

Natural History Cycles.

Levin Rojo. Elias,
Independent Art Curator
eliaslevin@arte.com

Abstract

Problems faced at a third world countries like Mexico to start innovative and propositive projects that involve new media and new ways of thinking. Ads an example the Creative Residencies Program, which fosters the exchange of ideas among scientists, artists, scientific promoters and other individuals through the development of individual artistic projects related to the Natural History Museum of Mexico City's (MNHCM) three key areas of interest: science, environment and art. The museum's first project by Ariel Guzik developed the Plasmath Mirror and the Harmonic Spectral Resonator. Other submitted projects were Eric Olivares Lira Global heating videoinstallation and Mariana Dellkamp digital photographs about medical archives and electronic microscope images. Due to political and economical issues, the program couldn't stand still and now we plan to rescue it in other places.

Introduction

Things have their own time and place, over the dreams, reality strikes trough cycles that open and cycles that close. Sometimes, what has been thought, as a wide and possibly interconnected cycle becomes shorter than it was planned, or it really crashes, becomes closed very fast and there is only left a wink into what it could have been.

Year 2000, San Luis Potosi Mexican desert, middle of nowhere there was installed provisionally the Spectral Harmonic Resonator (REA by its Spanish initials), it was a visual and sound contrast with the surroundings, where there rises thousands of Organos (organs), Gobernadoras (female governors) and Biznagas (round cactuses). An instrument created by Ariel Guzik that had born in the arms of the **Creative Residencies** Program that was beginning to reinforce its structure at Mexico City's Natural History museum.

Today, the program that rise little by little, going slower than we wish to, because it faced a lack of resources due to its innovative nature in a not fertile soil has almost disappeared. Despite Guzik is still working in the assigned place (at least at august 2002 beginnings).

Because of Political troubles that I'm not going to speak about here, the museum director, Marco Barrera, was asked to resign, he left the museum last July which unfortunately means the disintegration of Residencies program. Although it was central to the new museum approach, it was also depending on personal wills.

We wanted, a laboratory, to exchange ideas between scientist, artists, science promoters and public; where creative individual projects developed the interrelation between arts and sciences, following the interests of the museum: ecology,

nature and natural history. We tried to make the museum become again a reference point in national panorama while generating a public and internal discussion around relations between art, culture and science, trough multicultural and transdisciplinary statements.

Any way a fragile structure and a construction built upon individual efforts and not institutional politics have made this program almost a simple illusion.

The problem stands precisely in this point a nation that prioresses the attention of global capital demands, is forced to follow up a unequal development, government and private attention is on short term, material and practical goals. Innovation, education and culture are everyday harder to succeed, and if it doesn't produce tangible things, not a single program can be supported.

I'm not complaining about the eternal lack of money, which we already knew was in the horizon, but lack of vision. It is clear that new technologies haven't helped to close the gap between first world countries and those that are not. Talking straight, NT have become a tool to make that a wider gap because there are not resources to assure the accessibility on them, I'm not talking about money but about interest and effort to support program until it can be embraced and appropriated by the community.

The beginnings

Thirty four years from its opening, Natural History museum (MHN) was left out without discourse, it had lost movement and credibility, it wasn't any more a reference for contemporary childhood, as it has been for earlier generations

With this in mind, in 1998 started a renovation project that intended to give the museum solid objectives, around for lines: Preservation, investigation, promotion and integration. Looking forward to break old practices and design new ways of public participation, getting collective benefits, it was created this program, searching understanding between those fields and letting Mexicans and human a better development.

Reflections brought out the necessity of renewing educational and knowledge preservation institutions, transforming them into new paradigms and to contemporary ways of information exchange. We intended to build a live and dynamic museum trough participation of diverse groups of Mexican society and Mexico City population in particular.

From the very beginnings we wanted to give the program a way that restored historical values of Mexican society, one of them was the Tequio, a solidarity scheme of participation and retribution based upon barter and inherited from prehispanic cultures.

