

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

sculpture

Kneading the World from Scratch: A Conversation with Adrián Villar Rojas

By Robert Preece (June 2016)



Rinascimento, 2015. Found Turkish stones and mixed media, view of installation at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

Born in Argentina in 1980, Adrián Villar Rojas has taken the contemporary art world by storm. Working in high-profile places (from Venice, Istanbul, and Sharjah to London's Serpentine Sackler Gallery and New York's High Line), he transforms his sites with temporary works that lean toward extreme performance. These mutating and morphing installations—the result of time, intention, and accident—cast what he calls a "post-human" perspective on materials, forms, and experiences. Poetic, often confounding visions, his works make dream-like, surreal use of found objects, both natural and manmade, presenting magical worlds of thought-provoking fantasy.

24 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10019 TEL 212 977-7160
FAX 212 581-5187 WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Robert Preece: For *Rinascimento* (2015), at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, you combined rocks transported from Turkey with various found objects, including a one-euro coin, a dead bird, a spade, and a stale loaf of bread. How did you choose the rocks and the objects to place on them?

Adrián Villar Rojas: I think it would be better not to approach this project with traditional notions or ideas such as choosing and transporting stones or placing objects on them. My practice tries to respond to more flexible, fluid, and serendipitous codes. I really want to bury the idea of a linear process in which I make decisions based on conscious formal criteria. *Rinascimento*—the experience developed in Turin—responds to various levels of emotional connection with Turkey, where *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* was a radically moving experience that could well have been the metaphorical end of my career, the closing project. From this perspective, *Rinascimento* is the post-end, the hangover after Bacchic apotheosis, a mourning process made with the emotional residue of the Istanbul experience. It is a project that works on the basis of what I definitely and essentially am—a mobile parasitic agent without fixed base. I am keen on thinking that things happen because I am an actor who understands that life is artificial, and in *Rinascimento*, there is a new withdrawal into my previous gestures. I am the actor and also the director. I act on the reality where I build my area of influence, be it an institution, my staff, or the local agents who have to spend some time near me.



The Most Beautiful of All Mothers, 2015. Mixed media, view of installation at the 14th Istanbul Biennial. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

RP: The Most Beautiful of All Mothers (Istanbul Biennial, 2015), has a dreamy, poetic quality, how did you develop it?

AVR: I am interested in fantasy as the force that shapes the possible from the perspective of the impossible. Büyükada, or Big Island, is traversed by the fantasy of Leon Trotsky, one of the most important 20th-century figures in terms of his ability to imagine an alternative world that did not exist back then and still doesn't—an egalitarian and fair human society. I wondered if the revolutionary fantasy of men like Trotsky, Lenin, or Castro was more extreme than the fantasies originated by this late stage of capitalism, characterized by drones that attack ground targets from invisible heights or by the hyper-connectivity of social networks and the Internet. What is more fantastic and impossible, the dreams of those 20th-century revolutionaries or those of Obama, Hollande, and Putin trying to restore Western capitalist order in the Middle East, or maybe those of Mark Zuckerberg designing a virtual life for all of humanity inside Facebook? Is Trotsky's permanent revolution more delusional than the infinite expansion of communication technologies? I imagined Trotsky's countless sleepless nights on the island, the tremendous pressure endured by men like him—always on the edge of the knife, abandoned to their paranoia and their survival instinct. I thought of the ocean of anxiety on which he might have sailed until the last second of his life, all in the name of a dream, a fantasy.



The Most Beautiful of All Mothers, 2015. Mixed media, view of installation at the 14th Istanbul Biennial. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

What interested me most was exploring fantasy as the space between the idealized horizon that pushes humans to action—even to destruction—and the line of the earth where they finally—even dramatically—put their feet: fantasy as the tension between the impossible and the possible. The sea, watching those who came to look at it through the eyes of the animals

24 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10019 TEL 212 977-7160

FAX 212 581-5187 WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

displayed on its shore, was the metaphorical surface for this inquiry. But I did not want to approach fantasy from a male, phallic perspective, compulsively repeating the mistakes of the past. I chose a feminine, maternal point of view, with its fragility and ability to repair the damage inflicted by the global dominance of technology, which characterizes the Anthropocene. This was not at all a judgment or criticism, since I believe to some extent in the naturalness of these evolutionary events. I simply tried to provide another perspective, a softer and more silent one, operating in parallel to those more intense and penetrating forces that have built up our Western world. I needed an alternative thought based on reparation and mourning to understand fantasy, and I found it around the signifier "mother." This was not a topic or a theme, but an ontology and a logic for developing ideas.

