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Report from *ISEA2017*: A personal reflection

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This year the roving conference of the International Society of Electronic Artists (ISEA) was held in Manizales, Colombia, 11–18 June 2017. As soon as you land in Manizales you have a sense of a place apart. It is on a plateau surrounded by green hills and low-hanging clouds, high enough (2160 metres) to keep the temperature temperate even if it is 5 degrees off the equator. Neither central heating nor air conditioning are needed here, making it one of the more ‘ecologically correct’ places in the world.

Before leaving Toronto for Manizales I checked the weather on my phone and was dismayed to see that, according to the Weather Channel app, it was going to rain all day, every day there. I bought some rain boots. Guess what! The Internet can spread ‘fake news’. Though there were periods of rain during my stay, it was far from the deluge predicted by the collective intelligence. I wore the boots twice. You did have to be ready for twenty minutes or so of wet a couple of times a day, but I do not recall ever being caught in a downpour and drenched. The people of Manizales definitely do not wear raincoats, though a few had umbrellas on occasion. For the most part they ignored the precipitation and just went about their business. In one of the heaviest rains I experienced I was waiting for a taxi at my hotel. Across the road someone with a weed whacker was completely non-plussed as they continued holding on to and operating an electrical tool in the pouring rain.

Another interesting aspect of the city was that you did not have to worry about fitting in an exercise regime. The town is incredibly hilly and just getting from A to B meant you were pumping your heart rate into the optimal zone at the same time as developing ‘buns of steel’ – so a daily workout, not so necessary; shoes with traction, highly recommended.

I am going to quote a bit from the website to contextualize the conference’s themes. The event was the first time an ISEA conference was held in ‘a Spanish speaking country to recognize the bicultural heritage of a mega diverse country’. The hosts subtitled the event Bio-creation and Peace, inviting reflection ‘on the role of art, design, science and technology, in the look for alternatives to respect this biodiversity, and pacific connivance between communities and environment’. Given the historic nature of ISEA acknowledging an entire continent for the first time, the lofty goals suited.

Sub-themes included the following:

Design, art, science and technology – which encouraged an ‘interdisciplinary discussion and showcase about interrelations among design, art, science and technology’ (ISEA 2017).

The cultural dimensions of bio-creation and peace – on this point, the hosts proposed that ‘pockets of peace across our planet have emerged and Colombia is one example’ (ISEA 2017).

An interesting declaration given the PR nightmare the country has had to endure over the last few decades. It is true that the Colombian government and one guerrilla group dedicated to armed revolt, FARC, have come to terms. However, the day before I travelled to Bogota, at the end of the conference, a deadly attack was carried out in a shopping mall, killing three civilians. The alleged perpetrators were the National Liberation Army, another group dedicated to the overthrow of the government. Hopefully it was an aberration rather than a throwback.

Regardless, the questions posed to the participants

Does the idea of peace have a larger role to play than simply resolving conflict? In what ways could indigenous awareness contribute to our understanding of peace? What bridges in thought and action are needed to achieve global peace across cultural and transdisciplinary boundaries? Is bio-creation in conflict with, or in accord with, indigenous awareness of living organisms? (ISEA 2017)

can still inspire continued faith in humanity and progress.

Interdisciplinary platforms for coexistence – this discussion was the most methodologically orientated of all the sub-themes. The conference's official line was

Transdisciplinary teams collaborate to generate social and political content and debates. Artists, designers and scientists have tried to work together and get citizens involved with interactive technologies and media. Are these platforms showing paths for social coexistence? How transdisciplinary collaborations can generate social benefits? How can biological process be used as source of inspiration and the generation of social possibilities for living in peace?

These are challenging questions. How does one measure these abstract ideas? How transdisciplinary are we really? Can we even question the ideal of 'social coexistence'? Once again unanswerable questions that we can never cease to ask.

Critical perspectives on the use of technology for peace – the official description for this sub-theme makes assumptions about technology. That it ‘is a potential tool that supports peace process and conflict resolution’. And then follows this declaration with the question, ‘what is the role of art and design in defining the use of technology to support peace and conflict resolution?’. Further to this they ask: ‘are there cultural identity tensions catalyzed by technologies? How can technology promote intercultural dialogues and peace construction?’.

My concern is that the basic premise about technology does not allow for real criticality.

Anything as abstract and widely defined a ‘technology’ would necessarily have potential to, rather the questions for me are; what are you calling technology and does any tool have intrinsic values that would affect human behaviour?