Residents would contribute to the Museum by creating work for its collections and/or developing processes which will enhance the Museum's capacity to respond to its' visitors interests in diverse fields and issues. A criterion to be considered at evaluation processes as a qualitative criterion rather than a quantitative one.

The project and its importance

Creative Residencies fostered the exchange of ideas among scientists, artists, scientific promoters and other individuals through the development of individual artistic projects related to the Natural History Museum of Mexico City's (MNH) three key areas of interest: science, environment and art.

The MNH's references for this program were the Exploratorium museum in San Francisco, California, the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada and the Zentrum für Kunst und Media ZKM in Germany. We initiated our creative residency program with the museum's first project called the Expolab, with two main components, the Plasmath Mirror and the Harmonic Spectral Resonator.

REA is landscapes project & instrument which juxtaposes art and science by creating an instrument that is controlled by natural energies such as wind, humidity, rain, sunlight, and temperature. The intensity and changes that these elements undergo inform the instrument which, in a sense, sculpts, decodes and transforms that information into a sound, associated to an equation that displays the rhythm and harmony inherent to natural forces.

Creative Residencies intended to annually produce three short-term projects (three months each) and a longer-term project lasting one-year. Both renewable and conducted within a workshop space of 600 square meters. A space open to the public from a 200 square meter area used to exhibit creative works in progress and their scientific underpinnings, ie. contextualized exhibits.

The Museum would have provided a space equipped with different inputs so that each project can adapt the space to its particular necessities. Additionally, the Museum would have also provide a conference room for the exchange of knowledge and information, an exhibit room to showcase the results, and institutional support to obtain necessary materials and resources for specific projects.

Each project should have involved systematic research and methodology and should have been able to nurture the Museum in two ways: 1) by interacting with Museum visitors through conferences and 2) by interacting with the museographic infrastructure of the museum and/or its collections.

The Museum designed and intended to support those projects to expand the individual's capacity to understand and to challenge existing co-relations between art and science. We started on our belief that there are moments, in which science uses art to build a scientific theory that, sooner or later, results in the existence of new objects and actions. On the other hand, it is unquestionable that tools for the production of art increasingly stem from the proliferation of technology and, most importantly, from a vastly enhanced scientific knowledge base which provides the artist with new fields of action and new elements for artistic intuition. The combination of both of these areas can give culture a new meaning and foster a better understanding of both fields by providing diverse forums for public participation and contextualization

Goal

To promote research, understanding, as well as facilitate the exchange of knowledge between traditionally opposed fields of study – science and art – in an interdisciplinary way.

Specific objectives

- Enhance scientific knowledge and understanding of contemporary art.
- Establish a permanent forum in the Museum to develop creative projects that involve art, science and culture.
- Provide the museum visitor with multiple opportunities to interact in a dynamic and direct way with the artist-in-residence through work-in-progress showings as well as conferences, exhibitions and workshops.
- Assist the MHNCM with the conservation of its collections, the renovation and preservation of its installations, as well as its legacy through interaction with diverse audiences.

Residents and residents to be

For the program, projects should stem from the following areas:

A Science	B Art	C Media
A1 Technological development	B1 Visual arts	C1 Education
A2 Education	B2 Literature	C2 Interactive
	B3 Music	C3 Creative
	B4 Drama	

Ariel Guzik.

Ariel Guzik is an interdisciplinary creator. He has worked for more than 20 years creating sound artifacts ruled by natural forces, phenomena as resonance, electricity and magnetism are his field of action. In his every day life he is also iridiologist, musician and writer. The research work that he has done – always surrounded by a team- has brought him to build the Espejo Plasmath and the Harmonic Spectral Resonator (REA) among other pieces.

Espejo Plasmath is electronic art, scientific research, sculpture, medicine and technology; it fuses with natural surroundings, not by the meanings of camouflage but by the integration trough sound.

