

**MAD.  
SQ.  
ART 2014.  
IVÁN NAVARRO  
*THIS LAND IS  
YOUR LAND***

February 20 - April 13, 2014  
Madison Square Park  
Presented by the Madison Square Park Conservancy









# ESTA TIERRA ES TU TIERRA.

Ariella Budick

The water tower is to New York what the red call box is to London and the Métro sign to Paris—a retro icon of the city. That quintessentially vernacular structure, a squat cylindrical body topped by a conical cap, perches on rooftops from Coney Island to Washington Heights. So how did three of these stubby angels wander down from the skyline and into Madison Square Park, leaking neon haloes?

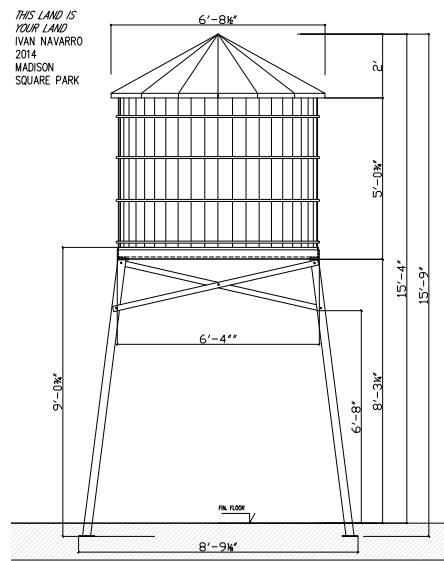
Iván Navarro, the creator of the installation, has erected them for the benefit of the square's migratory population—the tourists, commuters, and passersby who step beneath the structures and look up. In one, a ladder climbs to an infinite height. Another contains the words ME and WE in an endless series of inversions. In the third, bendy glowing tubes spell out repetitions of BED, scrolling into an invisible distance. The big barrels hover like cozy huts, each one spreading a welcoming coal-fire glow at night, inviting people to gather around. During the day, the towers blend into the cityscape, standard architectural objects stuck at the wrong altitude but otherwise comfortingly familiar and low-tech.

The traditional elevated cistern is still handmade in Brooklyn and essentially unchanged since the early 1800s, and although Navarro had to commission customized bottomless versions for his installation, he loves the timelessness of the original. "They are so old-fashioned and organic," he says. "When they make one, they fill it with water and they leak for, like, a year, until the wood expands and fills all the cracks. They don't have a plastic lining or anything, so they're a very beautiful invention." The idea of a vessel that heals its own imperfections is profoundly seductive.

To understand what these particular towers are doing at street level, why they contain words rather than water, and why the grouping is titled *This Land Is Your Land*, you have to go back to . . . well, Chile in the early 1970s.







Technical drawing for *This Land Is Your Land*



Iván Navarro Still from *The Missing Monument for Washington, D.C., or a Proposal for a Monument for Victor Jara*, 2008 Video Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

(Right)  
Iván Navarro  
*ME/WE (Water Tower)*, 2014  
Neon, wood, painted steel, galvanized steel, aluminum, mirror, one-way mirror, and electric energy  
189 x 105 1/8 x 105 1/8 inches

Navarro was born in Santiago in 1972, during the brief and tragic tenure of the democratically elected Marxist president Salvador Allende. Navarro's father, Mario Navarro Cortés, ran the printing department of the State Technical University (Universidad Técnica del Estado, or UTE), producing political posters and leftist brochures. On the morning of September 11, 1973, the elder Navarro and a group of designers were putting the finishing touches on an exhibition of antifascist posters, warning Chileans about the threat of civil war. It was there that Allende planned to call for a national plebiscite over the country's future; the folksinger and bard of the people Victor Jara was to make an appearance, too.

Instead, Augusto Pinochet, with the tacit support of the CIA, unleashed a brutal coup. Allende died in the presidential palace; Jara, along with much of the UTE faculty and thousands of others, was arrested and brought to a soccer stadium that was serving as a detention center. Mario Navarro escaped, but was picked up two weeks later and imprisoned for six months. He was lucky: soldiers tortured Jara, smashed his hands, and murdered him, turning him from a musician into a martyr. In his final hours, he managed to jot down a poem that a fellow prisoner later smuggled out of the stadium:

*There are five thousand of us  
In this small part of the city . . .  
So much humanity,  
Hungry, cold, panicked, and pained,  
Suffering pressure, terror, and madness.*

Whispered stories, unspoken fear, banned songs—these were the muted but inescapable elements of Iván Navarro's childhood. "You never knew who was on your side," he recounts. "People would just call the police and say, 'Here is a communist,' and [the police] would come and make everybody disappear. It wasn't a joke."

