

Comment

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

Contemporary arts in the Natural History Museum London: symbiosis and disruption

Bergit Arends

ABSTRACT: The Natural History Museum's contemporary arts programme is described and discussed, in particular the developments since 2006. The various models of engaging with artists and the rationale behind the resulting exhibitions and displays are explained in more detail. Artists who have created new works enabled through the programme include Mark Dion, choreographer Siobhan Davies, Tania Kovats, Tessa Farmer, Dan Harvey and Heather Ackroyd.

The Natural History Museum London has been working with contemporary artists for a number of years now and through various models. This dialogue between the Museum and artists is predicated on artists being able to engage with the science, scientific research and the history of the Museum's collections and displays. It is through this that we hope to provoke and challenge the Museum's understanding of itself. Out of this dialogue ensues the ability to commission exciting and innovative works that challenge the public's understanding of topical questions relating to the Museum's science communication agenda, which intersects with our place as a research organisation and our role within society.

One of its major temporary exhibition spaces, the Jerwood Gallery, has been used to display art exhibitions that have been specially commissioned. In 2006 we showed a major group exhibition, which was developed in partnership with Cape Farewell, an organization that raises awareness of climate change through bringing artists and scientists together. Based on a number of expeditions into the Arctic, artists such as artists Alex Hartley, Dan Harvey and Heather Ackroyd, sound artist Max Eastley, painter Gary Hume, choreographer Siobhan Davies, developed new works for the Museum that have since toured nationally and internationally.

Systema Metropolis (2007) was a major new commission by American artist Mark Dion. Following the invitation to Mark Dion to create a new work taking as a point of departure the work of eighteenth century Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus, Mark Dion presented his largest new commission to date. The exhibition displays themselves grew out of a collaboration between the artist and Museum scientists, exploring the quotidian environs of London through fieldwork. Together with botanists, soil experts, entomologists, molecular biologists and a Museum fish curator we investigated sites as varied as the graves of suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, Karl Marx, and Thomas Huxley; the river Thames; the airborne insects on one of London's arterial roads; and the development of the 2012 Olympic site. The exhibition presented the microcosm of the Museum, its display and the work that goes on behind the scenes in an associative, humorous way, that allowed him to present Museum objects that had not seen the light of day for a long while.

This year the Museum opened its first permanent art installation. Inserted into the fabric of the nineteenth century listed building itself is the work *TREE* by Tania Kovats. The installation was specially commissioned to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin and 150 years since the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Later on this year, we open a new group exhibition for the Jerwood Gallery *After Darwin: Contemporary Expressions*. The point of inspiration for this exhibition is Darwin's late publication *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, which served as a starting point to commission artists and writers to respond to this subject – yet a new model that we used to experiment in order to create an innovative and imaginative engagement with science from a cultural perspective. Artists who responded include Diana Thater, who on behalf of the Museum filmed gorillas in a wildlife

sanctuary, Jeremy Deller and Matthew Killip in collaboration with psychologist Richard Wiseman and writers Mark Haddon and Ruth Padel.

A range of artists are always working in the Museum, often enabled through grants to undertake their research at the Museum. There is no structured residency programme that artists can apply to as such. Artist Tessa Farmer undertook a residency here in 2007, enabled through Parabola, an organization that places artists in institutional settings. The Museum's science and library collections are free access to and can be used by anybody. Often out of this first interest longer term projects develop with artists.

Tessa Farmer, an artist at an earlier stage of her career, worked specifically on her interest in spiders and particularly parasitic wasps while undertaking her residency at the Museum. Her research was conducted very closely with science curator Gavin Broad, who gave access to the collection and discussed his methodologies with Farmer. Continuing her already established interest in fairies and taxidermy, the artist created a phantasmagorical display. She showed a stuffed fox that was being attacked by her imaginary fairies, which are minute skeletal creatures, half-human, half-insect. The animation film 'An Insidious Intrusion' fabricated a story in which the nasty fairies attacked a stag beetle, and finally a series of drawings fictionalized the birth and lives of the fairies as observed through the microscope. The artists drew liberally on the Museum's science and library collections as well as on the dialogue with the scientist to research her work. The display, shown for a few months in the iconic Central Hall, sat alongside major scientific specimens. Her work, however, was infused with the fantastical and imaginary, hinting at the history of the natural sciences and pointing to future uncertainty about the discovery of the natural world. Farmer and Broad are currently considering scientifically describing one of the fairies.

Through the arts we hope to disrupt engrained perceptions for the benefit of the Museum, to change its course and to reveal new knowledge in this process. Artists' research addresses ambivalence around science and can bridge between the languages and strategies of display and the working processes of science. We hope to introduce notions of uncertainty about our knowledge about the natural world and to move the engagement with the visitor from collections of facts to the creation of knowledge.

In recent years, museums, including science and natural history museums, have increasingly become places of theatrical spectacle and venues for display in which negotiations for the meanings of objects take place. Through free admission and with strategies for inclusion of many different communities, museums are striving for ever-increasing visitor figures to justify their existence. Generating income through commercial activities has become a focus. The Natural History Museum itself assumes a dual role as a scientific research institution and as a venue for display and learning. The Museum constantly interprets its objects through their very selection for display, the nature of that display, accompanying text and structured learning activities. Nearly 70 million objects are bound into the collections held at the Museum, and only glimpses into its taxonomic work can be afforded. Most objects are for reference, others are too fragile to be placed on display and some cannot be shown for ethical reasons, such as objects from the anthropology collection.

Behind the scenes, about 350 scientists are working on increasingly specialised knowledge. Most scientists would like to convey the importance of their painstaking taxonomic work and the wider context of biodiversity to non-scientific audiences. Artists working within collections and with scientists can make visible the meaning of an object, in the understanding that meaning is not inherent, but fluid. Meaning only becomes clear in a dialogue between those who present the object, those who observe the object and that which is actually presented.

The Museum's arts programme offers opportunities for artists to research and develop new work, to experiment with new methodologies and to create site-specific new works. It is encouraging that we can offer artists the possibility for research and new works that are away from the vagaries of an inflated art market. We are keen to support cultural and artistic enquiries that create works with a wide variety of associations, iconographic innovation, that value the imagination and are intellectually robust.

Beyond engrained structures of scientific working processes and those of the art world, artists are invited to engage with pressing environmental issues, the crisis of biodiversity, the history of collections the perception of science within culture, making the Natural History Museum a place of consequence.

Author

Bergit Arends has been the Curator of Contemporary Arts at the Natural History Museum London since September 2005. She is currently commissioning artist Tania Kovats to create a new permanent art installation for the Museum's Central Hall and curates the exhibition *After Darwin: Contemporary Expressions*. Most recently she curated *Mark Dion: Systema Metropolis*, 2007. In 2006 she curated *The Ship: The Art of Climate Change* in partnership with Cape Farewell. Arends graduated from the Royal College of Art, London, in 1997 with an MA in Visual Arts Administration: Curating and Commissioning Contemporary Art. E-mail: b.arends@nhm.ac.uk.

HOW TO CITE: B. Arends, *Contemporary arts in the Natural History Museum London: symbiosis and disruption*, *Jcom* **08**(02) (2009) C02