Plasmath it's connected through cables and electrodes to the surroundings and is in the desert where it's better adapted. With its sound the desert grows and gets into human senses in other ways. As its strings, that vibrate by sympathy to the one at the side, human being vibrates because of the sound it produce and every living self around feels those vibrations. Cactus rules how this instrument should sound by the way of the information that the Espejo reads from their internal vibration.

REA is a sound sculpture with several sound generator pieces that react to the nature stimulus: wind strength, sunlight intensity, temperature and ambient humidity. REA relates heat, light and wind variation to a very high frequency wave that its constantly moving, a group of resonators vibrates with the harmonic and sub harmonics of this wave and resonate when the wave reach a specific value that is harmonically related to its numeric structure.

Its a scientific work as well as a artistic one, in the work, low budget technologies are used as they are easier to get in Mexico, than sophisticated digital systems. It's a posture facing globalization technologies and development.

Gibran Cervantes.

A young Mexican percussionist with the intention to create new musical instruments that borne in Gibrán when he was intending to find a subtle and ordered language of sounds expressed by the hands, emotions and conscience, that could fulfill his expressive needs.

The Urukúngolo is a result of some tests and experiments done with existing instruments (music arches), in the search of new sound and view projections. Slowly the materials used for the instrument construction as guajes, thread and bamboo became a monumental sculpture were music knits with body movement, transforming the player into a dancer at the same time. The result is a spider net of human dimensions.

The Colónfono, second instrument of the series was started at the laboratory and now its continued at Xalapa City, where Gibran lives since 2001, originally was a harmonic support for the Urukúngolo with long notes and accords.

Electronic equipment was experimented to find the desired effect. A sinusoidal wave generator, a amplifier and a speaker placed near a guaje helped to generate frequencies that are capable to be in resonance with it and adding a involving generator the sound can be varied.

Pablo Castillo

By the means of assemblage Pablo Castillo (Mexico 1966), builds fantastic beings. Starting with recycled objects, industrial material, plastic in the garbage and metallic pieces recreates the figures, antique and futuristic at the same time, of insects.

Pablo observes insects and detects among manufactured object parts that can be elements of their body. Materials and artifacts that doesn't belong to natural cycle and destroy the ecological equilibrium point out the differences between human invention and natural evolution, but also point out their similarities. At the end the physic laws that rule natural design are the same that rule human design. The same principles that make a cricket jump let a machine spring function

Following postulates of what should be the solid waste management: recover, reuse and recycle, Pablo lets us testify the creative capabilities of man and nature, but what its more important, their possibility of gathering.

Artists to be invited as residents

1.- EDUARDO RINCÓN. Biologist, sculptor and painter. He is actually developing a project around the amate – a special kind of tree – its germination process and rescue, trough the process he uses the plant parts to produce paintings and objects

2. - FERNANDO PALMA. Engineer and sculptor. Specialized in mechatronics and robotics. He does mechatronic sculptures that refer to prehispanic cultures and the way they relate to the natural surroundings.

3. - DANIEL RIVERA. Designer and plastic artist. He is actually working with biologists from Biology Institute at the UNAM around the genetic code construction he is looking forward to develop a project that combines different genetic codes into grass to produce special kind of grass.

4. - FERNANDO LLANOS. Videographer and net artist. He has just finished a new cycle of videomails. His point of view is ironical to the spaces he is working on. He intended to produce a program of videos that interact with museum dioramas.

5. - MARIANA DELLEKAMP. Photographer. She has developed several projects on digital image. She is involved in virtual body modifications to point out the human intervention into the body and the cultural results from a social point of view. She is making photographs trough precision instruments as microscopes.

6. - MANUEL ROCHA. Musician and cultural promoter He is working with sound art projects and annually organizes the Sound art festival at x Teresa museum. He builds sound installations

7. - NESTOR BATRES. Engineer and sculptor. Design videogame programs and mechanical participating sculptures.

8. - ERIC OLIVARES. Designer and videographer. His project deals with climate and Global heating phenomena. He was going to develop a videoinstalation that consists in a long time videoprojection of an iceberg melting until passers by become metaphorically downed and in which the animated action is ruled by the real temperature information at the site of the installation.

