



strapped around his birdlike shoulders and his bourbon-colored locks swept into a tiny bun, the itinerant Argentine artist navigates through 100 tons of material that his team has shipped in from Mexico City, Sharjah, Seoul, and Istanbul to create "Rinascimento" ("Renaissance"), which runs through February and represents his last exhibition for the foreseeable future—and perhaps ever, if his latest threats of early retirement can be believed.

"As I've known him, he has suggested that what he's working on will be the last, but at the same time insists on the urgency of the next works," says curator Eungie Joo, who organized the 2012 New Museum Triennial, which featured Una persona me amó, a floor-to-ceiling "instant ruin" Villar Rojas installed on the New York institution's fourth floor. The massive clay sculpture resembled some kind of overgrown relic from a Star Wars graveyard, and basically sucked all the oxygen (and the press) from the survey. "He accomplishes far beyond what most people could accomplish in one year," adds Joo. "Only he does it six times a year."

For more than half a decade, AVR, as he is sometimes called, and his team of 10 to 15 Rosarino collaborators, whom he refers to as his "theater company," have been upsetting the standard operating procedures of art institutions around the globe to create a series of wildly ambitious, increasingly interconnected projects. Nearly all their efforts are destined to be destroyed, yet somehow they remain alive through a raft of remnants that are carried over into subsequent works. While the poetry of these bold auto-destructive gestures cannot be taken for granted, the reality of embedding a veritable soccer team in one art metropolis after another—Berlin to Bogotá, Mexico City to Venice, Paris to New York, Kabul to London, Istanbul to Turin-to produce these shows in four- to eight-week bursts for years on end is, as Villar Rojas puts it, "insane."



But this insanity is not without its perquisites: In a hiccup of art world time, the 35-year-old artist has gone from relative obscurity, working on his parents' terrace in Rosario, Argentina, to exhibiting his monumental post-apocalyptic sculptural installations at some of the world's most vaunted museums (the Guggenheim, MOMA PS1, Moderna Museet, Serpentine Sackler Gallery), biennials (Venice, Istanbul, Sharjah, Havana), and galleries (Marian Goodman, Mexico City's Kurimanzutto, Ruth

Benzacar in Buenos Aires, and Galeria Luisa Strina in São Paulo). He was also invited to Documenta (13) and assimilated into a small circle of globe-trotting artists like Danh Vo, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, and Tino Sehgal, who have carved out their own quixotic careers by bending spaces and curators to their will in order to reshape the very meanings, contexts, and experiences we ascribe to art. Rather than unfolding and exposing dense layers of complicated site-specific histories, like Vo, Villar Rojas succeeds by obliterating any sense of time and space.

"What kind of original art can you even make today? After Duchamp? That guy fucked up Picasso," Villar Rojas muses. The answer: Create the very last works on Earth. For him, that means lodging a life-size clay whale in an Argentine forest and filling the entirety of Kurimanzutto gallery with dirt, from which the remains of a futurist city appear to grow. From this earth rose gold-leafed tennis shoes sprouting plant life, plaster bowls dyed in trippy rainbow swirls (his first foray into color), and Judd-like cement boxes embedded with decaying organic materials that, last spring, he decontextualized by placing them at Stockholm's Moderna Museet atop a stark, white eye-level plinth that was illuminated like a disco floor.

"The way he's doing all these no-no's—massive work that gets destroyed, using materials that will crumble and disappear-all these things are important to us and to what it means to work with a new generation of artists," says Kurimanzutto cofounder Mónica Manzutto, who speaks with Villar Rojas every day and thinks of him as a brother. "He changed our psychology of the space."

Lena Essling, the Moderna Museet curator who organized the institution's show with Villar Rojas, adds, "We try to stop time and freeze the object, and that's almost exactly the opposite of what he's doing. I think this idea of something that lasts

> forever fascinates him, and I think he's torn between wanting to stop time and defying the rules of the museum."

At the Serpentine Sackler Gallery in London, a gigantic clay elephant appeared to be burrowing into a futuristic vault that seemed to hold the cultural and consumerist remains of our civilization: toys, angels, a clay replica of Kurt Cobain impaled by water bottles. Villar Rojas installed a crumbling classical amphitheater inside New York's MOMA PS1. And for his first solo exhibition with Marian Goodman, he transformed her New York gallery into a sanctuary via periwinkle floor-to-ceiling blackout curtains, a Mediterranean blue-to-gray clay floor whose tiles were meticulously embedded with Argentine pesos, leaves, cigarettes, asphalt, and late-model iPods, according to a high-tech architectural-modeling software program. The pièce de résistance was a full-scale clay-andcement re-creation of Michelangelo's David in repose atop two cement plinths: the most famous sculpture of the Renaissance bedded on 57th Street amid the town-and-country rubble of post-apocalypse Argentina.