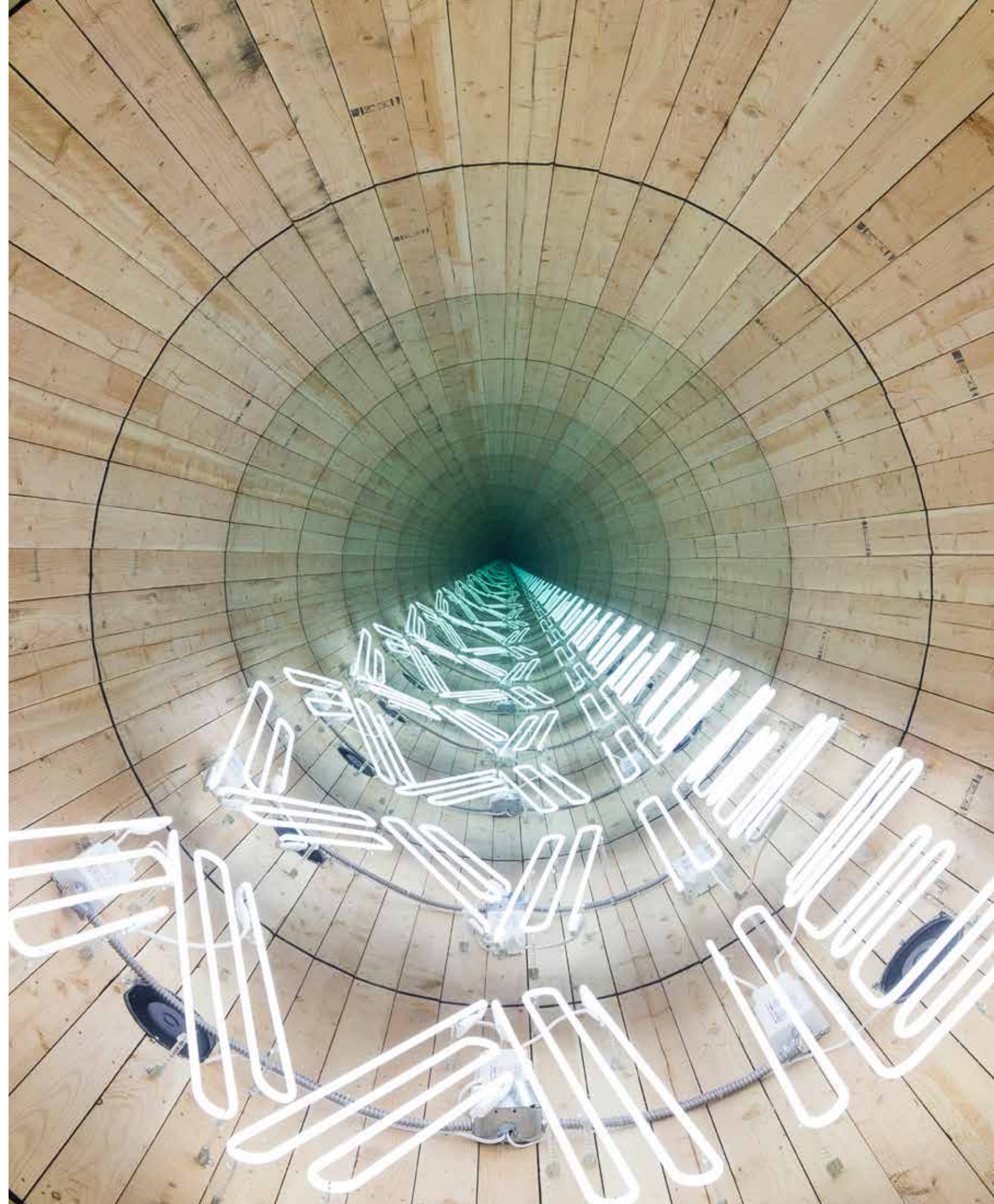
"Folk songs, played in private, were the only escape from a stifling regime, a way to clandestinely preserve the flame of rebellion. "The history of music in Latin America is much more interesting than the history of its visual art," Navarro says. "The music that I'm interested in was the music my parents had. We weren't allowed to tell our friends. I had to hide it. . . . I remember driving through the city and listening to the most subversive music inside the car, just as we were passing a bunch of military." Years later, Navarro used Jara's last poem in a work of video art.

Navarro arrived in New York in 1997, aware that Chilean protest music—like Chilean totalitarianism—had deep connections to the United States. He knew about Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger. What he discovered was an older common ancestor: Woody Guthrie, who in 1940 wrote the great continent-spanning anthem that gave Navarro the title and the spirit for his work.