9.- SALVADOR ALANÍS. Poet and digital designer. Works interdisciplinary. He is interested in challenging the scientific method and the science fields of study. He worked a hypnosis project.

Intended internal structure

Creative Residencies was going to be operated independently of the Museum but not autonomously. The residencies would have operate under a team that develops the day-to-day tasks and lines of communication coordinates the residents in their investigation and creative process. This team would establish communication channels between residents, museum staff and each department within the Museum (administration, educational and visitor services), as well as between residents, Museum visitors and neighboring institutions. The team also oversees each residency's production, beginning with the invitation and selection of the artist-in-residence to project implementation and evaluation. This coordination includes the organization of special events, as well as other marketing and promotional projects designed to enhance the public's awareness of the residency.

This team should comprise four people: the coordinator, an assistant, a lab technician and a secretary/program assistant. Each project will involve the resident and an assistant, as needed.

The MHNCM would have provide permanent support as well as advise the team in two areas: administration, including the project's operating budget, and defining the project's internal politics and viability.

Each project was going to be selected through a five-person advisory committee: two Museum representatives from the investigation and museography departments and three outside members from scientific, cultural and/or artistic fields.

Selection of each artist-in-residence wold have involve extensive research and a direct invitation, by the Museum, to specific artists – a selection process that might have change in the future to an open selection process whereby artists will be invited to submit their proposals.

What we couldn't do

- To produce 4 projects annually , 3 short-term and one long- term.
- To produce one exhibition and/or event for each short-term project at the conclusion of each project. This would result in three events.

- To showcase the results of the long-term project at the conclusion of the project.
- To produce an exhibit which contextualizes and reports back on the process and results of the long-term project.
- To conduct five workshops which promote interaction between the artists-in-residence, their work and museum visitors (one workshop for each short-term project and two for the long-term project).
- To program nine public events or presentations throughout the year (two for each short-term project and three for the long-term project).
- To record the activities and the process by producing a CD-ROM of the short and long-term projects.
- To contribute to the Museum's renovation project as well as to enhance its national and international reputation.
- Design and build a workshop laboratory with study cubicles and worktables. Include equipment for electronic systems elaboration; an audio recording cabin and a dark room to develop photos. The place should have inputs for the installation of hard machinery such as drills and welding tools: gas installation to manage basic chemical products, and refrigeration to experiment with horticultural and agricultural materials.

The end

Ironically last act of the program, was planned to be a mark in time, as a metaphorical beginning of the residencies – although it had been open and in exhibition since January 2001– through the massive recognition of the new museum thinking. Last may 9th was the date when the museum saw the biggest amount of people attending to it in long long time. Maybe since 1971, when the lunar stone donated by NASA was brought, the MHN had not seen so many people at once. It was a concert screening a record of the electronic collective *Nopal beat*, there were videoprojections on the outside buildings and there were heard countless voices of young people rediscovering the museum, a lot of them discovering it for the first time.

Why a music event in that context? To be a catalyst for the new public, to open space for dialogue and to bring economical means to the program. To begin the contacts between private initiatives in the context of culture such as MEXARTFEST, an independent cultural festival as the frame of the event, that presented the electronic group within their actions towards the *Fest*, that by the way was presented at Nagoya and Tokyo in August.

We wanted to begin those understanding roads, come across generation gaps and start new landscapes, recognize human diversity as an expression of nature diversity and standing for new cultural ecosystems. Unfortunately we just could see the top of the iceberg, we hope we can continue this effort in other places to seize the effort and challenge, with the most pure scientific spirit, one more time, knowledge and its way.

Meanwhile this was happening, struggle between political parties, and economical projects continued, education budget was once again resized for worse. The interest of the Environment Secretariat of Mexico's capital –to which the museum belongs– was on to rise an absurd second floor for vehicle transit at one of the few freeways that crosses the city, not understanding or even taking care to answer an easy question: why does the secretariat needs a museum?