"When he first proposed the idea, I thought, Oh my God! The gallery will be dark, there will be curtains everywhere,

but it brought a sense of quiet to the space, and there was something moving about the silence and the imagination that it took to create that," says Goodman. "We had a lot of artists from the gallery come through and say, 'I saw something new today."

Villar Rojas has managed to accomplish all this without maintaining any dedicated studio for production. He doesn't enjoy the process of construction (he studied painting, not sculpture), and he never really ships prefabricated pieces to his shows.



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His team creates almost everything on-site from a tumbleweed of detritus accumulated in the production of previous exhibitions (as well as some locally sourced clay, plaster, cement, earth, and organic materials ranging from market-bought fruits to birds and fish). The result of this cannibalistic process is very few sellable works (nearly 90 percent of the components in his shows are destroyed) and very little documentation. Even so, there are still throngs of institutions and megacollectors lining up to acquire his classically tinged, if conservation-defying, sculptures—some of which are literally decaying into oblivion as I write this.

We bought a work that was going to reside on our roof and decay over time and was inherently ephemeral, so we'll have to figure out a threshold of preservability with him," says Nancy Spector, chief curator of the

Guggenheim Museum, where Villar Rojas placed what is presumed to be a dead bird (and some other organic materials) next to the building's oculus for its "Storylines" survey this past summer. Every afternoon during the run of the show, a staff member would perform a "ritual" on this secret installationopening the oculus for 10 seconds, allowing a fleeting ray of light into the museum—that will now be carried out in perpetuity once a year on June 5, the opening date of the exhibition.

Villar Rojas considers this one of his "invisible" worksin addition to his hornero project, which consists of handcrafted clay nests of the Argentine national bird that he quietly places in every city where he opens a show. During this year's Havana Biennial, he installed 70 throughout the Cuban capital. He feels it is "very important for me to move between the extremes" of the spectacles and the silent works.

At the Guggenheim, the public is not allowed to visit the installation, and the piece, the first atop the roof, may well succumb to the elements during its first New York winter. But as a narrative device, it is the perfect metaphor for Villar Rojas's practice at large. "He was very interested in creating a work of art that existed as a rumor," says Spector. "That would gain a certain

traction culturally by word of mouth, without our taking any photos of it."

In a certain sense, all of Villar Rojas's installations exist as rumors. They are reliant on ephemeral

forces: natural light, exposure to the elements, and the harsh reality that the bulk of the materials will degrade over time. Even the most seemingly stable cement or clay sculptures, from the Modern Museet relics to the sleeping David to the clayand-cement bell from his Documenta (13) project that is continuously cracking in the foyer of Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo's town house, will fall apart someday. Which may explain his recent transition from clay to ready-mades: in the case of his current project, "Rinascimento," 90 one-ton boulders.

"Usually, when you make something, all you see are the things

Mi familia muerta, 2009, at the End of the World Biennale, second edition, Ushuaia, Argentina.

OPPOSITE Villar Rojas at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, 2015.



Installation view of Where the Slaves Live. 2014. Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris

OPPOSITE: Images of the preparation of Villar Roias's installation at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, 2015.

that you didn't do, but these stones are a gift. I don't have any attachment; this is someone else's work. It gives you some sort of immunity. That's why I'm so happy that this one is the last show," says Villar Rojas, who currently considers himself "an inmate" of a "suicidal practice" that needs to change. "You can't imagine the amount of decompression I'm going to need."

That decompression will have to wait, however. In "Renaissance," the stones and petrified-wood pieces were sourced from an Istanbul garden supplier. Villar Rojas views the work as a "meta critique" of his recent project for the Istanbul Biennial, The Most Beautiful of All Mothers, which featured 17 Instagram-baiting fiberglass animal sculptures (covered in ropes, industrial fishing nets, and garbage recovered from the depths of the Bosporus by deep-sea divers). This mutant Ark lot hovered above the Sea of Marmara on concrete plinths and seemingly commented on migration and exile as they faced off against Leon Trotsky's house of exile on Princes' Islands.

