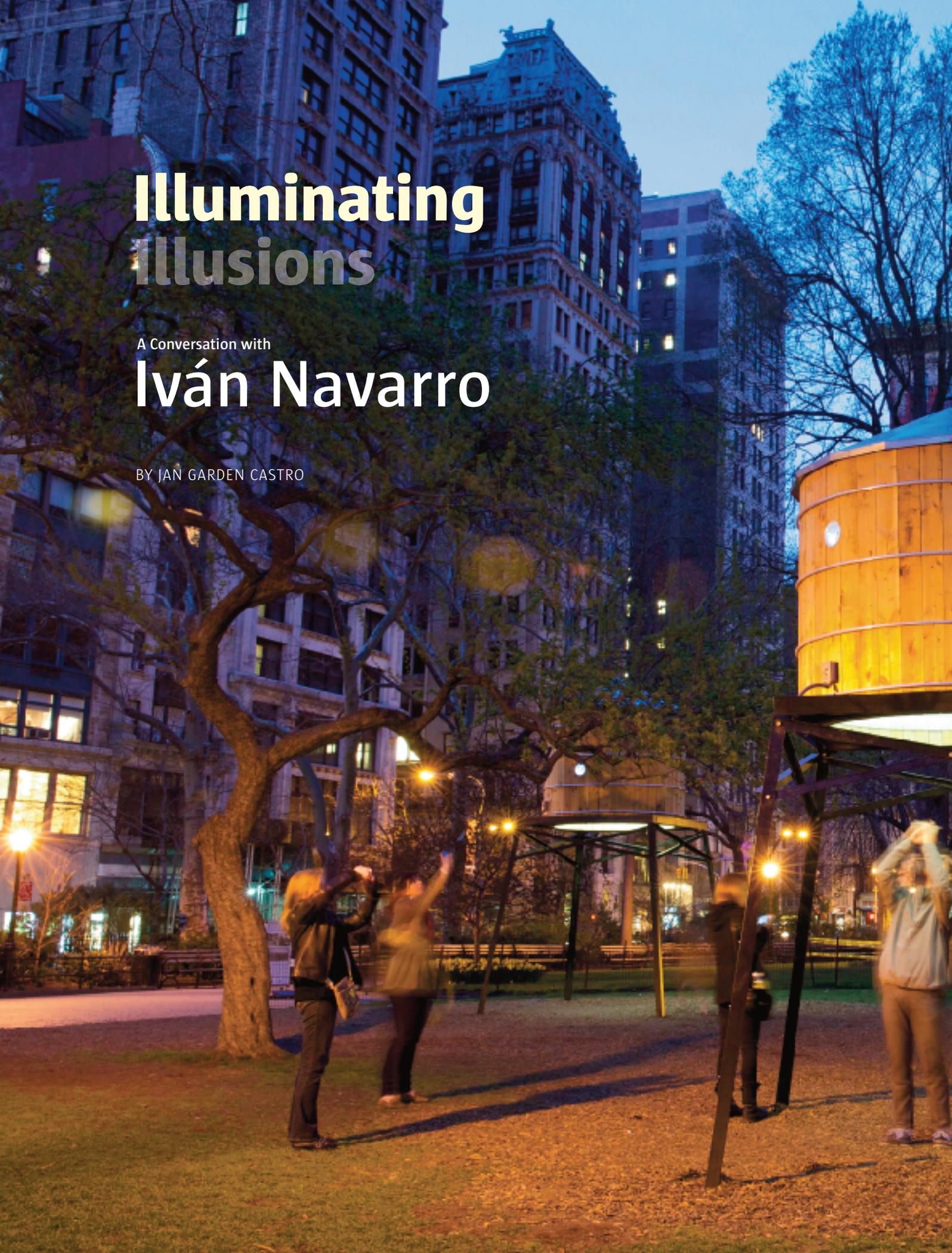


Illuminating Illusions

A Conversation with

Iván Navarro

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO





View of "This Land is Your Land," 2014,
at Madison Square Park, NY.

THELMA GARCIA



Iván Navarro’s activities this past year—participation in a summer 2014 show at the Guggenheim Museum, a new Skira Rizzoli book *Iván Navarro*, his “This Land is Your Land” exhibition in Madison Square Park, shows at Hotel Particulier in Manhattan and Galerie Hyundai in Seoul, and his electronic, minimal music CD *Oido* (Huseo Records)—suggest diversity, fluency, and well-earned popularity, as does his presence in museum and private collections worldwide. Navarro’s success seems tied to three things: a contrarian, metaphorical use of light; a strong work ethic; and keen collaborations with others to realize his ideas.

