

“I Had Never Been Here Before”: A Pedagogy Based on Surprise

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Eduardo Navarro
with Paola Santos Coy

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How can we transform our language-centered perception of the world into expanded forms that allow us to speak to the uncertain? This is a fundamental question fueling the work of multidisciplinary artist **Eduardo Navarro** (Buenos Aires, 1979).

Through installations, performances, sculptures, drawings, and objects, he seeks to trigger alterations at different conscious levels in order to transform sensorial states and allow for a new understanding of our experience of reality and time. Sometimes this transformation happens by playing, which Eduardo regards as “the ultimate universal language.” From his studio in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he talks with Mexican curator **Paola Santos Coy**.





Eduardo Navarro "Naves Espaciales"
[Spaceships](2022). Project
commission for TBA21.
Photo: Gustavo Lowry.

Paola Santos Coy: Given that drawings are such an important part of your work and thinking process, I would like to start this conversation by discussing them. I think about the ones I've seen and they seem to crystallize ideas that don't appear so clearly in other ways.

Eduardo Navarro: I think drawings have always been part of my life. Ever since I was a child, I have seen drawing not as something I generate but as a sort of emanation. That's why I feel I can draw without paper or pencils, because it's something that emanates from me and the paper acts as a sort of filter that captures and fixes it. The drawing process is always somewhat of an internal invocation. An unexpected something must always emerge in them. If this happens, then I say to myself: ***I made a drawing / the drawing made me***, and it gets even more ambiguous because who is creating what? This is an important thing to explore for me, without thinking too rationally as to what I'm exploring.

So it's a kind of discovery, I like that. Allowing this headspace for something to appear seems to be somehow related to your insistence on certain ideas or quests. I mean, these are not isolated things, they're part of a process of developing ideas for other pieces or materials different from drawing.

Yes, in a way, it is as if they were blueprints because, on the one hand, the drawing comes out and I know that once it is on paper people will see it, but what they see is not the sheet of paper, what they see goes into the mind of that person and there it is reconfigured again, according to their understanding and subjectivity. As a medium, drawing only takes shape in the material medium, and then the person reconstructs it again.

Sustaining this subjectivity is important for me. So, when I make a drawing, I don't want it to show exactly what I want others to see but rather that it has a more psychological quality, in the sense that it could be used for saying, "What do you see here?" If I manage to keep that primordial energy alive, I feel that I made drawings that will have one meaning ten years

from now and another one in twenty years, and so they will reinvent themselves over time.



Eduardo Navarro "Naves Espaciales"
[Spaceships](2022). Project commission
for TBA21.

Photo: Gustavo Lowry.

Perhaps it is as if they
illustrate an intuition, a
moment in a particular
space.

It's impossible not to keep building internal intuitions with the mind's eye. Unlike language, drawings are capable of translating untranslatable things; that's why all children can draw from a very young age, and it's also the reason why it is an unlimited exercise in exploring the world. Drawing is a symbolic realm, and it is very easy to hide things or write messages within those symbols... Think about when drawings that are 40,000 years old are found and you say: **What do they**

mean? They retain a certain quality that makes them enigmatic; for example, nobody knows what the little spiral-shaped symbol means, and some people say: **They're spaceships!** Drawings have this magical quality; they can never be translated as they did with the Rosetta Stone. This quality of being untranslatable into words is quite a powerful freedom.

Maybe because we're now in front of this watercolor spaceship, but as you were talking, I was thinking that play is another important aspect of your work. What is this about?

This is a watercolor spaceship for children. It was part of my participation with TBA21 in the city of Córdoba, in Spain, and the invitation to do a project there. The ships arise from an intuition that the Guadalquivir River, which crosses Córdoba, awakened in me. I spent some time there and thought: **How can I work with kids?** So I invited them to think of ways to use the river as a time machine. I figured that, If I used water as a time machine, maybe I could ask them to imagine how they could time-travel with water.

