

IVÁN NAVARRO: NO MAN'S LAND

New Media Wall, Remis Sculpture Court & Koppelman Gallery

Tufts University, Medford, MA

www.ase.tufts.edu/gallery

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Born in Santiago, Chile, in 1972, Iván Navarro grew up in the period of the dark and relentless dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The Pinochet years, which lasted from 1973 to 1990, overlapped with the period when minimalism was a major force in visual art. Navarro joins these streams in his Tufts University exhibition *No Man's Land*, in which he bends rules and snares history in the service of an urgently humane art.

Die Again is a twelve-by-twelve-foot black box that clearly pushes its historical antecedent, *Die*, the 1962, six-by-six-foot steel box of sculptor Tony Smith. *Die* asserts the quintessential minimalist claim of the art object as being only itself, austere and impenetrable. Navarro's *Die Again* has an opening, which allows the viewer entry to light and mirrored illusions of deep penetrations within its interior chambers. Navarro's dialogue with minimalism resets Smith's formal, silent rhetoric in the service of Navarro's more personal introspection about identity and self. Interestingly, to fully experience *Die Again* requires the experience of Tony Smith's seminal piece of sculpture. *Die Again* many seem to co-opt the earlier work, when in fact, its oppositional posture reinforces *Die*'s obduracy.

In *Homeless Lamp: The Juice Sucker*, Navarro combines sculpture with performance and video, unleashing the basic grammar of minimalist Dan Flavin's light sculptures from existing without content, while stealing a little city electricity in the process. Fashioning a shopping cart out of fluorescent light fixtures, Navarro signals an image of homeless portability in the shopping cart and institutional hierarchy in the lights. When Flavin used ordinary fluorescent light fixtures, he challenged notions of beauty and worth, but it was only a short time before his fluorescent lights became artistic royalty. In the video, Navarro's cart is pushed by a collaborator through the Chelsea art gallery district of New York, stopping periodically at city lamppost outlets to be plugged in and lit up. In the video, the glowing shopping cart sits undisturbed, or perhaps ignored. How ironic that such a wonderful and wondrous object can become invisible out there on the city streets. And how fitting that this metaphoric vehicle for the homeless subverts the order of the street and the city as an institution, sucking little bits of energy, temporarily on the grid, briefly in the game. While Flavin lighted hard-edged, interior architectural spaces and gave them an unexpected romanticism, Navarro's fluorescent shopping cart operates at architecture's edges, a more self-contained and sadder romance.

One wonders whether Navarro and other artists of his generation are simply reaching into an art history grab bag, without regard for the intentions of their elders. In his case, I think Navarro is acutely aware of what Smith and Flavin's works were about. His alterations of their artistic postures have less to do with disrupting their artistic missions, and more to do with reviewing the principles they encoded for the sake of a broader cultural ecology. In fact, it is this sense of the space outside established and stratified institutions that Navarro illuminates. His work shares something of the ambitions of earthwork artists, like Robert Smithson or Richard Long, in their self-

removal from centers of artistic and cultural authority, paired with Robin Hood-like social welfare aspirations.

For *Flashlight: I'm not from here, I'm not from there*, Navarro constructed a fluorescent light wheelbarrow with a gas-driven generator. In the video for *Flashlight*, a man siphons gas from a car on the street to run the generator (used for the lights), and pushes the wheelbarrow through a rough urban landscape into the dark of night, ending up on a set of railroad tracks. As the man pushes along, he stops periodically to change color sleeves on the lights. He gets nowhere in particular, and is last seen bumping over the rail ties in a dimming perspective, receding as a distant spot of light. The work reveals, and is absorbed by, location. *Flashlight* includes a soundtrack: "No Soy de Aquí, Ni Soy de Alla," performed by Nutria N.N., a Chilean music group with original lyrics by the Argentinian folk singer Facundo Cabral. The lyrics state: "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." Even without knowing Navarro's story, or that he is (dis)located now in New York, *Flashlight* speaks directly to the heart of absence. His art is so richly nurtured by history and experience that its cultural and civic misdemeanors are heroic.

--David Raymond
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