

## Piercing the Facade: Iván Navarro and the Aesthetic of Social Illumination

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Since 1996 Iván Navarro (b. 1972, Santiago, Chile) has used the medium of light to create “social sculptures” that are simultaneously seductive and disturbing. Navarro uses mass-produced lighting fixtures that both attract with their glowing beauty and repel with their threat of electrocution. Light often symbolizes hope and faith, but Navarro reverses these conventional references by employing the medium paradoxically to explore the dark side of “social illumination” in which social injustice and inequality still exist beneath the attractive, rhetorical facade of neo-liberal economics and global democracy.

The three sculptures and two videos in this exhibition comprise a series of work the artist calls “No Man’s Land.” In *Die Again (Monument for Tony Smith)* from 2006, located in the Remis Sculpture Court, Navarro metaphorically cracks open the hermetic Minimalist cube. *Die* is the title of a 1962 sculpture by Tony Smith, a paradigmatic Minimalist artist. Minimalism was an object-focused art practice prevalent in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s that claimed to eschew social or

political content. Yet the often monumental scale of these “objects” outsized the museum spaces in which they were exhibited and thereby called attention to institutional constraints (both physical and ideological). Over forty years later, Navarro asserts the social content of the cube form in order to build on what he calls the “incomplete experience” of Minimalism.<sup>1</sup> In *Die Again* Navarro doubles Smith’s six-foot dimensions and pierces the impenetrable façade of the Minimalist box with an entryway. The 12 x 12 foot black box beckons the viewer into its hollow interior with the lure of light and sound—the antithesis of the refracting quality typical of Minimalist sculpture.

Inside the darkened box several five-pointed-star forms made of fluorescent tubing are embedded in the floor and walls. These tubes are sandwiched between a reflective mirror and a one-way mirror, so that the forms appear to repeat *ad infinitum*, creating the illusion of deep space, where in reality the surface is flat. This formal device creates what Navarro calls a “psychological space” that de-centers the viewer’s perceptual expectations and forces him/her to negotiate between what is real and what is not.<sup>2</sup> Inside *Die Again* a contemporary cover of the Beatles’ 1965 song “Nowhere Man” permeates the

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<sup>1</sup> Artist’s talk at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 23, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Iván Navarro quoted in “Iván Navarro,” review of exhibition at Roebing Hall, Brooklyn, *Art Nexus* 54, October, 2004.

dislocating space and adds another level of complexity and irony to Navarro's "homage" to Tony Smith and Minimalism. *Die Again* also relates to another Navarro illusion-inducing black-box installation from 2005 titled *Venda Sexy*, which was modeled after a Santiago discotheque used in the mid-1970s as a secretive torture chamber and described by the artist as a "limbo space."<sup>3</sup> Navarro's incursion into the hermetic Minimalist cube metaphorically functions to pierce the façade of these shadowed realities.

Navarro grew up in Santiago, Chile under the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006). The Pinochet regime was notoriously ruthless; many people were forced into exile; thousands of people "disappeared," and even more were jailed and tortured. Among those imprisoned was Navarro's father.<sup>4</sup> Mario Navarro Cortes, a political cartoonist and dean of a leftist university, sympathized with and supported the socialist government of Pinochet's predecessor Salvador Allende, who was overthrown and then assassinated in the 1973 a coup d'état. The daily reality of living under Pinochet's authoritarian rule was tumultuous and imbued with fear. It was not uncommon, for example, for police to randomly

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<sup>3</sup> Artist's talk.

<sup>4</sup> Mario Navarro Carvacho, "Documento Desclasificado" (2005), from Iván Navarro, e-mail message to author, August 23, 2007.

shower gunfire on the Navarro's Santiago neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> Electricity and news-blackouts blanketed Chile in periodic darkness, masking the truths of Pinochet's brutality. This disinformation and governmental censorship led to experiences that have made Navarro particularly sensitive to the integrity of information and the relationship between constructed truths and reality.<sup>6</sup>

*Flashlight: I'm not from here, I'm not from there* (2006), located in the Koppelman Gallery, also addresses dislocation and interrogates the superficiality of light. In *Flashlight*, Navarro constructed a wheelbarrow out of fluorescent lights and then created an eight-minute video performance in which the wheelbarrow figures as the protagonist. The video opens with a man on an urban street siphoning gas from a Mercedes Benz to charge the generator that lights the wheelbarrow. He then pushes the glowing wheelbarrow through a deteriorating urban landscape and along railroad tracks. As night falls the man intermittently stops to change the color sleeves on the fluorescent tubes of the wheelbarrow. The man wanders aimlessly and in the end never reaches a destination.

