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Comment

SCIENCE CENTRES AROUND THE WORLD SEE UNREST FOR ART AND SCIENCE IN SOCIETY

From interventions to interactions: Science Museum Arts Projects' history and the challenges of interpreting art in the Science Museum

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ABSTRACT: Hannah Redler's paper examines the 13 year history of Science Museum, London's contemporary art programme and explores how changing cultural conditions and the changing function of museums are making the questions raised by bringing art into the Science Museum context increasingly significant. It looks at how Science Museum Arts Projects started as a quirky, experimental sideline aimed at shaking up the Museum and its visitors' assumptions, but has now become a fundamental means by which the Science Museum chooses to represent the impact of science, medicine, engineering and technology on peoples' everyday lives.

Introduction

Science Museum Arts Projects (SMAP) evolved from the Science Museum's 1996 Arts Policy, which committs the Museum to working with artists on every major capital project. Our work with artists has since expanded to collaborations with over a hundred artists on temporary and permanent interventions, solo and group exhibitions, research and socially engaged projects and events. We work with artists from within visual, sound and media[1] arts discourses and are increasingly looking towards the field of 'art and science'; practices characterised by artists whose work is rooted in an active engagement with the tools and processes of science, as well as its surrounding concepts. Our interest in art and science and our commitment to media art are clearly driven by our core function as a science museum. Our programme, however, is equally involved in any discourses which contemporary artists are involved in, albeit seen through the lens of the Science Museum. In bringing art works into the Museum we hope they will either act as provocative elements, encouraging visitors to add their own questions to those of the artists, or as catalysts which, seen in our context, may offer unexpected entry points for visitors to explore science, as well as the wider meanings in the art.

From interventions to interactions

Projects have been diverse: on a warm summer's evening in 1996, guests arriving to celebrate the opening of the *Challenge of Materials* gallery were treated to the sounds of a poetry performance by artist Brian Catling; Amidst cases populated by Astroturf shoes, radiation shielding glass and High Density Polyethane, artist Jordan Baseman had secreted 'alternative' labels, part of a mixed media work entitled *Some People Believe…* Although he had used the same font and format as the Museum's formal object labels, Baseman's labels referred to folk tales, beliefs contained within materials, and superstitions rather than explanations of science. In October 2008 a collective of 10 young Muslim adults, the London Tigers, launched a two-week exhibition, *Being Connected*, in our recently opened Science Museum Arts Projects gallery. The Tigers presented photography, digital film, and scrapyard robots, which they had

[1] Media art is art traditionally characterised by artists' interrogations of the parameters, function and socio-political implications of new media technologies.

made in a week-long festival workshop alongside professional artists Jonah Brucker-Cohen, Katherine Moriwaki, Graham Peet, Furtherfield and MediaShed. Their exhibition was made in response, and located directly adjacent to, an installation of our most recent electronic art acquisition, *Listening Post* by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin. Curatorially, *Being Connected* was a 'rapid-prototype' research project. It followed *Big Ideas*, a 2005 project in which we invited 4 artists to come up with concept proposals that used the Museum's dialogue-based Dana Centre conceptually, architecturally or technically, as a vehicle to unpack processes of science, in participatory ways that would bring the public into contact with scientists, through artistic interrogation. The resultant ideas included London Fieldworks' proposition *artEmergent* which proposed the creation of a 'pavilion of ideas' using rapid prototype machines and a 'database of brainwaves'. Artist Brian Duffy proposed a marble monument to Einstein. His *A Theory of Everything* was envisioned as a public square monument, visually designed to embody Einstein's unachieved aims to unite the known forces in the universe. These projects never happened, but the purpose was to *think* big, to imagine ways in which people might encounter science, its mysteries and its uncertainties, in ways which would be involving rather than talking-down-to. More recently, in April 2009, author Tony White gave a reading from *Albertopolis Disparu* a publication he produced following his 2008 SMAP writers' residency in which he investigated the science-fiction genre 'steampunk[2]'. Also at the event were participants from workshops White had run, reading works they had created. For White the residency offered the *'opportunity to use fiction - the short story - as a kind of laboratory, a place for myself and others to experiment, and as a means to also reflect on the kinds of stories that the Science Museum tells the world*.[3]

Working with artists as researchers, facilitators and strategists, as well as makers, is SMAP's contribution into Museum-wide research towards what it means to be an institution where visitors become active participants, where interpretation is as much about doing as it is looking, reading and thinking. We draw very strongly on community arts and socially engaged practices artists have been engaged with since the 1970s. We are also influenced by media and community artists' interest in the democratising effects on cultural production of new media technologies, and visual art's Relational Aesthetics. These are difficult projects to realise, depending as much on relationships as they do upon resources. But they allow us to formulate necessary questions about becoming the most culturally relevant museum for the future. As we deliver these as small projects, we are continually asking ourselves how we could potentially scale up to the point where the majority of our very large numbers of visitors might be able to engage in such projects onsite, and also how similar projects might feasibly operate as a drop-in activities.

