

BALANCE-UNBALANCE: ART AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Ricardo Dal Farra, Hexagram, Concordia University, Canada, and CEIArtE-UNTREF, Argentina. Email: <ricardo.dalfarra@concordia.com>.

© ISAST

Abstract

Balance-Unbalance aims to use art as a catalyst to explore intersections between nature, science, technology and society with the intent of engendering a deeper awareness and creating lasting intellectual working partnerships in solving our global environmental crisis.

Keywords: art and environment.

Environmental problems, economic uncertainty and political complexity have been around for a very long time. Not one year, one decade or one century. What was different before was the speed and depth of transformations compared with today's fast changes. The frequent occurrence that certain events are having around us - such as floods, twisters, etc - is increasing fast, and the effects of human beings on modifying our adjacent surroundings as well as very distant places have turned into a power capable of changing the whole planet, improving or ruining people's lives and even eliminating all human life on Earth.

When I started to think about taking a more active role in looking for ways to help with climate change and environmental related problems through art actions, I was wondering what the experts studying and working daily in preventing and acting upon the consequences of certain catastrophes will think about it. To my surprise, scientists and engineers alike answered positively and with enthusiasm. And the first *Balance-Unbalance* event ("Equilibrio-Desequilibrio" in Spanish) started to take shape. It was a conference gathering artists, scientists, philosophers, engineers, government officials and policy makers from Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States organized by the Electronic Arts Research Centre - CEIArtE from the National University of Tres de Febrero and was held in Buenos Aires, 2010 [1].

Some lessons were learnt: a) A few local artists were interested in participating, and b) We were reaching people wishing to collaborate but many of them were already aware of the threats we are facing or were working in minimizing the negative consequences of, for example, rapid climate changes. It was a good first step but we need to reach those who

are still not paying attention to the environmental crisis.

Less than one year later, a second *Balance-Unbalance* (a.k.a. BunB) was held at Concordia University, in Montreal, on November of 2011. The conference was possible thanks to the direct involvement of Concordia's colleagues coming from very different fields, such as: communication, political sciences, geography, management, music, digital arts and design. We had a variety of perspectives and background experiences—some people with decades of study and work focusing on environmental problems, with others mostly new—but a common interest was present in every discussion and meeting: "...to bring artists together with scientists, economists, philosophers, politicians, sociologists, engineers, management and policy experts with the intent of engendering a deeper awareness and creating lasting intellectual working partnerships in solving our global environmental crisis" [2].

The second *Balance-Unbalance* conference was organized in less than six months. In spite of that, many submissions were received from all over the world to participate. We had paper presentations, artistic installations, posters, two evenings with films and electroacoustic music concerts. We also left 'the door open' for a number of flexible transdisciplinary activities. This allowed us to receive projects of up to 90 minutes, fully open to any format as far as the goals were clearly aligned with the conference expectations. The response was amazing.

Some new lessons were learnt this time too, among those: People coming from very different fields were able to talk and understand each other given some contextual conditions and a common goal. The results widely surpassed our expectations as organizers of the conference. All was developed as part of a rich and diverse proposal: To use art as a catalyst to explore intersections between nature, science, technology and society, providing a platform for reflection and debate, and for ideas to become actions.

Is a conference series enough?

Balance-Unbalance was not conceived as a series of conferences but as a program. The conference series is one of the projects being developed. A series of art exhibitions were held in different spaces in Argentina during 2011 and 2012 too. Two of those were presented at the National University of Lomas de Zamora

and one in the San Martin Cultural Centre, Buenos Aires, during the *Electronic November* international festival [3]. All these events were organized by CEIArtE.

The decision to organize a third *Balance-Unbalance* conference was taken when it was seen that the goal of going beyond a conference series was starting to become a reality. The Associate Director of the Red Cross / Red Crescent Climate Centre participated in the 2011 conference. As a direct consequence, the *art! ∞ climate* initiative was launched a few months after. In its first stage, it is a global contest leading to the creation of sound art miniatures to be used by the Climate Centre in its activities, such as: workshops, simulation/educational games, lectures and presentations around the world. The results of this first contest have been announced and are being used by the Climate Centre at the time of this writing. The next stage will be open to other areas of the new media arts that could fit the Centre's goal [4].

The works were selected by a jury of internationally recognized composers, new media artists and members of the Climate Centre as well, finding that it was possible to have works of art that could also fulfill the specific needs of an humanitarian organization for its daily field actions. The *art! ∞ climate* initiative showed one of many possible positive paths to follow and also helped to answer the question: Is it worth doing a third BunB conference? This collaboration and the consequent contest demonstrated that a new conference was worth the effort. The third *Balance-Unbalance* conference was held in UNESCO's designated biosphere reserve in Noosa, Australia in 2013 [5].

Among the new projects being started by *Balance-Unbalance* is a public database and virtual meeting point on the Internet focusing on connecting organizations, institutions and individuals, aiming to empower projects with similar objectives [6]. We all want to cooperate and contribute in helping "to save the world" [7].

References and Notes

1. <<http://ceiarunteuf.edu.ar/eq-deseq-en>>
2. <<http://balance-unbalance2011.hexagram.ca>>
3. <<http://ceiarunteuf.edu.ar/eq-deseq-cgsm>>
4. <http://ceiarunteuf.edu.ar/art_climate>
5. <<http://www.balance-unbalance2013.org>>
6. *Eco*: art and environmentally responsible actions.
7. R. Dal Farra, "Can the Arts Help to save the World?" *Leonardo* Vol. 46, No. 2 (2013) p. 110.