But of course, I also thought that I couldn't go and propose this as a workshop because they would say, "Why?" This had to be a proposition coming from a fantastic place, something that would take

them out of the historical and current complex reality of Córdoba.

So I built these spaceships, as they're something that comes from the sky. Everything that came from outer space always impressed me as a kid. So, I wanted a spaceship to land in Córdoba and for all the children to use it for drawing with watercolors using the water of the Guadalquivir River. It had to land on the riverbanks, as water is a living, magical, mythological element. At the same time, I wanted them to think about how human time passes compared to the water time of a river—which does not repeat itself, like history. Time is the fourth state of water, in addition to gaseous, liquid, and frozen. That was my takeaway from that trip to Córdoba. That's what I was looking to grasp, but I had to do it from a playful instance.



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Photo: Lourdes Cabrera.

It's very interesting how it
all begins with water and its
constant flow in this site-

specific project, designed for a group of people who live in this place and have a constant relationship with this element. How does that take you to this spaceship, which seems to be so far from it but serves here as a vessel to carry these ideas of constant change, such as the flow of water, which also affects the idea of the site as something static? It's such a provocative gesture to go so far off and then be in that playful and imaginative instance, which seems to have nothing to do with the river, but it actually brings it back!

Looking at some of your projects, along with the relevance of playing, the idea of activation also comes to mind. This notion attracts me because there seems to be a use—and sometimes an overuse—of that word within the curatorial sphere, also coming from institutions and exhibition spaces. It is a term that departs from a good intention but also takes many forms. What does “activating” mean in the context of your work? Is it to approach others? Or is it to set the conditions for something to happen?

For me, this is somehow related to gardening, in the sense that you can do this or that to help plants grow, but you can't control them. And at the same time, there is a much bigger factor, which is the climate, and this in turn responds to a greater factor, and so on... I see it as a process of enchantment that I as an artist am dealing with. I mean, I ask myself how I can find ways to guide this into becoming the garden that I want it to be, though I'm well aware that I don't control it. But also, this garden has to be open to receive visitors and to take on an interdependent and lively dynamic. I don't know if "activation" is the right word, but I want it to gain consciousness and interact with the world. And in this interaction with the world, I believe the plant has to adapt to the fact that an ant might suddenly come about and eat it, or that suddenly there can be rain and wind and birds and clouds. I think artworks should retain that organic instance where the activation also entails the risk of being exposed to coexistence and unpredictable events.

This reminds me of something I read recently, where you commented on this regard: "I think the experience of my work must function beyond the mind." Hence we can wonder: What is beyond the mind? One answer, of course, is experience, but not only that, there's also intuition...

And error! The risk implicit in the work is also important for me. The vulnerability of it being activated by people without me taking the place of

an educational psychologist, because people don't come for a therapy session with me, I'm not a psychologist, this is about a different energy. The kind of energy that I can provide is more like when a baby has an experience for the first time... it breaks their cognitive schema and so they have to readjust and learn who they are. This is the only point where I feel that I, as an artist, can offer a pedagogical experience based on surprise—but not from a therapeutic perspective, I'm not a therapist!



Eduardo Navarro "Naves Espaciales"
[Spaceships] (2022) at TBA21's
Fellowship School.

Photo: Lourdes Cabrera.

Of course, it's not aimed in
that direction, it seeks a
different effect.

I believe there are many ways
to do therapy, but I think
artworks have the power to
reveal something that the
person never saw before. As
long as that happens, the brain
has to readjust itself and

reconfigure identity,
expectations... As you arrive at
a new place.

This also seems to me like
a kind of mental
gymnastics that goes along
with the body and
sensations, as everything
else starts reconfiguring
itself based on an
experience you haven't had
before. To a large extent, I
think the reason I'm drawn
to art is that feeling of never
having been here before.
And this can happen in the
moment you're looking at a
work, amidst that
experience, or the
realization of what it stirred
in you can come later, or
even after various
cumulative experiences.

Of course, that's why people love traveling to places
they've never been before.