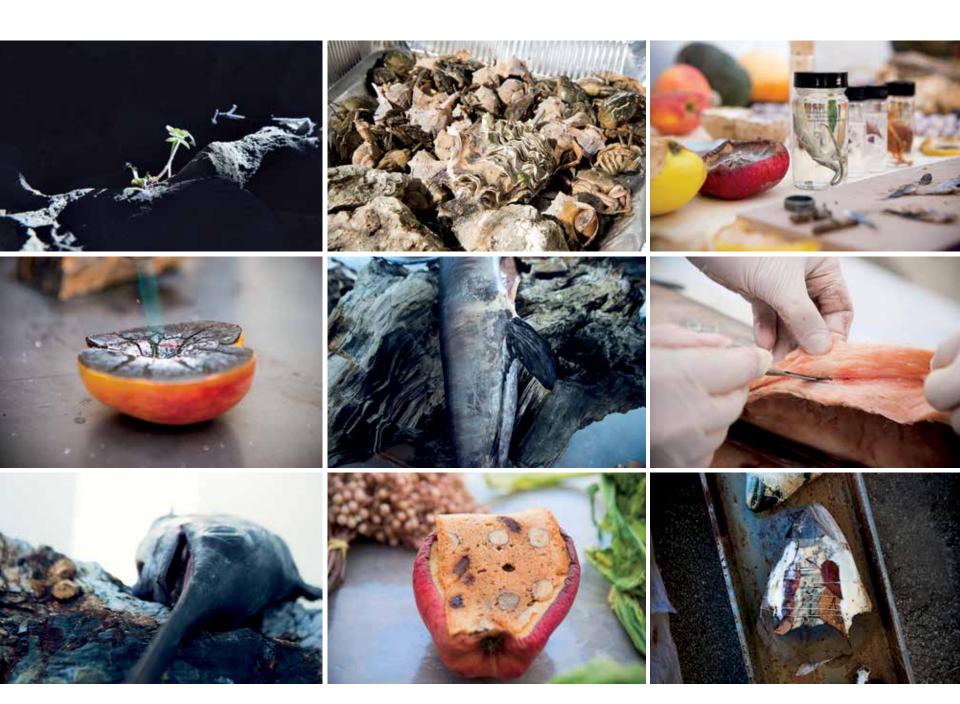
"I wanted to do this Disney-meets-Trotsky, very weird, very Baroque project," says Villar Rojas. He claims he doesn't really see reasons for any one work to exist in any particular space as much as he sees the connections that allow them to function there. "I remember walking down the steps into this super-wild garden that is totally abandoned, and then I went through the house and found the sea, and it was such a beautiful experience. So I wanted to propose some sort of fantasy toward such a loaded space."

While the air at the Fondazione is less politically fraught, the

stones carry plenty of physical and psychic weight: Some are polished like slick furniture pieces, some are rough with a millennium of patina, and some are even sprouting plant life and housing Turkish spiders. "I'm interested in the transportation of organic matter," says the artist, pointing to a sapling cropping up from the pores of a pumicelike boulder. "There are tiny little things here that don't belong to this ecosystem, and now they will stay."

The gallery, previously divided into three separate spaces, is filled with the noise of crashing cymbals and clanking chains as AVR's team manipulates a series of forklifts and industrial hoists to move these monoliths off pallets and onto the floor in some sentry-like formation that suggests a Japanese rock garden on steroids. Atop various stones there are rotting gold-leafed fruits and vegetables. One is even draped with a half-mummified swordfish that was purchased at the local fish market.

The adjoining white-cube gallery is filled with boxes of Turkish twigs, tables of Sharjan corals, crude iron tools found in various European capitals, shoes and hats plucked from Turin's Balon flea market (where the team will spend hours gathering vintage watches), South Korean propaganda smuggled back in suitcases from one of the DMZ villages near Seoul, racks of cowhides from Mexico City—some of which are painted with zebra and leopard patterns—and an old barnacle-encrusted anchor that was recovered nearly 200 feet below the surface of the Bosporus during preparations for the Istanbul Biennial.



"Once we place the stones, we will start to place the things on them. This part of the process is totally instinctual," Villar Rojas says. "Usually you want control, but now I'm letting things happen. A month and a half ago I was swimming in the Bosporus trying to install those works, and then I was installing the Marian Goodman show. This project was designed with regard to the amount of energy I knew we would have."

