits direct communication and interaction between the particles in the river and those composed by specialists that are subsequently energised by Navarro's contraption.
- 3 Expression happens in the emission and reception of particles. In *Poema volcánico*, a work made for the 12<sup>th</sup> Bienal de Cuenca in Ecuador in 2014, Navarro inverted the model of the landscape painter-explorer and journeyed up an active volcano to have the mountain make a drawing.
- 4 Costumes subvert, as they can confuse regular roles of power or identity. But they also force us to reprogram our bodies and, hence, tune ourselves to time in different ways. The artist's *Timeless Alex*, commissioned by the New Museum in New York for its 2015 Triennial, is a Galapagos turtle outfit periodically brought out of dormancy by a dancer.



XYZ, 2015  
Paint on courtyard, PVC ball and  
accompanying sensory jackets, and  
goggles  
Photo by Sharjah Art Foundation

اكس واي زي، 2015  
طلاء على أرض فناء، كرة بي في سي،  
سترات استشعارية مرافقة، نظارات  
الصورة من قبل مؤسسة الشارقة للفنون



# الماضي، الحاضر، الممكن بينالي الشارقة 12

