



**avaf**

**abstracto viajero andinos fetichizados**

With a trajectory spanning almost two decades, *avaf* (assume vivid astro focus) became renowned for their immersive and sensorially-loaded installations which bring together contributions from a diverse range of collaborators including designers, DJs, performers, video artists, among many others. Working under this acronym has enabled *avaf*'s founder Eli Sudbrack (Rio de Janeiro, 1968) and his artistic partner Christophe Hamaide Pierson (Paris, 1973)—who joined in 2005 and worked as a permanent member for almost 10 years and continues to collaborate with *avaf* on occasion—to celebrate the convergence of like-minded individuals at the same time as eschewing notions of authorship in a world that was only starting to feel the impact that digital platforms would have in the distribution and accessibility of content in recent years. In fact, looking back at some of their early projects and overall work methodology, it is almost hard to grasp their pioneering spirit given how prescient it was and how much it reflects the way we consume and use information twenty years on. By incorporating not only the work of ad-hoc collaborators based in different locations worldwide, but also a myriad of disparate references from high and low culture, *avaf* created numerous multi-disciplinary pieces that somehow anticipated the centrality of networked thinking in today's societies.

However, as much as this 'internet state of mind' is a remarkable trait in the development of *avaf*'s work over the years, it seems to have emerged quite intuitively as a tool that allowed them to tackle very specific issues and trace unsuspected connections between seemingly disparate events or artistic manifestations rather than as a subject matter in and of itself. Their characteristic image-laden and brightly coloured environments often celebrate the subversive potential of such spaces as nightclubs and public parks, where the norms of late-capitalist bourgeois society are defied by communities of outcasts who don't fit into prescribed class or gender roles. Intricately designed wallpapers, sculptures, paintings, masks, inflatable objects, as well as video, music and performance programmes have all been used by *avaf*—often simultaneously—to create these absorbing spaces.

Achieving the complexity of detail found in these ambitious projects requires intensive research into the particular references that have been summoned up, combined and transformed in each context where the work was presented. Therefore, since the start of their career, *avaf* has been building up a considerable archive consisting not only of the raw materials incorporated in the work, but of imagery and patterns that have featured in one or more occasions in their installations.

For their first solo exhibition in Peru, *avaf*—having currently assumed a one-man format led by Sudbrack—presents a selection of newly commissioned and existing works displayed in the two temporary exhibitions spaces of MATE, as well as the museum's external courtyard, that reveal the most recent developments in their artistic practice. As in previous projects, the show's title, *abstracto viajero andinos fetichizados* (something like 'abstract traveller fetichised Andeans'), is a slightly nonsensical derivation of the group's acronym that playfully speaks about some of the ideas that inform the work on view. The dialogue with local context, another prominent feature in past projects, appears in the installation shown in the main gallery. But while in the past this dialogue was much more focused on individual narratives and critical commentary on specific current affairs—such as George W. Bush's war on terror or the crackdown on New York nightlife by former Mayor Rudy Giuliani—, *abstracto viajero andinos fetichizados* seems to represent a departure from this topical approach and a move towards reassessing and distilling some aspects that have characterised *avaf*'s production since the outset.

The dialogue with Peruvian culture emerged more or less accidentally when, during a research trip to Lima, Sudbrack visited the Museo Amano and came across some striking examples of pre-Columbian textiles. The artist was particularly drawn to the bold colour schemes and geometric patterns produced by the Wari, in which he found striking formal correspondences with *avaf*'s own work. Wari civilization came to power around 680AD and extended from the highlands to the coast of Peru. They ruled this vast territory for about 300 years, 800 years before the rise of the Incas, and faded away for reasons that remain unknown. Textiles were at the centre of many rituals and ceremonies in ancient Andean culture, but little is known about the exact meanings and symbolism found in Wari textiles. This interpretive gap, however, instead of presenting a problem and indeed becoming a focus of interest for *avaf* seems, on the contrary, to have freed these



objects from specific readings that could bring too much contextual information. In other words, the lack of scholarly knowledge about these textiles, has allowed him to look at the pieces without too many preconceptions. The abundance of colour has always been a characteristic trait of *avaf's* work, and in Wari textiles he found several resonances in terms of palette and colour combination. It is as if, beyond the huge geographical and temporal distances that separate the pre-Columbian civilisation and the artist, Sudbrack somehow found a converging way of communicating through colour.