Outside the museum's storage space, half of his team is working on picnic tables under a clear plastic tent, where they have assembled groupings of Argentine pesos, Venetian-glass knickknacks, luxury soaps, and seashells. They are drying lettuce leaves and flowers (poppies, artichokes, sunflowers). And in order to create what might be considered AVR's signature flourish they are rotting and blowtorching produce that will be grafted onto quotidian consumer products like Nike tennis shoes-most of which will be gold-leafed in a way that will suggest that the metal formed around these objects over thousands of years.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it," the artist says, pointing to a mossy, blackened gourd. After assessing the progress of this organic material, he leads me to a curb where his team has laid out numerous local bird carcasses and fish heads—some burned, some covered in multicolored salts—that are currently in various stages of mummification.

"We used to go to pet shops to buy dead animals, but they don't let you do that anymore," explains Villar Rojas, who sourced the birds he couldn't smuggle into Italy from a local taxidermist

who collaborates with Maurizio Cattelan, among other artists.

When I inquire about what he thinks the dead animals bring to the projects, Villar Rojas is quick to respond: "Knowledge. Usually when you want to mummify something you go to a taxidermist, but I think it's better that we are expanding the notions of what we think we can do. From the very beginning I've been experimenting with cake, sugar; then the clay period appeared, then I was embedding potatoes. Now the clay is disappearing, and the organic materials are appearing more."

Villar Rojas doesn't see a hierarchy between materials. For him the simpler, more elemental, the better. To prove this point, he reaches for a crude ax—one of many "sick tools" strewn about the asphalt—that his team is making for display, based on one he saw in a shop in Turkey. "It was important to be as minimal as possible here," he says. "As I said, this could be the last show. It's my fiction, my role. It's important to feel that I may not be doing anything else, that I may retire. Right now I'm this raw piece of meat, there are no filters, but it's also about being exhausted and not wanting to do much."

While the gestures have been simplified, Villar Rojas is pardon the pun—leaving no stone unturned when it comes to the experience he wants to impart with this coda. In addition to reconfiguring the gallery layout, he's stripped all the paint off the façade's ribbon windows (there will be no electrical illumination) and he's erected a wall in front of the entryway desk and removed all signage to strip away the "politics of the institution."



As we walk into the storage warehouse, he shows me the poster for the show, one of his proudest achievements. It's a tweak on the creation myth of the Turkish flag, which, according to legend, represents the reflection of the moon and a star in pools of blood after the country's war for independence. "I made the moon smaller because I wanted to return it to the sky," Villar Rojas says. He calls the posters, which he's been making for nearly every show since 1999, his "moment of total control." He uses them to thank all of his collaborators and tease out secret connections between each show. In this case, the "Renaissance" poster mirrors the one for the Marian Goodman exhibition "Two Suns," an abstraction of the Argentine flag and peso that is meant to reveal a sunny sky that he's turned into a "weird reference to the U.S. flag" and "some sort of mosaic decoration."

He's also invited exhibition producer Asad Raza to collaborate on this send-off. Raza calls the experience a "pre- and post-historic show that changes from sunlight to crepuscular light and goes beyond visual art." A frequent collaborator with Sehgal and Parreno, Raza is working with a series of "mediators," museum employees instructed by the artist and the producer to wander around the space and perhaps lie atop the boulders from time to time. "They don't ask questions; they wait for people to ask questions, and they haven't received any formal guidelines on what the show is about," says Villar Rojas. "It should be perceived as something very natural, and this in a sense is what the show is about."

ROWING UP IN ROSARIO, a shipping hub along the Paraná River that gave the world Che Guevara, Lucio Fontana, and Lionel Messi, Villar Rojas watched his parents fabricate, design, and sell hand-made brass and bronze bathroom accessories. "I learned everything from them," he says. "They never succeeded because what they were doing was something so specific, so handcrafted, so difficult.

But there was something about the way that they worked and how they would handle the entire process and how they would interact with their employees at our house and create this fabric of people around them—it really influenced my approach."

In his spare time, his father crafted toys, masks, and the manga robot Mazinger out of paper for Villar Rojas and his playwright brother, Sebastián, who now writes texts for AVR's exhibitions. "I never had a studio or quiet space to go on my own until I moved to Buenos Aires in 2007," says Villar Rojas, who was working out of his parents' house when he won the Curriculum Zero prize as a fifth-year painting student at the Escuela de Bellas Artes in Rosario. As part of the prize, he was given a solo show in 2004 at Ruth Benzacar, the country's top gallery. He took this as

a sign that his vision was the right one and dropped out of school.

"At the time, I was having disagreements with my professors about a very basic understanding of what art is," he says. "It was kind of weird because most of my teachers couldn't or wouldn't show in such a place, though I guess most of them may have wanted to."