Guthrie, Navarro says, "is the lost connection between American folk music and Latin American folk music"—the unacknowledged father of both.

The "you" that this land belongs to in the song includes the dislocated, the downtrodden, the unemployed—all those whom the Depression sent careening across the country on an epic quest for some way to make a buck. They gravitated toward the railway system's unofficial embarkation points, where hoboes huddled around campfires and each town's gathering spot was marked by a looming, unmistakable sign: the water tower.

"For me, it's very important to make connections with local culture," Navarro notes, as his conversation meanders from Guthrie to Jara, from the Dust Bowl to the blood-soaked stadium in Santiago, from the huge steel water towers flanking rural tracks to their smaller wooden cousins sitting on urban rooftops. "I'm very influenced by my original culture, but I feel that there isn't











(Left)  
Iván Navarro  
*Ladder (Water Tower)*,  
2014  
Neon, wood, painted  
steel, galvanized steel,  
aluminum, mirror,  
one-way mirror, and  
electric energy  
189 x 105 1/8 x  
105 1/8 inches

(Right)  
Iván Navarro  
*Bed*, 2009  
Neon, wood, mirror,  
one-way mirror, and  
electric energy  
32 1/2 x 71 1/2 inches  
Photo by Sebastiano  
Luciano. Courtesy of  
the artist and Paul  
Kasmin Gallery.



enough information here for people to understand my direct references. So I always look for something similar." His art operates on parallel planes, one pointing directly to Chile, the other to the United States.

Woody Guthrie stipulated that this land was made for "me," too, and that single egotistical phoneme glimmers inside one of the Madison Square towers, paired not with "you," but with its typographical inverse, "we." One word, reflected, spells the other, and together they spiral magically upward. It's a mirror trick, but one that effectively illustrates the constant tension between the individual and collective. "There's never a me without a we," Navarro comments with a wink—never a Jara or an Allende without the masses behind each man. But since the syllables are conjoined, you might also conclude that there can be no we without me—no popular movement without individuals to give it voice.

Navarro's work superimposes personal and national memory onto fresh surroundings. He reframes, reflects, and translates his own experience into a uniquely New York context, crafting new iterations of old themes. Light, for Navarro, means truth and hope. In much of his work, he has used it to lay bare his country's dark history, but also to spell out new meanings.

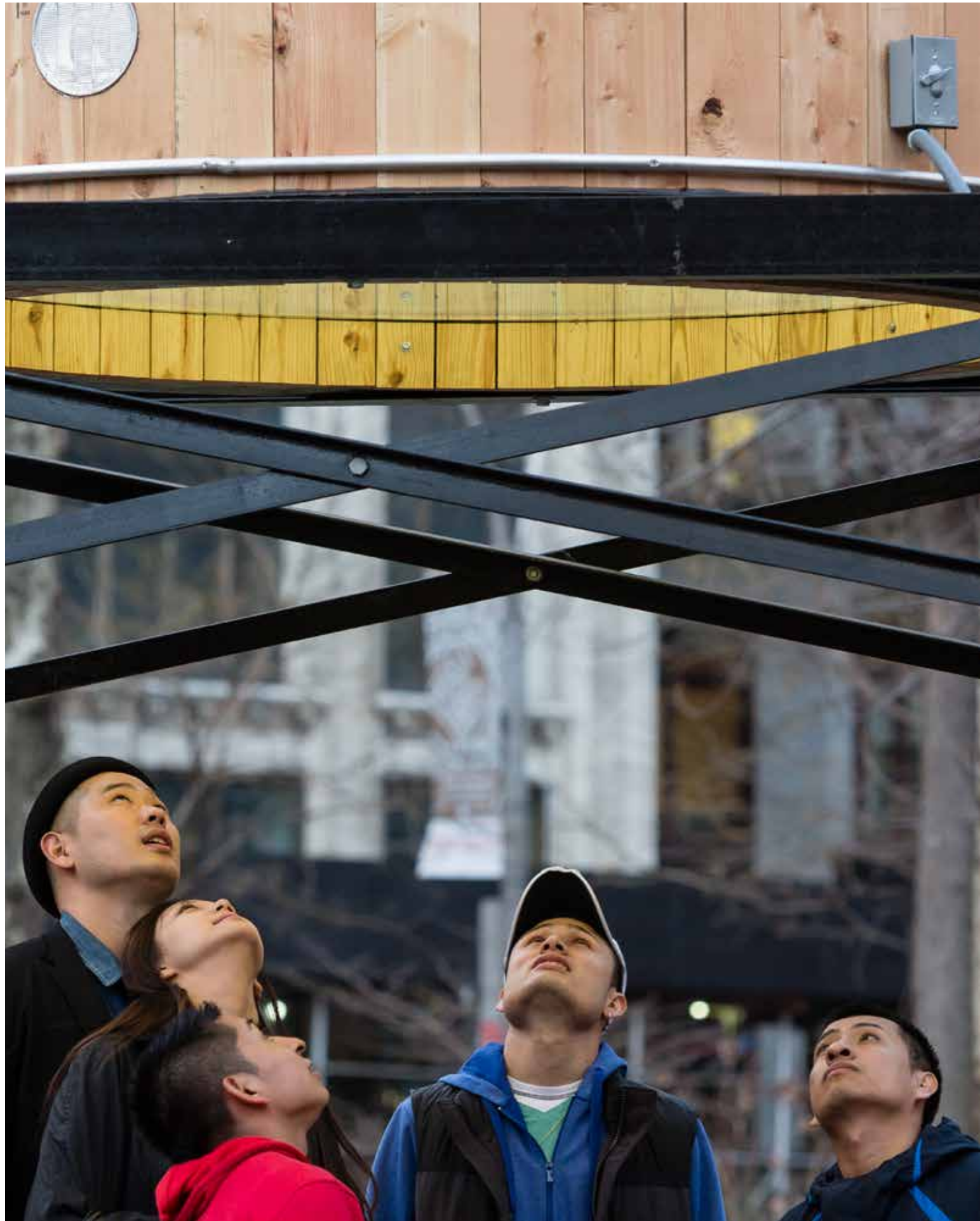
The word BED, which appears inside the second of his cistern-cupolas, is vertically symmetrical: flip it upside down and nothing changes. Navarro fashioned only the lower half out of minimalist-flavored neon tubes, letting a mirror complete the rest. Subtle irony subverts a simple equation: bed = rest. Instead of experiencing the ease and comfort that the word implies, visitors have to crane their necks for a view of a vanishing ceiling, a vista of incompleteness, repetition, and illusion.