RP: Could you explain the placement of the animal forms on plinths?

AVR: The project in Turkey condensed a series of operations and reflections on the idea of the plinth. In Planetarium (Sharjah Biennial, 2015), each column, built with layers of different materials, was held by concrete blocks that were part of the original structure. Then, in Fantasma (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2015), I tried to explore the museum by asking how to make monstrous the devices that program a passive experience of the object. Plinths, shelves, walls, and seats were all painted with a perfect, shiny white covering. Finally, in Istanbul, there was the sum of my gestures—the concrete plinths, the white animals playing the role of plinths as if the Moderna Museet displays had mutated into beasts, and the mutant forms, which have been present throughout—clusters of vegetables, soil, sand, minerals, geometric shapes, clay, concrete, and resin. And it is not a minor detail that the concrete platforms got impregnated with seaweed and micro-organisms that attracted hungry fish. Moreover, on the spot where the pieces were installed, right by Trotsky's house, the tide changed, because the pillars affected the current. We created a small reef through the action of "some platforms holding some sculptures." I was interested in this system of meta-plinths (things holding things holding things) and in the fantasy that grew in my mind through the wild process of constructing and installing this experience: I imagined my entire language sinking into the sea, floating without aim or final destiny, lost in the salty water.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



The Most Beautiful of All Mothers, 2015. Mixed media, 2 details of installation at the 14th Istanbul Biennial. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

24 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10019 TEL 212 977-7160
FAX 212 581-5187 WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Summing up, there were some human animals that created experiences and objects collected in the biennial. Other human animals came to see and enjoy. And there was a third group of animals affected by these experiences and objects but completely indifferent to the existence of something called the Istanbul Biennial. This last group felt the residual activity of those experiences and objects. This is the second, third, and fourth life of a project, the unexpected activity of our actions. I think it excites me far more to think of the serendipitous activity of the platforms than to see how the project, as a codified experience in the realm of art, is received by viewers. A violent, unexpected, and uncontrollable shockwave effect created an entire periphery of phenomena, which is now at the center of my concerns—language overflowing its codified activity.

RP: Your works are known for their mysterious narratives, full of layering and different perspectives. Do these narratives develop from one project to another?

AVR: The projects communicate with one another, but under no circumstances in a linear way; there are brotherhoods, criticisms, and even internal discussions between them. One project does not necessarily endorse or conceptually support the views expressed by another. I think it is important to carry out a critical or meta-critical dialogue from one experience to those that follow. What stimulates me is language, representation, the conventions we assume in order to dive into different systems that we agree on as "the real." *The Work of the Ocean* (Belgium, 2013) and *Lo que el fuego me trajo* (What Fire Brought to Me, 2013), a film made in São Paulo, explore these language problems. They are metalinguistic turns inside the field. The film operates right over my fantasies; my team and my practice become fiction. It materializes our working process; it dramatizes our dynamics of interaction as a "piece of raw reality," as I call us. *The Work of the Ocean* does the same thing by turning all of our work into decorative art and by creating an alternative life in a house specially built to keep decorative figurines reproducing some of the pieces from *Return the World* (Documenta, 2012), among other works. Both projects were actually elaborating my disappearance, which is now central to my work.



Planetarium, 2015. Mixed media, view of installation at the 12th Sharjah Biennial. Photo: © Jörge Baumann, Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.

It is important to clarify that there is no story here. I narrate like a camera left behind in the middle of the countryside. Narration is inside us. We—human animals—cannot stop interpreting things. Storytelling has existed since we started to "read" the first footprints in the sand; for instance, some rat paws and a waving line mean a snake ate a rat. In my work,

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

there is a sort of friendly negotiation with the viewer, which varies from one experience to another. Some projects are more comfortable than others, and sparkles of narration come up precisely in this feeling of comfort. There is a constant negotiation with spectacularity, which is quite dangerous. Anything that pleases the audience is dangerous. One aims at expanding the battlefield, but we must move forward with extreme caution because it is also a minefield.



Planetarium, 2015. Mixed media, view of installation at the 12th Sharjah Biennial.
Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.

RP: How does Planetarium, an intervention for the Sharjah Biennial, relate to previous works at the Moderna Museet and the High Line?

