

# Laboratories and Digital Experimentation Centers in Ecuador: First New Technologies Art Experiences

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### Abstract

The Ecuadorian art circuit is feeding on a plastic artists generation based on pictorial practices inherited by modernity for years. They achieved great national and international recognition and even nowadays they occupy privileged places in the most important Ecuadorian art fairs. However, a new generation of artists is abandoning traditional art practices to approach different ways of art making. This change comes hand by hand with the arrival of digital technologies to Ecuador in recent years. On one hand, younger artists have a growing interest in using new media for their creative processes and, on the other hand, different private and public institutions are betting on creating centers and labs for creative experimentation. They are using digital technologies like fab labs, media labs and university laboratories. Considering this, we will analyze the organizational models, the media, the concerns and the needs of the institutions mentioned above. Also, we will address, copyright management and its relation to the social sphere. All of them are relevant data related to the core of current participatory practices. This talk, will allow us to generate a cartography of the new paradigm in the Ecuadorian artistic creation, and, its connection with other international realities.

### Keywords

Art & New Technologies; Experimentation Centers; Ecuador; Creation Labs; New Art Practices.

### Introduction

Art practices related to new technologies are in a pre-birth stage in Ecuador. But, we perceive few symptoms of life, statistically, we can forecast a successful bloom for these art practices. In Ecuador people are starting to gain access to new technologies and understanding in a broader spectrum the possibilities that these offer to art, we can see also an increasing number of contemporary cultural centers and exhibition spaces, where people can connect to new technologies art experiences.

In Ecuador artistic practice in the visual arts field has not overcome twentieth century foundations yet. Most of the artists follow principles of the beginning of the

mentioned century, and some of them are attached to conceptual art. Artworks related with twentieth century bases are still popular between pieces presented in art fairs and gallery spaces. These aesthetics also prevail in the courses offered by University and academic art schools.

Nonetheless, new technology centers and laboratories are slowly appearing in academic institutions. Being the most notorious, University of Cuenca Media lab, UIO Media lab, FAUCE's extended graphics lab and UArtes lab. An analysis of these centers and their artistic outcome, will provide us with information about the position new technology art practices are having in Ecuador. We will be able to see the first relations that art and new technologies are having in this country.

### Art Labs: Brief Historical Summary

Medialab centers model has its beginnings with paradigm change related to artistic creation, this changed was directly influenced by the birth of digital and electronic technologies in the second half of the twentieth century. Although "Bauhaus" was a pioneer in this area, new technologies labs were more prolific in the USA. During the sixties and seventies there were prominent faces in new technology artistic research. Billy Klüver and his teamwork directed experimentations under the parameters of E.A.T. (Experiments in Art & Technology) projects, they had a big influence in New York, György Kepes (M.I.T.) and his C.A.V.S. (Center for Advanced Visual Studies) based in Boston and Sonia L. Sheridan and her research project The Generative Systems in Chicago. They were pioneers in making visible the relation between new technology and art. All of them faced traditional conceptions about art discovering a new perspective on the possibilities of artistic creation.

In these collaborative projects, artists were the protagonists and representatives of their teamwork. However, these teams were composed by engineers

and technicians, who contributed with their work and knowledge to achieve the goals that artists envisioned. With the artist as a leading figure, interdisciplinary organization had the mission of artistic experimentation. Therefore, we understand the model of media lab, as places that possess technological resources to develop investigations, experiments and artistic works (Ruiz, 2014).

During the eighties and nineties several art centers were established, following the organizational model of the former media labs. Some of them are V2 – Institute for the Unstable Media (Rotterdam, Netherlands), ZKM – ZKM - Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe (Karlsruhe, Germany), NTT InterCommunication Center and Canon Art Lab (Tokyo, Japan), Centro Multimedia CENART (Mexico), ARS Electronica Center (Linz, Austria).

Slowly, the former organizational model lost its prevalence and dominance. Suddenly it was not necessary to have full equipped laboratories with expensive machines. The arrival of digital and compact technologies and the revolution of social networking democratized the access to technology, giving birth to a new concept of artistic laboratory. The current medialab is a new basilica to the organization of discourses, a meeting place for the voyager, and, a scenario of all the collective experiences that require individual pliability to the foundation of new rules of the game (Alcalá, 1993). Rules that resonate according to the new digital culture, especially social networking websites.

This new artwork, needs to be understood, not only as a production of exhibition objects but also, as a bind to new ways to experiment reality. Artwork that desires to sustain communicative territories between man, machine and society, hence, artwork that creates new interfaces as a vehicle of connection to supply data exchange. (Alsina, 2007, p. 29)

Considering this historical background, a new concept of the media lab has been established. The laboratory is now a metaphor image of a world that is not a familiar and a consolidated system anymore. This is a new metaphor of a system where the relationships between us and the system itself are constantly modified, inherently changing our knowledge and appraisal of its phenomena (Alcalá & Maisons, 2004, p.8). This new system adopts and implements the main features of Internet communicative practices: transdisciplinarity, read & write culture, free & open sources and copyleft.

These medialabs have become dialogue spaces, they are creative ecosystems dedicated to aesthetics reflection and debate. They are also places to investigate and produce artwork, and work as well, as places for art education and socialization. These mentioned activities encourage changing processes that belong to an emerging culture, processes that work parallel to the democratization of communications, a phenomenon that has never happened in human history (Ruiz & Alcalá, 2016).

### **Medialabs and its Linkage to Electronic Arts in Ecuador**

During the last few years in Ecuador radical changes on the use of new media for artistic creation are happening. These changes are worth to study.

