



Eduardo Navarro, *Riverbed Meditation*, drawing session, June 4, 2022, Córdoba.

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## Deep See

Over millennia, diverse technologies of contemplation have relied upon a concept of mind that adopts the ocean as a metaphor. We can observe waves forming at the ocean's surface, and notice how they emerge from a clear, dense undersurface that remains still despite the surface chaos. Accordingly, just like our individual thoughts and emotions, our collective ideas about the nature and origins of the world—whether philosophical, creative, or scientific—emerge from the mind's depth, the waves of which heave and overflow into what we call "reality." Such shared ideas play a crucial role in inventing our world by constantly partitioning the real from the poetic, ghosts from shadows, and milestones from mishaps, as though they had concrete identity, substance, or definition.

We perceive what arises in the senses with our eyes, ears, noses, and tongues; with our bodies, and with our minds. Visible forms appear to the eyes, a vibration in the inner ear arouses the perception of sound, the nose perceives odorant molecules, the tongue delights in taste, textures and motions create the experience of touch, and the mind thinks thoughts. The transience of our experience connects and reconciles our different sense perceptions, arising and fading away each time. Relational awareness allows us to recognize the multidimensionality of every form despite this impermanence. Yet, there are ineffable dimensions of being that are not affected by either sense perception or by the relations we conceive through them. Because some of these dimensions go beyond what can be grasped through either perceptual

or conceptual experience, they also exceed the imagination itself.

Is there such a thing as direct, non-conceptual experience, or is all experience, by its very nature, conceptually mediated? Acknowledging the reach and limitations of sensory perception, as well as extending beyond our common ways of thinking about it, gives rise to what art critic and scholar Thomas McEvilley has called the "problem of the One and the Many," an age-old metaphysical conundrum expressed in an impulse to find a principle unifying apparent diversity.<sup>1</sup> If our perception of form is different and separate each and every time, how can we account for the known and unknown dimensions of the multiverse? And by overcoming the partitioning generated by our cognitive experience of the senses, how can we recognize those dimensions of both being and non-being that originate in the ineffable and that cannot be reduced to representation?

Some spiritual traditions refer to this ineffable excess as the Beloved, the divine, the absolute, or, simply, consciousness. The latter precedes any form that it ultimately manifests in. For instance, consider a flower. It is made up of floral as well as non-floral elements like soil, nutrients, photosynthetic processes, water, and the skillful effort of all the other entities that help it blossom. All these factors coexist with each other, in interbeing, to manifest what we call a flower. Yet there are other aspects of this flower that cannot be

1. Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (New York: Allworth Press, 2022), 23-66.

reduced to its linguistic representation, such as the fact the flower exists. There is also no essence arising from the fact the flower exists that is unique to it; in fact, neither is there for any other being. Following this unchartable, impermanent, and, ultimately, interdependent quality of all species-beings, what new languages can emerge from artworks that question the limits of their visible and invisible dimensions?

In our conversations for his TBA21–Academy research commission, Eduardo Navarro proposed to query consciousness, or the ultimate reality underlying all life. He would tell me that artworks did not need an artist because—like the flower example—they existed as manifestations of a preceding and continual nature. Having collaborated on previous curatorial projects at TBA21–Academy, Navarro was interested in taking a deeper dive into the ocean of consciousness to see past the turbid waters of dualist perception. In our conversations, Navarro began to call himself “an illusion created by an artist that orbits an intangible and anachronistic plane,” and eventually proposed shedding the concept of artist altogether in favor of a more encompassing definition: “cosmic organizer of conceptual events.”<sup>2</sup>

During his first visit to Córdoba, Navarro surmised that the city’s approach to the sacred had been siphoned off by historical appropriations and archaeological discourses that attempt to legitimize two narratives. On the one hand, a Christian origin story made by mostly conservative Catholics justifies claims to heritage and public space despite the significant pantheistic Roman, Islamic Arab, Almoravid, and Almohad cultural presence in the region that endures in the city’s syncretic architecture. On the other hand, another origin story, a fiction of conviviality

2. Navarro, personal communication with the author, my translation, May 2022.

between the three monotheistic religions, institutes itself via official public speech. Both positions were “drowning in linear time,” Navarro believed. With the intention of emerging from the depths of such historical abstractions with a renewed view, he approached the waters of the Guadalquivir as a common experience, belonging to no single origin narrative nor to any religious belief, yet being present throughout recorded time and beyond.

Navarro became interested in working with children, whose ability to perceive dimensions beyond conventional definition, or apparent substance, accompanied their unbounded creative imagination. “I suppose that ultimately childhood is not a stage of life but a way of seeing the world, of asking for magical and impossible things,” he hypothesized.<sup>3</sup> In June 2022, Navarro drafted a letter to an imagined group of children in Córdoba, explaining his intention to work jointly on a public artwork in the city, “which from its conception is intended to invite you into the focus of creation.”<sup>4</sup> He recounted that, following his first visit to the city, he thought about how to “create an experience on the banks of the Guadalquivir that belongs to the river, that is born from it and that is generated by it. An experience that transcends the world and its problems, where we can see them from afar like a bird does in its flight and when it returns to step on the ground, with a new vision of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

This new perspective asked: “can we reconceptualize our experience of water beyond its use value to become a sacred entity that traverses all forms?” In order to return sacredness to water Navarro

3. Navarro, email exchange with author, my translation, July 6, 2023.

4. Navarro, unpublished letter draft, my translation, June 11, 2022.

5. Ibid.

speculated that “water, known for its three states, has a fourth state: the state of giving life and reaching the whole. I cannot help but think that consciousness is the fourth state of water. What can I do to convey this state and its manifestation?” In his letter he went on to explain that we “all have stories we tell about water, with words, particles, uncertainties, and experiences, that return to the memory of the river meandering through the land, which then returns to the ocean, to the world, and to the cosmos and, in turn, from the cosmos returns to the absolute in all life.”