This has a political dimension, too. Navarro used the word and a similar technique before, at the 2009 Venice Biennale. In that installation, the spelled-out half-BED sat in a mirrored barrel placed on the floor. The endless reflections seemed to plummet down an infinite black shaft—an illusory mine, an oil well, or a dungeon













Rendering for *This Land Is Your Land*. Image by Hernan Rivera and Iván Navarro.

where a political undesirable could disappear. The void in Venice expressed Navarro's ambivalence about representing Chile at the Biennale; he was a U.S. resident by then, and no longer saw his native country as a place where he could feel at ease—if he ever had felt so. Pinochet was gone, yet Navarro still sensed that his homeland had lost its way. "Chile's identity has been so contaminated" by the United States and Europe, Navarro believes. "It's very racist. Aboriginal people have no rights, and big power plants buy land from the state and kick the natives off."

For the Madison Square project, Navarro originally thought of installing a carousel outfitted with neon war machinery and soldiers, all under surveillance by a tall watchtower. When that proved unwieldy, he thought of a grouping of false-bottomed wells, similar to the Venice BED. Then, as he was walking around Madison Square Park, trying to figure out how to keep sunlight from muddying the reflections in the wells, he happened to look up. "That's when I saw the water tower on top of one of the buildings. I realized that this is exactly what I need: it's almost like going inside a tent."

And so, in his adopted city, Navarro has gone beyond war and inverted the pessimistic well. Instead of plummeting into the earth,

his American BED floats into a magical sky, a space where troubled roots give way to a more abstract feeling of belonging—what he calls "a poetic relationship to the idea of home and origin." The effect is slightly creepy, not just blithe: the well has become a watchtower, guarding a public square in a haunted evocation of the surveillance state.

The third tower contains a ladder made of light—the most functional-looking of the sculptures, since a water tower might actually come with a useful set of rungs. But it is also the most aspirational, and ultimately the most metaphysical, of the three towers. "The ladder has always been a symbol of progress or growing up," Navarro points out. He skips the more obvious and pervasive reference to Jacob's ladder, the dream of angels ascending and descending in a luminous flow. In that vision, God tells Jacob: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."

In other words, the Lord sayeth unto Jacob what Jara said to Chile and what Woody sayeth unto us: "This land is your land."

*BED (Water Tower)*, 2014 Neon, wood, painted steel, galvanized steel, aluminum, mirror, one-way mirror, and electric energy 189 x 105 1/8 x 105 1/8 inches  
Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein. Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.