This seemingly endless and laborious journey is echoed in the chorus of the soundtrack "*No Soy de Aquí, Ni Soy de Allá*" ("I

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Am Not from Here, I Am Not from There"), performed by Nutria N.N., a New York-based Chilean musical group (with whom Navarro often collaborates), and with original lyrics by the Argentinean folk singer Facundo Cabral (b. 1937). The 1972 lyrics read: "I am not from here, I am not from there/I have no age or future/and being happy is the color of my identity."<sup>7</sup> The lyrics reinforce the indeterminacy and chameleon nature of existence and function as an allegory of dislocation, exile, and biculturalism—all characteristic of Navarro's own life experience as a Chilean living in New York City.

*Homeless Lamp: The Juice Sucker* (2004-05), located in the Koppelman Gallery, also references dislocation and transience. *Homeless Lamp* represents a shopping cart, a symbol for the itinerant homeless. In a four-minute video performance Navarro and a friend push the cart through the Chelsea art gallery district in New York City on a Sunday morning. The light-sculpture comes to life when it is plugged into a municipal power source on the street. The fluorescent cart buzzes with energy and sustains itself surreptitiously, as a kind of "parasite", a term Navarro also uses to refer to all artistic practice and the artist's struggle to be autonomous from the commercial art world.<sup>8</sup> The video accelerates the passage of time; trash

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<sup>7</sup> Translation of lyrics as it appears in Tatiana Flores, "Iván Navarro," review of exhibition *No Soy de Aquí, No Soy de Allá* at Union Gallery, London, *Art Nexus* 62, October, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Artist's talk at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, October 23, 2007.

accumulates, the day quickly passes, and the cart sits undisturbed—a metaphor for the public's daily disregard for the homeless and the destitute.

*“Juan Sin Tierra”* (“Landless Juan”), a 1905 Mexican *corridor* (popular ballad) re-recorded in late 1969 by Chilean folk-singer Victor Jara—a social activist and national symbol of worker's rights, who was assassinated by the Pinochet regime in 1973—provides the soundtrack for the video *Homeless Lamp: The Juice Sucker*, featured on the New Media Wall. A *corridor* is a traditional form of music and poetry that, especially during the Mexican Revolution and early years of Mexican Independence, was a vehicle for the peasant class to express its political views; *“Juan Sin Tierra”* speaks of the desire for land and autonomy, values opposite Pinochet's agrarian policies. In the early 1970s President Allende had initiated a land reform agenda that divided the previously feudally organized farm land among the laborers. Pinochet, however, revoked Allende's socialist measures, thus making the values expressed in *“Juan Sin Tierra”* a threat to the regime's new order.

In 1990 Chile entered a period of Transition—Pinochet's rule officially ended and the democratically elected president Patricio Aylwin assumed power. According to Navarro, the

governments that have followed Pinochet's have continued to support policies that augment social stratification.<sup>10</sup> The Chilean Transition served to “rescue” Chile from its corrupt past, but the country's neo-liberal economic policy of deregulation and privatized industry remains in effect today and social inequalities continue to deepen. And, according to Navarro, despite Chile's successful pursuit of foreign investors and appeal to export markets, poverty still afflicts the nation.<sup>11</sup> The so-called Chilean Transition seeks to make the Chilean population appear equal at all costs so that, according to Chilean cultural critic, Nelly Richards, nothing “shamefully dirty” or “disastrously poor” disrupts the “sparkle” of the country.<sup>12</sup> Navarro exposes the tumult that boils under the façade of official rhetoric through his work.

Navarro's use of light is an appropriate metaphor for the way this rhetoric constructs supposed truths and transmits “information.” His process of harnessing artificial light into content is itself a process of construction. Navarro's sculptures are constantly shifting between that which is natural and that which artificial, that which is truth and that which is illusion.<sup>13</sup> He

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<sup>10</sup> Iván Navarro, e-mail message to author, August 23, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Nelly Richard, Nelly. *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>13</sup> John Ravenal, *Artificial Light: New Light-Based Sculpture and Installation Art* [exhibition] (Richmond: VCUarts Anderson Gallery, 2006), 9.

transforms artificial light and iconic forms into his own subjective creations, a process not dissimilar to the ways in which governments and media transform truth into “information.” Navarro's series “No Man's Land” unmoors us and demands that we look beyond the surface of both historical disinformation in Chile and contemporary complacency in the new global order. The work in this series functions as social illumination, exposing the often dark reality lurking under the glowing surface.

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