Yes, but it's interesting to
think that it doesn't just
happen in the literal sense
of a displacement that gets
you to travel the world or to
have a touristic bucket list.
This also happens in the
sense of how one feels
about something, I'm

talking about the feeling of
I've-never-been-here-before
that makes me wonder how
an experience changes me
or what it provokes in me.

Being in front of something one has never seen before
and not knowing how to react or how to speak to it
seems like a sort of rebirth to me. The most powerful
works of art are those that I see and say, ***What is this? I
don't understand what they're trying to tell me.***

***And what should I do, be
offended because the artist
doesn't know how to
communicate?*** When I'm given
space to play a little detective
inside the work, that is when I
feel that the work creates a
communion between the
viewer and what the work has
to offer. Such a communion
provides breathspace. Those
are the works I will never
forget. For example, when I
was 12 years old, I went to see
a painting by Dalí. To see the
work, you had to put on these
tiny binoculars, stand at a
certain point, and then
suddenly ***something*** would
appear, a fourth dimension in
the painting. I was enthralled!

It offered me something I'd never seen before, which was the possibility of trying to do things that don't exist. For me that was a big WOW moment; I knew I would never forget it.

That sounds amazing and fascinating. Along the lines of what you just said about creating something that doesn't exist, and going back to drawing, I think what I often see in your drawings are connections I didn't expect. And I think there is a very interesting path—though it can sometimes be a little too long or complex—which is to take that as a point of departure for making projects on a different scale or to materialize them in negotiations that have to do with who invited you to that place or how you got there, or what the conditions of that place are. There is a lot going on there that no longer plays in the realm of abstraction but in the concrete.

Yes, over time I realized that this is the most difficult part. Because when the mind dreams, symbolically I can say: "In the dream, I had a box head and I had a hard

time moving because it was very cold but it was sunny.” There are many symbolic and magical contradictions that have no rules. So, it's a bit like going from that universe to the hyper pragmatic realm of production, schedules, calendars, and all that. Over time, I realized that this is somewhere I also have to put on a sort of costume: the disguise of work. To be able to move that energy from A to B, and to look for the right vehicle for traveling the journey of materializing a work, one has to somehow **be** a work of art. That is the only way I can navigate all those instances (otherwise, I would have given up after the first work I tried to make), in the face of how difficult it is to manifest intuitions. Therefore, it seems to me that to be an artist also means being able to be a work of art itself; that's quite fundamental to me. I'm not a producer of ideas, I'm not a cultural manager—all those terms are valid, but I am none of those things, I have a gelatinous membrane that protects me—instead I live in the world of artworks. I don't live in the universe of production, crafting, CVs, and all that which makes the art world work in the real world. However, I'm aware that if art didn't function in the real world, it would be a thing from the caves or psychiatric institutions, but some mysterious force allows art to emerge in reality and function in today's world.



Eduardo Navarro “Naves Espaciales”
[Spaceships] (2022) at TBA21's Fellowship
School.

Photo: Lourdes Cabrera.

I would like to touch on one last question before closing. It has to do with the scale of things, because I was also thinking, now that I see these large drawings in your studio and the spaceship, that there is an interesting play of scales that has to do perhaps with the possibilities of a project, or maybe they simply change. For example, this spaceship book works well with watercolors and it was used originally in a specific place, but it can exist in any other circumstances. As a book, it can serve one person, fifty children, or even three. And this is also scale.

It's like a universal scale... That's the scale I try to reach out to. Think, for instance, the universal scale of a river. So, even though they're framed in specific contexts, all my works move within the metaphysical plane in which a river or the sky exists. The scale is circumstantial to how many people are going to use it, but it is still a vehicle for something much larger; it touches on a universal topography while remaining specific.

It's as if it belongs to a land that has no location, it cannot be pinned on a map. I find that this is where all the works spin

universality, the scale merely
fulfills a function, nothing
more.

Translated from Spanish by **Marianela
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