The first Ecuadorian medialab was inaugurated in 2012, it was the Ecuadorian institution Universidad de Cuenca's medialab. This place is located at the art school building. The University endeavors to create a medialab introduce artists, students, teachers and designers to actively participate in the use of new media. In this center research projects oriented to the analysis of digital art and sensitive design are developed. Most of them are funded by the research department of Universidad de Cuenca. I am going to highlight some of them to recall some of the most successful projects. *Cuenca Sound Map (2016)*, *The most remote place in the world (2015)* and *Dialogue Interfaces(2013)*. At the same time the University has conducted an increasing number of courses open to the community, this introduction of new media to the public has shown the benefits of using new technologies in art practices. The University of Cuenca's medialab has acquired electronic kits and sensors, technologies that border on open source software and freeware. Their technological resources go hand in hand with the standards and processes that most of the international Medialabs apply in their own practice.

Another laboratory is Medialab UIO (Quito), which recently opened in 2016. This lab is in Quito, the Ecuador capital city, as part of the facilities of CIESPAL (International Center for Higher Education in Communication for Latin America). Socially oriented, Medialab UIO was founded as an innovative technological space for creation and experimentation, where trial and error method is fundamental in the artistic learning and development process. This place offers

workshops, conferences, expert talks and meetings. This lab has implemented a visual exhibition circuit, where the thematic core is sustained by the following axes: urbanism and citizenship, technology and human body, ludic and inclusive education, innovative entrepreneurship businesses, digital arts, techno-politics and social movements, ancestral technologies and memory retrieval researching. The Medialab website <http://www.medialabuio.org>, positions this laboratory as a confluence for innovative initiatives, which promote in a social way, symbolic and political technological processes. These processes are based on free culture and inclusive education for academic and popular knowledge. Medialab UIO works under the parameters of collaborative and community oriented creative processes. Without doubts, this center is one of the best models of adaptation to the international concept of Medialab. Here, the artwork relevance is relative to the trans-disciplinary dynamics of the teamwork.

Another medialab created in 2016, the FAUCE's Extended Graphics Laboratory. This center is located in the Facultad de Artes de la Universidad Central del Ecuador, (School of Art of the Central University of Ecuador, Quito). This laboratory is born as a research project directed by José Manuel Ruiz (Current director of FAUCE's graduate programs), this project is also supported by the Research Department of the Central University of Ecuador. The main goals of this place, is to explore creative processes, under the possibilities that expanded graphics that use new technologies can offer. This place also has the function of educating FAUCE's students in the use of new technologies as media for artistic production, and, it also organizes exhibitions and develops publications on the outcome of its several projects. This place is creating academic foundations for a new artistic path that uses new media as a principle, and gradually becoming FAUCE's Medialab. This Medialab project was suspended due to the lack of funds. Nowadays, this project is linking students and teachers to digital media such as: digital printing, image editing software, automatic machine art theories, etc. I see the FAUCE's Extended Graphics Laboratory as a way of reconnecting with the first American art labs.

At last, I'm introducing LAB Uartes, which is actually under an opening process as part of the biggest public art education project in Ecuador, its name is Universidad de las Artes (University of the Arts, Guayaquil). This LAB has arranged several events, meetings and panel

discussions to understand and become familiar with new perspectives and models that utterly strengthen the development of LAB Uartes. In between the most prominent conferences we can mention one titled Laboratorios de Innovación Ciudadana, which addressed the issues of encouraging citizens to switch in a more inclusive social model. This follows the ideological line of Universidad de las Artes. One of the participants in this conference was Marcos García, Medialab Prado director (Madrid, España).

Ramiro Noriega president of the management commission and rector of this University, has visited several laboratories and cultural and academic institutions in order to learn from the experience of these places. Between the institutions visited I'm citing: Mind Lab (Copenhagen, Denmark), Aalto University Media Lab (Helsinki, Finland) and Amsterdam Medialab (Amsterdam Netherlands). Maite Freire, LAB Uartes general manager, searched for counseling with José Manuel Ruiz—author of this article. In these conversations we tried to find possible actions to increase the academic community participation in this project. One of the main issues addressed was, the high operating costs of LAB Uartes. As an example, LABoral (Gijón, Spain) faced the same issue, and couldn't keep up through time.

## Conclusions

Data indicates that in Ecuador, there is an increasing interest in the use of new technologies for experimentation and creative purposes. Nonetheless, Ecuadorian artists and institutions are not prone to change, and, they are attached to traditional ways of production. Therefore, is important to reach and educate wider publics.

Several laboratories have been implemented in Ecuador these laboratories still work as mixture of the first American labs and current ones. Even if they have a hybrid structure, these centers are oriented to use and consume free and open source resources, they also encourage collective participation processes and questioning of traditional copyrights, aligned to new proposals such as Creative Commons.

Ecuadorian laboratories that are integrated to University Art Schools, are keeping up a strong linkage to artistic practices. LAB Uartes is a peculiar case, its relative short existence does not provide enough outcome for a more profound study.

The centers analyzed in this article are the first

## Panels

laboratories in Ecuador where art, science and technology converge. This is a strong indicator for the expansion of these practices, and also a sign that Ecuador has a promising future in this artistic field.

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## Author Biography

Director of Postgraduate Studies - Central University of Ecuador, School of Arts - Quito, Ecuador. PhD of New Cultural and Artistic Practices – University of Castilla-La Mancha, School of Fine Arts (Cuenca, Spain, 2014) with the thesis 'Appearance, impact and effects of the automatic machine at the artist's studio: from the traditional workshop to media lab'. He has conducted research in the fields of New Media Art, Museology, Read & Write and Digital Culture. His work has focused on the new creative possibilities of Digital Graphic. As a multimedia artist, his art work has been part of prestigious exhibitions and festivals from Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Belgium, Mexico and Spain, among others countries.