Jan Garden Castro: *Your work combines architectural forms, optical illusions, language, and light. How did these elements interact in “This Land is Your Land,” your show at Madison Square Park?*

Iván Navarro: Architecture was the first problem that I approached when I was planning this show. I was not happy about what I was proposing. One day, I was walking around the park, and I saw the water towers on top of the surrounding buildings. I felt that they were a direct connection between what I was looking for and what was already there, so I worked with an architect to build new water towers. The source materials were well planned—it was like building a house. The size is like a tree house.

Language makes a tight connection to a narrative, but it’s difficult to make language ambiguous and poetic. To turn language into something poetic is the challenge. That’s where optical illusion comes in—to mix both the language and the shape. The illusion is part of the construction of the piece, but also how we perceive the work. The illusion links the ways in which architecture and language support and contradict each other.

JGC: *The magic is that they connect and contradict.*

IN: The illusion is also the immaterial part. You could say that the architecture is the heavy part, the text is the visual part, and the illusion is something in between that connects them. It makes an endless space, which is an extension of the architectural piece and also of the language. Without the illusional part, it would be very complicated to mix them.

JGC: *One of the ironies of the illusion is that you make a shallow space appear to be an endlessly deep, upward-cascading space. Did you use a one-way mirror and light?*

IN: It’s basically a sandwich. The light is between a regular mirror and a one-way mirror. The combination creates the fictional space.

JGC: *You’ve used the three Madison Square Park images—the word “bed,” the words “me/we,” and a ladder image—in other contexts. Were you aware that “me/we” is from a 1975 poem by Muhammad Ali?*

Left: *Bed (Water Tower), 2014. Above:* *Ladder (Water Tower), 2014. Right:* *Me/We (Water Tower), 2014. Neon, wood, painted steel, galvanized steel, aluminum, mirror, one-way mirror, and electricity, 3 elements, 480.1 x 267 x 267 cm. each. Details of “This Land is Your Land,” Madison Square Park.*

IN: In 2006, I thought it was something that I had invented. Then, somebody showed me the poem, and I learned about other artists who had been working with it, too. It’s great to make links to other artists. I never feel like I’m inventing something new when I make my work. If I run into another artist doing a similar thing, I think it’s more interesting, because you see how other people approach the same topic; it’s more enriching than if it didn’t exist. The two words—me and we—were separated by a mirror in 2006. I was thinking more about the idea of language than about metaphor. I was playing with language in a formal way, trying different words to create one word leading to a second word.

JGC: *In the case of Bed, you create half of the word and the mirror creates the other half.*

IN: Yes, but *Me/We* is not like that. “Me” is one complete word; against the mirror, it turns into something almost opposite. That’s interesting because it’s almost the way mirrors are. They reflect the positive and the negative—me and we are oppositions.

JGC: *You experienced power outages and blackouts when you were growing up in Chile under the Pinochet regime, and now you work with light. In some ways, your use of light is politically charged. You use it to illuminate evil as well as good. Could you talk about growing up under Pinochet?*



IN: It's part of my emotional background. It gives me experience and knowledge about complicated social situations; it gives me awareness. For example, I was supposed to have a show in Ukraine. Because I have experience and knowledge about growing up during a civil war, several months ago—right at the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine—I told the people there that I didn't feel comfortable doing the show. I told them that the situation looked like when I was growing up in Chile.

JGC: *You still have family in Chile, and your grandmother lived near Pablo Neruda and Isla Negra.*

IN: That's right. That whole area—Isla Negra and the town where my grandmother lived, Las Cruces—is known for its many poets. The poet Nicanor Parra, from Las Cruces, is still alive. I grew up across the street from his house. My grandmother's house was bought by Parra's granddaughter. My mother and brother, who teaches art, are in Santiago.

JGC: *Your 1995 thesis show in Santiago used light. What kind?*

IN: I was working with a simple concept: how to make a work without bringing any materials into the gallery. I took down all of the track lighting and installed it on the wall as an art installation. I then went to work with the electricity and the lights from many different angles. It was called *Camping*

Day. When you go camping, you take advantage of the materials around you. You tie a tent to a tree, you take advantage of what is already there.