AVR: The Evolution of God (High Line, 2014) undoubtedly anticipates Planetarium. The scale of the projects is directly related to the activity of the parasite that I have become. In this sense, the final "size" of a project measures my interaction with the social, political,

24 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10019 TEL 212 977-7160
FAX 212 581-5187 WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

cultural, geographical, and even institutional context. It reflects the position that I have gained in the structure of my host. Sharjah is an excellent example. With all of these projects, I am measuring the possibilities and potentialities of a system, of a certain culture and its mechanisms to carry out fantasies. Istanbul is also an extraordinary example of a context that enabled me to almost touch the impossible. Every society deals with a certain tension between the possible and the impossible. I explore that zone when I regard myself as a parasite. I am constantly measuring—and daring—the distance between these two poles.



Fantasma (Ghost), 2015. Mixed media, view of installation at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist and Moderna Museet Museum.

RP: With *The Evolution of God*, you juxtaposed the classic cube form with the imperfections of concrete and clay, embedding found and organic objects into holes and crevices. You also added seeds to generate plant life. How does this work relate to its title? And what is its relation to the iconic forms of Minimalism?

AVR: We should avoid any linear interpretation, because the alien—the hypothetical position of "alien" from which I approach the world with total indifference to human hierarchies, values, and classifications—does not work with codes like "minimal art." There are no such references.

Duchamp was such a powerful force—he essentially traced all future paths for others to continue walking. His genius was as generous as it was oppressive. Faced with this Duchampian universe, which is completely naturalized as the cornerstone of any renewed practice and probably of any vanguard cultural operation, I decided to exile myself from this time and retire to a posthuman moment. Sitting behind this fictional boundary separated me from humanity, and I started to knead the world from scratch, using the materials of the world and looking at it with the naive eyes of an alien deprived of any human mental structure to categorize and classify reality. If there was nothing to say after Duchamp, I could only go to the post-end—that moment of total human silence—to mourn art. And that's what I did.

The High Line project is the fantasy of watching the primal breeding ground for life on earth—staring at those first pools of molecular waste, those first sparks of life; witnessing that invisible, untouchable, insipid, and tedious organic activity, like the porn of life in slow motion. This accounts for the title. The cubes are the absurd nothingness from which everything came. It is like filming a redwood tree for 2,000 years, or leaving a camera on in

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



The Evolution of God, 2014. Clay, concrete, and mixed media, detail of installation at the High Line, New York.
Photo: © Timothy Schenck, Courtesy the artist and High Line.

the middle of the Argentine countryside, a flat, green, silent, and infinite landscape where nothing seems to happen

RP: How did you select the objects on the shelves in Today we reboot the planet (2013)?
And how does the elephant form relate to the post-human?

AVR: Today we reboot the planet is a perfect representation of this alien will. The alien wants to use the world and everything that constitutes it—cement and clay. Clay is the pre-human world. Cement is the post-human world. Mixed, they shape everything the world contains. With the world, we knead the world; this is my only criterion. I am against the rigid idea of a "selection criterion." Serendipity, chaos, hazard, and chance are my instruments.

Regarding the elephant, it is wrong to isolate this element from the whole. The entire building was turned into a sculpture. The problem was how to present a building that nobody knew. There was a double void: an exhibition and a building that nobody had seen. The viewer's degree of uncertainty was the real material that I tried to work with and explore. The elephant was just another element, along with the brick floor, the clay walls, the empty room, the stained glass windows, the shelves and objects, the musty smell in the air, the natural light, and the sound of walking on bricks.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



Today we reboot the planet, 2013. Clay, concrete, and mixed media, view of installation at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London, and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

RP: Do all of these works fall into the realm of "extreme performance?" Do you still destroy most of them, leaving only a few elements to travel to other sites?

AVR: I want to make clear a key issue. The "pieces" are almost never destroyed, but they are inherently unstable and diachronic, which implies that they are constantly changing over time. They are mutant entities. In this sense, the notion of "diachronic or mutant objects" is intended to integrate time as a non-stop, shaping force that works on materiality long after the end of the "human moment," as I call my direct intervention in an experience. The working process and the resulting exhibition are just initial stages of much broader processes that do not necessarily include me.

Some fragments of this materiality travel with me and are constantly redefining their role. There are displacements of matter from one spot of the world to another, just as there is human nomadism in my practice. However, the experiences I have been developing over the last five years are so delicately contextual that the environments from which they emerge are organically part of their symbolic system. Therefore, it is critical to limit the transformation of isolated fragments into commodities, because that operation enrolls the fragments in other language games responding to other logics.