Villar Rojas never looked back. He presented an ambitious suite of 100 drawings, collages, and paintings of dinosaursreproductions of Charles R. Knight paintings of prehistoric life that another young artist copied for him—to which he added tiny falling meteorites suggesting that life on Earth was about to end. As a juxtaposition, he made some tiny drawings of suburban houses with little serendipitous interventions like façades painted with phrases such as No te amo ("I don't love you") that were also blasted with meteorites.

A couple of years later, Villar Rojas enlisted a colleague to shoot a photograph in his girlfriend's room of a friend who sat crying on a bed while clad in a spray-painted Styrofoam-andcardboard armor, embellished with blue electric cables and hoses, that was meant to evoke another manga robot.

"I think my biggest skill is to interact and engage with people, and that's why I think of my group of collaborators as a theater company. You never see the performers in a way, but you see the recording of this human activity. I think of myself as the recorder," Villar Rojas says. He considers this early portrait, titled My Nose Bleeds, his first attempt to engage a group of people to make a work that commented on time and space. "I was very interested in how you could create some kind of universe without leaving your home."

He also worked with his aunt on baking cakes in the shape of robots or mountains, which made their museum debut at Moderna Museet after nine years in storage. "My girlfriend said, 'You experiment with people, you're experimenting with us. That is your work."

While these early efforts were perhaps a bit naive, they showed promise and provided a glimpse into the diplomatic processes and post-human themes that continue to guide Villar Rojas's practice to this day.

"It has always been a traveling circus, and Adrián's this nomad who had this idea that some alien race would come to the world in 20,000 years and they would find the kind of stuff that looks like his work," says curator Jens Hoffmann, who argues that the artist's second solo show with Benzacar, "Lo que el fuego me trajo," in 2008, is what sent him into another orbit.

Shown in relative darkness in the gallery's subterranean project space, it was an immersive environment that sprang from a dumpster's worth of construction debris spilling out onto the gallery floor like a faux archaeological excavation; it seemed to have birthed small 6to 10-inch clay sculptures—on the ground and shelves—that could be seen as maquettes for the monsters that have overrun various forums in the years since.

"It's not an intellectual project, it's not a conceptual art project; it's very intuitive and has a lot to do with materials and scale. It reminded me of a teenage boy's bedroom, which, on the one hand, related to sci-fi and, on the other, to Jurassic Park that has these crazy animals that don't exist anymore or things like Chewbacca, crazy animals that could exist someday. That's the bandwidth of the icons Adrián deals with, but nothing in the present. It's a very bizarre hybrid language he's found, which is great because there's so much monotony in the art world," says

Hoffmann, who has worked with Villar Rojas for the past seven years. The two are currently assessing the feasibility of a show in the ruins of Motor City with the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. "I think he's come to a close with a certain type of work. The Marian Goodman show had the dark curtains, and it was very much like an end point. I don't know where he's going to go with the project—how many more variations can he do on the same theme?—but I'm sure he's going to continue to think about this idea of an archaeology of the future. Maybe it will just express itself in a different way."

F 2015 WAS ALL ABOUT VILLAR ROJAS EXPANDING HIS practice and creating new areas for himself to work in, this year is intended to be one long hibernation. "I'm saying no to everything," he says. He plans to take a twomonth road trip through Turkey; visit his mother ("she's like a piece of my brain"), who is suffering from kidney problems in Rosario; and maybe visit a certain romantic interest in New York.

Perhaps his troupe will reconvene at the brickworks farm near Rosario, in Villa Gobernador Galvez, where AVR first encountered real hornero nests and where he rents a space for his team to come together and work out ideas. He discovered the operation in 2011 during one of many six-hour bus rides from Buenos Aires to Rosario, and he sees a "beautiful connection" between the way his team works and the way the artisans at the farm craft the bricks by hand with power supplied from animals.

During a solemn Saturday stroll through the Marian Goodman exhibition this past September, Villar Rojas pointed out little

OPPOSITE: Return the world, 2012, at the Weinberg terraces, Documenta (13), Kassel, Germany.

BELOW: Poems for earthlings, 2011. Jardin des Tuileries, Paris,



pieces of asphalt, pesos, and leaves embedded in the blue tiles while talking about the fact that his oldest collaborator, César Martins, had become a father and had to remain in Buenos Aires more often as a result. "It's beautiful that the work has to react to life coming out of us. We are actually incredibly fragile," he said. "I think I have potentially created a small civilization or community, and there are moments I feel expelled from it. But one day I imagine removing myself from this community. I'm sure it could still function." MP