Yet Navarro never sent the letter. Instead, he created a paper UFO containing soluble paints that schoolchildren aged between four and eleven activated with water from the Guadalquivir in a series of drawing sessions (*How Can We Investigate the Future?*, 2022). He introduced himself as a traveler from a future: “Córdoba is a complex spiritual and cultural spaceship that landed in the middle of an anachronistic landscape of olive trees. This spaceship asked me to build another one that gifts Córdoba’s children the world in its timelessness, which is beyond any history, religion, school, or teaching.”<sup>6</sup>

With this intuition, Navarro asked the children to imagine how together they could “experience the fourth state of water” and travel through time in the Guadalquivir River. As a group they conceived an unrealized large public installation and participatory performance for the riverbanks that was inspired by their multiple notions of futurity. According to Navarro, “the artwork would have arrived yesterday to be experienced by the children of Córdoba tomorrow—those who once invoked it as an experience that only existed in present time and to the mind’s awareness.” Could such experiences of presence, connection,

6. Navarro, email exchange with author, my translation, July 6, 2023.

and co-creation help us imagine life beyond the separateness caused by the apparent diversity of forms? Could they help us experience life beyond our commonsense perception of time? Could the ideas-images we individually and collectively imagine transform our thoughts, words, and actions, and strengthen our ability to experience life as riverine, oceanic, something that like water is in continual flux and transformation? Navarro has no doubt that they can.

For *Riverbed Meditation* (2022), a drawing and contemplation event presented during “The Journeying Stream,” Navarro proposed another experience of time travel: both to the Mesozoic Era, 252 to 66 million years ago, during which the Guadalquivir Basin was uplifted from the remnant Tethys Ocean, and to an unspecified future age of extinction and drought. With the performance of the words that can be read on the previous pages, he invited those present on a cyclical journey to times when their material bodies would have been primeval matter, and times when they will become one with the sediments of the river.

As we sat on the riverbank, above the sandy islets and under the vegetation of its margins, he asked us to sense receding watercourses, and to attune to the sounds of the birds flying above as if they had metamorphosed with the prehistoric fish that once swam in a paleo-ocean below. After we slowly returned from this meditative state to become reacquainted with tactile perception, we were invited to make drawings of ourselves as fountains in which water re-entered the body and returned to the river. These drawings attempted to access a kind of subconscious internal map, to uncover the multidimensionality of the river and its multispecies continuities beyond sensible space. In Navarro’s words, *Riverbed Meditation* endeavored “to lend our bodies to the river so it can

slowly become human by filling every vein, every capillary, and every organ with water, collectively taking us on a journey back to the ocean of all oceans.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2013, Navarro created a homeopathic treatment for the Plate River, whose waters form the shoreline of his native city, Buenos Aires. For the artwork *Tratamiento homeopático del Río de la Plata* [Homeopathic Treatment of the Plate River] (2013), Navarro, alongside the President of the Argentinian Medical Homeopathic Association, a historian of the river, and the President of the National Water Institute, jointly diagnosed and prescribed a therapy for the river’s past and present contamination. Homeopathy departs from the idea that water carries memory. Inspired by Japanese author Masaru Emoto’s fringe theory that the aesthetic forms of ice crystals can be affected by the positivity of the energies and emotions to which they are exposed, Navarro created a spherical device in which river water was brought into daily contact with the prescribed homeopathic medicine. Throughout this process, and following the treatment’s evolution, Navarro took photographs of ice crystals with a microscope and speculated how riverine memory could be projective too.

In moving away from conventional representation, Navarro’s insightful, critical, and creative practice delves into the deepest expanses with a clarity of vision. In recent years, he has sought to bury drawings made with the seeds of trees (*Photosynthetics*, 2021–22), to metabolize animal and plant life (for example in *f.o.c.a.*, 2023, *Vegetal Transmutation*, 2021, made in collaboration with philosopher Michael Marder, who is also featured in this book, and *Index of Shapes*, 2022), to experiment with ways for dancers to embody the physical properties of light (*In Collaboration*

*with the Sun*, 2017/19), as well as to ensoul a mechanical octopus and become part of its decentralized nervous system (*Octopia*, 2016). Yet since these projects, his cosmology has moved away from working with performers and towards co-creation. In this way he has suggested that “the artwork begins when the experience of the work has ended.”<sup>8</sup> Such a move, I believe, reconciles long-standing oppositions through which art has instituted itself, such as viewer-artwork or audience-performance.

The attentive gaze that Navarro brought to bear on the river’s multiple temporalities, and the possibilities therein, suggests a new way of understanding impermanence and formed and formless qualities of participatory artworks. By displacing the expectation of what it can be, as much as when and where it comes from, Navarro seeks a transformational shift that is both interpersonal and “im-personal,” because, as he insists, “artworks do not need artists.”<sup>9</sup> This purpose is explicit in the unsent letter and Navarro’s desire “to reach everyone with my work, in the same way that water reaches all beings.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps his speculation about the fourth state of water is itself a practice of revealing how subtle forces bring what we cannot describe into existence, and of showing how they sustain ways of imagining and practicing life. Being a mere state of illusion, Navarro and his cosmic conceptual events can travel in time with the same depths and perspectives as rivers: a journey of impermanence, just like our own.

8. Navarro, personal communication with the author, my translation, May 3, 2023.

9. Navarro, personal communication with the author, my translation, June 2022.

10. Navarro, unpublished letter draft, my translation, June 11, 2022.

7. Navarro, email exchange with author, my translation, April 21, 2022.