The material dimensions of the projects are fully open to the action of contextual forces that keep redesigning, redefining, and transforming them. These are not deliberate or conscious forces, but they are efficient ones. I am striving to stop thinking of human action as the center of any artistic experience or practice. Wind, for example, does not sculpt as neatly as the fingers of a human animal, but that does not imply that wind—or sunlight, temperature, or moisture—is not doing some work on materiality. I believe that these forces are ontologically neither superior nor inferior to the "deliberate and conscious" moment represented by our human intervention. We could say that even the institutional context

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

sculpts, and it would sculpt even if there were no clay, no matter at all to be shaped. I am definitely proposing another kind of sculpture policy. This is an extension of the battlefield.



Today we reboot the planet, 2013. Clay, concrete, and mixed media, view of installation at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

RP: You said in Bone Magazine, "Processes are everything. Sculptures are just a byproduct or even a residue of those processes. I would not even call them 'sculptures,' for that discipline does not interest me at all." Could you explain?

AVR: I want to be a cat. Cats shit, sneak into a four-dimensional world, sleep both in wild and domestic spaces. They are like clay and cement, for they are always on the edge, reminding us of what we were before we became what we are now. Dogs are civilization, dogs are civilized humans; but cats occupy the border between civilization and its unexpected rupture. I think these "sculptures" are that: the memory of that ambiguous border, the healthy and wild mistake of this nomadic company we are. I have no workshop or studio. I have no working method. I sneak around on an ambiguous map made by myself. Cats represent my anti-disciplinary stance quite well, the idea of a "sculpture" as an accident, as a residue emerging from a failure in communication, from a gap between my fantasies and my ability to communicate them to a group of collaborators.

Sometimes there is "less" language friction and "more" codified order—for instance, the reproduction of Michelangelo's David in Two Suns (2015, Marian Goodman Gallery). In

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

such cases, I have to minimize the distortion in the communication process; but there are other occasions when distortion and misunderstanding rule the scene, provoking an outburst of language's symbolic dimension. Therefore, we can be a farm, a factory, a theater, or a construction company. We can play at being artists, factory workers, farmers, or artisans. Sometimes information is transmitted as fast as a thunderbolt, and the process is reduced to a series of codified tasks; other times, everything seems to get lost in the paroxysm of a hermeneutic chaos. There is no formula or methodology, but there is a logic: the centrality of the processes in relation to the residuality of the results. It is similar in theater, where most of what happens in rehearsals is lost forever, and the play we finally see on stage is no more than what remains of that process, the residue of a wider experience and probably the least rich part of it.



Two Suns, 2015. Clay, concrete, and mixed media, view of installation at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

In my case, the center is a failed communication process, and the "sculpture" arises from this unbridgeable gap, from our human wound—communication. The "sculpture" is precisely the proof of that failure to close the gap with language. It is like an ontic vision of the fracture. But it is also an esoteric and metaphysical vision. In this sense, there are no bad or good "sculptures." This is where the body of the actor/collaborator enters, in that very instant, he or she plunges into the impossible mission/desire to satisfy my mission/desire and achieve a full communication with me: the impossible dream of a transparent community. This is the constitutive gap of any language operation. I think of my work as a complex communicative process with others because I do not actually enjoy "doing" things. This seems totally inconsistent with the amount of work required by each project, but it is only an illusion: what really concerns me is human activity.

That is why a sculpture is always the proof of something, of a weak or strong relationship with an institution, of a high or low level of communication and coordination with my team, of the amount of "interesting" materials we collect. The sculpture measures. It measures time. It measures space. It measures levels of interaction with a city and with a group of

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

people. It is a thing articulating and articulated with other things. Thus, a sculpture as the outcome of a discipline holds no interest at all, has clearly passed away to become a complex field of relationships. Lacan says that certain signifiers, points de capiton, anchor neurotic discourse.



Two Suns, 2015. Clay, concrete, and mixed media, view of installation at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Photo: © Jörg Baumann, Courtesy the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, NY/Paris/London; and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

Without them, language would disintegrate into an infinite rhizome, without rhyme or reason: this is delusional or psychotic discourse. In the best case, for me, a sculpture is this: a capitone point to organize a rhizomatic universe of events and processes that go far beyond any discipline. I am definitely not interested in sculpture, unless we are aware of the fact that all of us—animals, vegetables, and minerals—are both sculptors and sculptures in a four-dimensional world, where time will finally reduce us all to nothing. Yes, I'd rather be a cat.