In typical *avaf* fashion, the centrepiece of the installation that occupies MATE's main gallery is a set of four woven rugs that were produced in collaboration with Elvia Paucar Orihuela, an artisan from San Pedro de Cajas who learned the trade from her late father, don Santiago Paucar, one of the most recognised weavers in the region. *avaf* created the rug designs by combining some of the elements found in Wari textiles and others taken from some of their own existing work, which were then woven by Elvia using the technique that has been passed down to her by her father. Although incorporating a traditional technique and drawing on elements from an ancient culture, the resulting pieces seem to completely sidestep any anthropological or ethnological connotations, focusing instead on the interaction between colour and form. These compositions feature recognisable patterns, like the recurring ladder-shaped forms that appear on several examples of Wari work, alongside fluid splashes and more abstract geometric details that were zoomed out and cropped out of *avaf's* paintings and wallpapers. They are, above all, intense clusters of colour that concentrate a great amount of energy in a somehow condensed space. Hanging from the gallery ceiling, these rugs actually translate this concentrated energy into movement, as they periodically revolve increasingly faster around their suspension point, eventually becoming a kind of blur of colours until slowing down again.

The gallery walls have been completely covered with wallpaper designed from details taken from one of *avaf's* early works, which were enlarged and mirrored like the symmetrical blotches in a Rorschach test, forming quasi figurative images that are suggestive of mysterious deities or entities. Along the whole perimeter of the gallery, the Wari ladder motif is transformed into actual physical structures made of wood that can be climbed by viewers who wish to experience the enigmatic ritual performed by the revolving rugs from a different viewpoint. The fact that the public is invited to interact with these structures also transforms them somehow into participants to this ritual where there are no prescribed actions except being open to experience the unmediated effects of colour on our perception. There seems to be, additionally, a suggestive aspect that relates to the spiritual dimension both of textile-making in ancient cultures and of colour as a kind of universal vehicle of communication in the repetition of the ladder motif—a symbol commonly associated with transcendence—on the rugs, the wooden structures and on the black and white zigzag pattern that covers the entire floor.

*avaf's* first incursion on the meaning and potential of colour in their own work undoubtedly signals a movement of reassessing the role of certain elements in their practice and picking up some unexplored threads that can take the work into new directions. A similar movement can be also found in the second gallery space, where they show a 2-hour long video programme containing footage accumulated by Sudbrack over almost 20 years alongside a selection of short video works. Bringing together more than 60 clips recorded mostly on mobile phone cameras, the programme offers an almost archaeological insight into the vast range of references that has informed their work over the years, as well as non-professional documentation of some of their most iconic pieces and the many performances and parties that took place in their installations. In the manner of films such as Dan Graham's *Rock my Religion* (1983-4) or Mark Leckey's *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999), this nonlinear video seems to capture the spirit of an epoch, including precious images of Vogue balls in New York in the early 2000s, when phone cameras didn't capture sound and could only record up to 15 seconds of footage. Other moments are more self-referential, like the clip in which Sudbrack demonstrates the logic underlying a wallpaper created for *avaf's* 2007 exhibition a very anxious feeling (John Connely Presents, New York). This particular piece was based on one of the most recognisable pop images, namely Robert Indiana's *Love* (originally designed as a Christmas card commissioned by MoMA in 1965), and the video shows the artist working through the many alternative 4-letter combinations featured in the group's wallpaper designed as a response to the disastrous effects of the Iraq War.

For those who are unfamiliar with *avaf's* previous work, it may sound absurd to say that *abstracto viajero andinos fetichizados* signals a shift towards a more introspective stage in their trajectory. However, after years of obsessively collecting references and producing large-scale projects involving a huge number of collaborators, they seem to be going through a period which Sudbrack defines as 'autophagic', meaning that there is a need to take a look back at the extensive archive of references and works amassed over almost 20 years and explore uncharted territories. True to the original spirit



that always characterised their practice, *avaf* continue, after all, to make art—to borrow Mario Pedrosa’s over-quoted yet incredibly precise definition—as an “experimental exercise of freedom”.

— Kiki Mazzucchelli