Selecting artists

Key to our programmes are careful selection and careful interpretation. We look for works which demonstrate evidence of strength and originality of ideas. We look for an approach which engages with the ethical, political, social or cultural impacts of science and scientific theories, or their potentialities, and not which is fundamentally illustrative. We look for artists who have the capacity to astonish and excite our visitors. Our art commissions and purchases need to be powerful enough to occupy their own space persuasively in our demanding environment, where many different exhibition components compete for visitor attention. It is also important that we do not need to request any modifications which fundamentally alter the artists' intentions. These may include health and safety, robustness or spatial issues, and even an analysis of proposed adjacent objects or interpretative materials which could potentially mislead or undermine the artists' concepts. Bringing art into such a loaded space involves delicate negotiations. We also seek artists who are open to working within a non-art context and are willing to work in ways they would not have to work with art galleries. In terms of experience, we have always championed emerging artists alongside more experienced practitioners. Our exhibition standards and development processes are demanding for longer scale or more complex projects which can mean negotiations are easier with up-and-coming, mid-career or established artists, but it depends on the artists, and we review our selection criteria case-by-case, with the aim of achieving a mix with each programme.

[2] Steampunk sci-fi is based on the assumption that mechanical 19th-century computing technologies such as Babbage's Difference Engine created our contemporary information age a century or so early.

[3] Tony White in 2009 interview with Science Museum Arts Projects Coordinator, Ruth Fenton, following his 2008 writers' residency.

Interpreting art in the Science Museum context

The strengths inherent in working with artists in the context of the Museum, the ways in which artists' projects add to the creation of an innovative environment also present our greatest challenges. The Science Museum is a leader in the field of interpretive design. We strive to create a gloriously rich visual environment, which includes commissions from leading international designers as well as artists. Visitors do not always recognise the art amongst these other interpretive and iconic materials. Whilst this necessitates questions surrounding whether the interventions and collaborations have been so successful that they can be read as seamless, or whether we are failing the art, the artists or our ability to effectively communicate hard science, it also necessitates a constant review of interpretation models. Our earliest art interventions were lightly interpreted, offering simple artist credits or raising what we now judge to have been over-simplistic questions in relation to the science content. These over-simple labels also discussed the concepts of the art works inadequately. This was not a completely naive decision. It was in part an effort not to be overly reductive – to infer more by saying less. However it has led to some misunderstandings, which again need to be reviewed cautiously when considering whether they suggest success or failure. *effective, defective, creative* (2000) is a video art work commissioned for the Wellcome Wing by award-winning British artist Yinka Shonibare. Shonibare persuaded pregnant women deemed to be at 'risk' of delivering a 'defective' baby to allow him to use moving image footage of their ultrasound scans in his work. Three screens of moving foetuses with visible, strong, pulsing hearts, flash up one after the other. The first are labelled 'effective'; the second, 'defective' while the third, a montage of both is labelled 'creative'. The artist was interested in examining how science has provided us with difficult questions regarding on what basis we may choose to end a human life. Its caption identifies the artist and points out that science is raising difficult questions in this area. The work provokes powerful reactions. Some visitors, not understanding it to be art, nor understanding the medical terms, have written to complain about the Science Museum using, what they see as, pejorative terms about potentially disabled children. Others, frequently mothers of children with disabilities, have understood the artists' intentions directly and written in gratitude that a piece of work which understands that regardless of physical or mental ability all children are creative has such prominence. We are still left with the question of whether to strengthen the interpretation material to allow Shonibare's intentions to be more directly communicated, or to fully allow people to come to it on their own terms and make up their own minds.

In response to this challenge we now try to answer the following questions against each art work: What is this? Why is it the Science Museum, in this gallery? What does the artist have to say about it? What questions does it raise? and What do other visitors think? It is difficult to answer all of our questions through static labels. Where appropriate we endeavour to build digital labels for art works into the gallery furniture. But this is not always appropriate, particularly for smaller works of art, which we are researching new options for. Against traditional art gallery labels this approach may appear heavy-handed. But we need to respond to the fact that our visitors do not expect to encounter art, are not often regular art gallery goers, and even if they are, do not bring the same mindset into the Science Museum. In art galleries visitors expect to be faced with unsanctioned, personal, uncensored and potentially socially-unacceptable propositions. But their expectation of the 'information' they will receive in the Science Museum is different. Although we (with many other of our international colleagues) have long been seeking to communicate science in ways which acknowledge its uncertainty, we still have plenty of older displays which still speak in the traditional 'voice of absolute authority'. The majority of our adult visitors remember this voice and still expect to encounter it at the Museum. Many also actively seek it. They want to know that the information they are receiving can be relied upon. It is at this point when, if we do not explain our intentions, attempts to disrupt the narrative with art can leave visitors in an interpretation limbo. It is imperative that we give some clues as to which mindset we are inviting them to bring to which aspects of each exhibition. We have come to this conclusion through practice, evaluation and experience.

Summary

In summary, it is obvious that many of the questions provoked by bringing art into the Science Museum are those we need to ask ourselves perpetually as we develop the programme. We are working within

fast-moving waters as collapsing boundaries between disciplines create further complexities rather than easier options. There may be the temptation to dismiss boundaries. But I think this would mean dismissing huge implicit points of reference for both art and science which would undermine any ability to move forward by eliminating important histories to refer back to. Looking at art and science together is not always a comfortable project. But we do not see ourselves as forward-thinking for our work with artists, rather we would see ourselves as backward were we to exclude them. We believe it is appropriate that as a contemporary museum we should reflect the culture we are active in as well as the histories we have the privilege to be guardians of, and that this should take an expansive view. Our arts programme creates vital landmarks within this view.

Science Museum Arts Projects launches its new microsite on the Museum's main website in summer 2009. http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk

Author

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