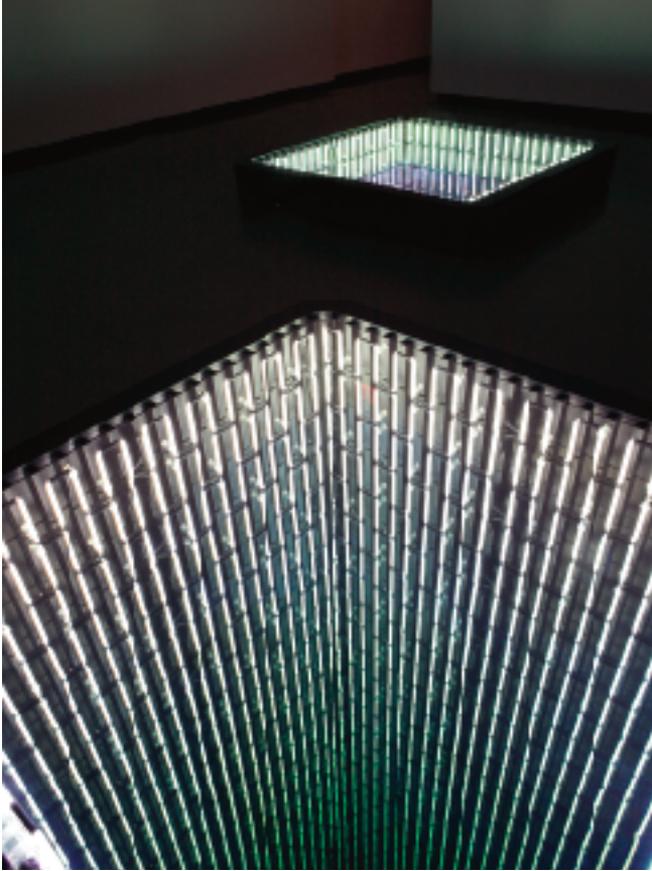
JGC: *In the new monograph devoted to your work, Cay Sophie Rabinowitz brings up Dan Flavin's monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (1966). What do you think about the comparison?*

IN: The writer is making that connection. I'm more interested in his first pieces, when he would go to a hardware store, buy 30 fluorescent lights, and make an installation in a gallery. After the show was over, he would return everything to the hardware store and get the money back. It wasn't about not having money—or maybe that was part of it—it was about using readymade objects; and after you used them in a piece, they could go back into the regular system. It was similar to using all of the track lighting in the gallery and then putting the lighting back into the regular electrical system. When I moved here in '97

Below: *Death Row*, 2006–09. Neon light, aluminum doors, mirror, one-way mirror, and electricity, doors 218.4 x 91.4 x 11.4 cm. each.



TOP: ELISABETH BERNSTEIN / BOTTOM: SEBASTIANO LUCIANO



Above: *Untitled (Twin Towers)*, 2011. Neon, wood, paint, mirror, one-way mirror, and electricity, 2 elements, 20.3 x 146.7 x 146.7 cm. each. Right: *To Reach*, 2012. LEDs, plywood, one-way mirror, mirror, and electricity, 30.5 x 61 cm. diameter. Below: *Ecco (Brick)*, 2012. Neon, mirror, one-way mirror, bricks, and electricity, 82 x 182 cm. diameter.



or '98, I started to understand that work. I'd seen it in books, but I never understood it. Also, I was more interested in artists who worked with a social context and political meaning, and Minimalism wasn't interested in those things. I was interested in the work of Felix González-Torres, and later I discovered Joseph Kosuth.

JGC: *Gordon Matta Clark — also later?*

IN: Exactly, around the same period. He had the interesting idea of combining sculpture and architecture.

JGC: *You had already been doing that yourself?*

IN: I was experimenting. I didn't have a clear idea of what I was doing. I was young. When you're 25, you don't know what you're doing — you have some ideas, and you see those ideas are related to other artists. Little by little, you start discovering the work. It's a slow process. When you look back, you say, "Wow, I was so lucky." Without knowing anything, I did the right moves that took me to what I'm doing now. But at one point, I was going to move to Sweden, which would have completely changed my life. Nobody tells you what to do. You make your own decisions. What's important is to continue investigating your work, trying to be constant about something that will lead you somewhere.

JGC: *What did you do for your show in Seoul?*

IN: It was on three floors of Gallery Hyundai; it was almost like a museum show. A big installation took up the whole basement. It was a fence like the one at the Armory Show in 2010. I used the same pieces in a different configuration, putting the whole piece on a diagonal.

