





Q&A

EVERY SCULPTURE IS MANY SCULPTURES

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A CONVERSATION WITH ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS

INTERVIEW by JUSTIN PATON and LISA CATT

A world where humans evolved with seven fingers. A future city on Mars racked by revolution. The remains of life on Earth after the seventh mass extinction. A museum commemorating the end of post-colonial deterrence on the moon.

In 2020, the Argentine-Peruvian artist Adrián Villar Rojas embarked on a remarkable sculptural experiment, which took place not in a physical studio but in times and places that no human has visited. Developing a new software system dubbed 'Time Engine', he and his team created a series of intensely detailed and constantly evolving worlds – and placed virtual sculptures within them. Simulating ambient conditions – from weather to warfare – across timescales ranging from hours to millions of years, Villar Rojas was asking unanswerable questions about the life of art through time.

Extreme things happened to the sculptures during their time in these other realities. Fires assailed them, altered gravity distorted them. Unrest toppled them, wars left them wounded. Other life forms took shelter within them, organisms bloomed on their surfaces. And as their travels through time continued, the sculptures became increasingly fractured and complex, their skins and structures accumulating evidence of all they encountered.

Two years later, in late 2021, these objects underwent another journey – from the virtual worlds of the Time Engine into the physical world. Establishing a large workshop in his hometown of Rosario in Argentina, Villar Rojas and his team began (re)constructing, with forensic intensity, these time-travelling sculptural bodies. Using unconventional techniques that ranged from delicate tinting to violent scorching, they pushed materials to their limits to manifest these objects and their temporal trials.

These are the sculptures – at once haunting and visceral – that you will encounter in *The End of Imagination*, the inaugural project in the former World War II fuel bunker called the Tank that forms the last and lowest level of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' new SANAA-designed building. First visited by the artist in 2018, this vast space is itself a document of conflict and material change. In Villar Rojas' project, it becomes a container and holding bay, a strange stillage for the slow observation of his 'impossible objects'. Are they survivors or prophets? Should we revere or fear them? What discomforting knowledge do they bring us from other times and places?



JUSTIN PATON Adrián, tell us about that first moment of descent into the Tank.

When I first visited the Tank there was almost no infrastructure in place, except the scaffolding which served as a staircase and a couple of temporary flood lights. We entered the space through a huge metal hatch within the parkland that surrounds the museum, which gave access to this vast subterranean bunker. We had to wear boots because the floor was still partly flooded. The space was raw, damp, cold and with a profound echo and reverberation. The hundreds of columns reminded me of being in a pitch-black forest, where forms only become visible within the single, moving light of a torch.

LISA CATT I remember you saying on that first visit, "this is all a fantasy." You grasped instantly that, when the new museum was open, visitors would not see the same flooded dark space that we saw.

Yes, it was critical for us not to forget that the space was going to completely change once the museum had moved in. The magic of the 'untouched' oil tank was not going to exist in that form again. So, it was important for us to remember every single detail of that fantasy – how it felt, smelt; the darkness; the reflections in the water; the way it was lit by only these dramatic, cinematic floodlights. Tree roots had grown into strange forms, lines of sediment stretched across the walls – no human had ever inhabited it. This led me to think about the stories of places we haven't yet seen.

LC You also spent a lot of time in the archives, talking to colleagues and other curators, researchers and

Artist Adrián Villar Rojas during a visit to the Tank in 2018. Photo: Mim Stirling © Art Gallery of New South Wales
Opposite Views from live environmental simulation generated by Time Engine software, 2022
Previous page Adrián Villar Rojas workshop in Rosario, Argentina, with sculptor and modeller Georgina Bürgi (top) and Ariel Torti (bottom) at work on sculpture for *The End of Imagination*
Photos: Mario Caporali
Courtesy the artist and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney © Adrián Villar Rojas

academics, learning about the history, politics and location of the Tank.

I resist all vocabulary that draws a clear line between content and container, between 'artwork' and 'art space'. I am interested in every square centimetre of a space. From things as overt as the historical use of architecture and the political specificities of a given geographical location, to things as seemingly meaningless as the electrical outlets, cables or unpainted walls. For me, everything generates meaning.

Conversations with my hosts and the process of 'housekeeping' are therefore very important to me. Following the many conversations I had with people in the Art Gallery [of New South Wales] and across Sydney, I started to see the Tank as a portal opening a view to stories of human conflict – from colonisation to modern global conflict, to fossil fuel extraction and post-industrial change.

JP For this project you established a large workshop in your hometown Rosario. But there was a crucial research period before this, when you developed a unique tool dubbed the Time Engine. Tell us more.

I am very proud to have created this new work in Rosario. Making work in Rosario is not like making work in the outskirts of LA or in Queens in New York City, where artist supply chains and networks of resources already exist. In Rosario, you must first create the infrastructure that you need to then create the work.

But you are right, we also dedicated immense time and energy to creating the Time Engine. It is a software system invented by me and my team, and an idea that we intend to keep evolving. It emerged because I was feeling extremely frustrated with the way we were using other digital modelling tools – software platforms that are designed to replicate the analogue, human-centric experience of modelling in the digital realm. With the Time Engine, it is completely different. Here, I model a digital space that itself has agency.

JP Why was this external agency such an important thing to achieve?

The Time Engine is a way for me to model worlds that model sculptures. Before now, I had been modeling sculptures that have the imprint of the real world, that are shaped by the physical, social and economic realities of their time and contexts. For this project, I wanted to find the next step – artistically and ontologically. And that step was the Time Engine.

The Time Engine can simulate environmental conditions across small and vast timescales and in different places – from landscapes and seascapes on Earth to the geographies of the Moon and Mars. My team and I then place objects and forms inside these modelled realities and see how they are affected.

What if we left Rodin's *The Kiss* in a jungle in the Jurassic period for 500 years? Would a bird's nest survive the seventh mass extinction? What would a coffee mug,

or a car, look like if it was left in the canyon of the Valles Marineris on Mars for 15,000 years? Or if it was subjected to the forces of wind in 7,374,000 BCE? What textures would form? What would remain of their volumes?

LC This leads us to the next phase of your project – the extraordinary process of hauling these forms out of virtual worlds and into ours. Even though we've looked at endless images, we feel we won't know these objects until we meet them bodily. How would you describe them?

They are impossible objects that perhaps no human being in our lives, the lives of our grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren will ever see. They are witnesses of immense change – geological, political, environmental. And because of the many processes that they have gone through digitally and materially, the weight and space that the physical sculptures occupy is ambiguous.

In a way, their scale comes from the density of the information they hold. Their skins are like reservoirs of data. Every sculpture is many sculptures.

These sculptures are without a doubt the most complex shapes and textures that my team and I have ever tried to produce. They took us nine solid months to make, not including the preceding period of research and experimentation. We worked around the clock and learned a completely new set of skills. To make these sculptures we had to remake ourselves. ▼

Justin Paton is the Head Curator of International Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Lisa Catt is the Curator of Contemporary International Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Adrián Villar Rojas is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and London and kurimanzutto, New York.

Adrián Villar Rojas: The End of Imagination shows in the Tank, Art Gallery of New South Wales from December 3, 2022 to July 16, 2023.

mariangoodman.com
kurimanzutto.com
artgallery.nsw.gov.au

This is an edited version of a conversation that can be accessed in full at *VAULT* online.