JGC: *So, it divided the room; you could enter one half but not both sides?*



Left: *Blue Electric Chair*, 2004. Fluorescent light, color sleeves, metal fixtures, and electricity, 114.3 x 80 x 113 cm. Above: *Homeless Lamp, The Juice Sucker*, 2004–05. Fluorescent light, metal fixtures, wheels, electric energy from a streetlamp, and video, 101.6 x 132.1 x 76.2 cm. Below and detail: *Post*, 2012. Neon light, aluminum and electricity, 213.4 x 61 x 30.5 cm.

IN: Exactly. To see one side, you had to go through the stairs, and if you wanted to go to the other side, you had to go back up the stairs and down in the elevator. There were six different pieces playing with the idea of illusion—from different years, using different materials. On the third floor, there was a group of pieces that I started in 2010. They're based on the floor plans of different skyscrapers from different parts of the world. By playing with mirrors and neon, you play with the idea of the height of the buildings or suggest the idea of an endless tower.

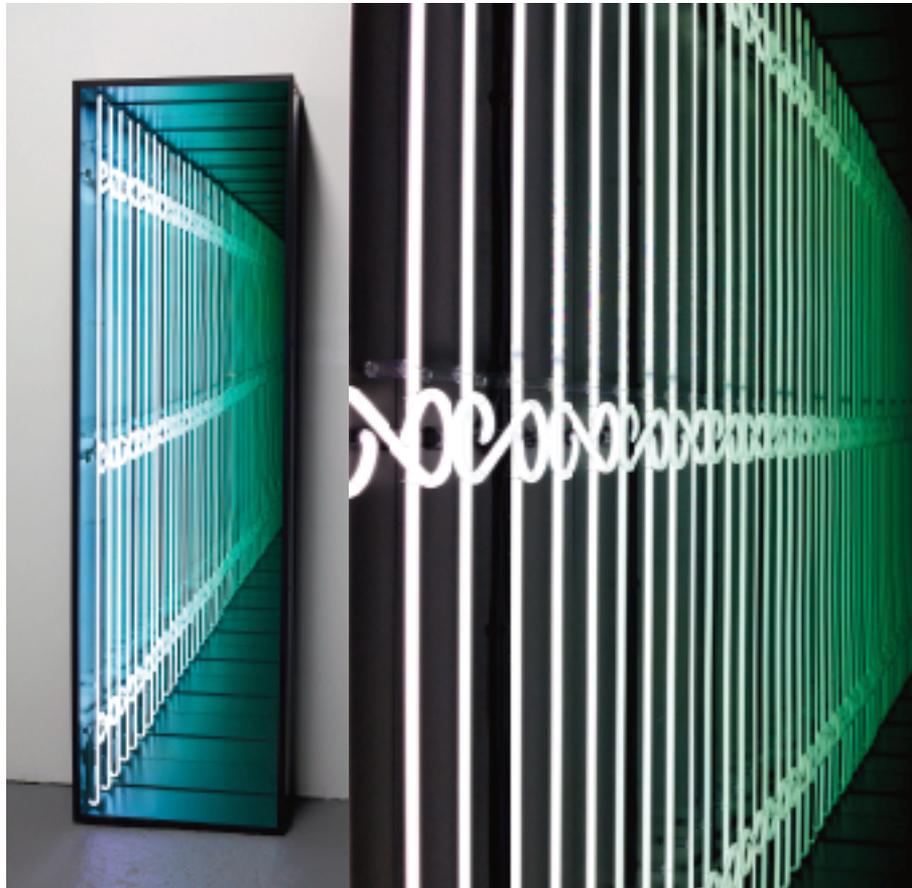
JGC: *And there are words in the footprint of each building.*

IN: Yes, they suggest, in a poetic way, the idea of space, the idea of home, the idea of construction. They're an ambiguous comment, playing with some kind of irony about the height, the shape. It's like writing a poem.

JGC: *You're also a musician?*

IN: I play in a band, but I don't consider myself a musician. I include music in my performances most of the time, to use the sculpture in a different way. I don't believe in sculpture by itself. The works need the interaction of people or of the architectural space in order to be what they are. In a performance, it's a way to show people how to interact with the sculpture, with the meaning, with the concept. I like to make pieces that are active in the space, not passive. Otherwise, it's decoration.

Jan Garden Castro is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.



TOP LEFT: TONY HAMBLOESSI / TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM: THELMA GARCIA