Bio creation and data – was an area of particular interest to me as the work that I was showing at ISEA, Pillflower App, came under the auspices of this sub-theme. The committee framed the debate:

Data is becoming pervasive in our daily lives. Scientists have used data and biological processes to create products and systems, while artists explore the aesthetics of technology, data and biology. How do artists integrate data and biological phenomenon in the creative process? In what ways do designers take advantage of large amounts of data to make decisions that affect sustainability and biodiversity?

This is a set of questions that once again speaks to methodology and process. In its less elevated framing than some of the other foci, this sub-theme offered up opportunities for specific discussions and detail.

Media art, landscape and heritage – this focus was directed towards a set of interests particular to place and location. The questions posed were prefaced by an explanation: ‘ISEA2017 took place in a region in Colombia known as the Coffee Cultural Landscape, declared as a world heritage site by UNESCO’, thus ‘the reflection about the conflict between media and heritage’.

The following questions were posed:

How do artists and designers include heritage in their critical thinking and aesthetic decisions? How could media art help disseminate cultural values around peace? Does media art have the capacity to preserve heritage? Does conservation or cultural transformation generate conflict?

Once again the abstraction of this line of queries allows for wide-ranging responses. Arguably you need to pose these provocations; however, the answers need to come with bracketed and contextualized parameters.

The keynotes that took place at the beginning of each day were, for the most part, in response to these sub-themes. Keynotes, particularly the number of them we were offered – three daily – meant that there would be necessarily variances in the dynamic and persuasive nature of them. The other truism about keynotes is: You cannot always tell a keynote by its title. Not being a scientist I thought something titled ‘On space curves as a substrate for audiovisual composition’

would be a real snooze. On the contrary! Lance Putnam, author of above-mentioned keynote, delivered a visually intriguing and conceptual rigorous talk that entranced.

Regardless of the interest level, starting out the day altogether in the main auditorium of the conference, the Teatro Los Fundadores, centrally located in Manizales, offered a feeling of cohesion. If you have ambitions to see and hear all that an ISEA conference has to offer it is often a daunting task. This year the size of Manizales, along with the availability of inexpensive transportation made getting around easy and non-stressful. Gathering everyone together in the morning in one location helped to ease the anxiety of managing such a large-scale event. After listening to keynotes, you could get a sense of the rest of the day through announcements, check out the art installations in the basement of the theatre and then move upstairs to smaller meeting spaces to hear panels and watch videos.

In the afternoons the action moved to the university location. Manizales is a 'college town'. There are a number of universities located there. The official host of *ISEA2017* was the Universidad de Caldas, so we were shuttled there in the afternoon for workshops, panels, artists' talks and performances and, most importantly, lunch, which, sadly I was shut out of as I was showing my work and had paid a reduced fee to come to the conference. My official designation was a '6' in a scale of 1–6, '6' obviously being the least desirable. True confession – someone snuck me in to the 'free' lunch at one point in the week and it was so delicious I did rue my status as a lowly '6'!

A note on language translation – it was comprehensive. I do speak a little Spanish so limped along without resorting to the translation handsets that were offered for all events. It is hard for me to comment on how the translation experience was for others, but when I was part of any

workshop, either giving or participating, there were always plenty of really lovely students around to enthusiastically help translate. The hosting was incredibly gracious.

One of the most important functions of gatherings like these are the opportunities to network. The conference setup, organization, warmth of reception and the relatively inexpensive modes of transportation really helped me in this regard. The shuttle services and transportation were in place to allow for visits to off-site art installations, a variety of venues and sites. While travelling together from place to place people naturally made connections and started the dialogues that are always so critical to a conference vibe.

The art that was shown was naturally as varied as the panels, talks, and workshops. There were a number of venues and the curation was challenging. As always with technologically based work there were myriad issues to solve, Internet connectivity, electrical routing, sound and light control. Installations are always tricky and when you are not on home territory, where you know your way around supplies and solutions, it makes for an even greater challenge.

In my own case, I was exhibiting my project in a gorgeous new building, designed by one of Colombia's foremost architects, Rogelio Salmona. Not only did he design the building but it was named for him as well. The wrinkle was that it was still being constructed. The area where we were setting up was for the most part 'finished' but the newness of the building and the tricky nature of installations made for a tense schedule. The students that were helping us were amazing, unflagging, skilled and smart. Somehow it all came together.

There were quite a few performances of electronic music and light, titled Soundscapes, most of which took place in the evenings, once again back at the Teatro Los Fundadores. The almost nightly performances of electronic audio-visual work were popular and drew a lot of the local

population along with ISEA participants. One night I stumbled into a local concert with full orchestra, choir and soloists of acoustic music and song. The contrast was notable.

So what would I have liked to see done differently? Artists' talks were problematic. People were given ten minutes to present their work with quite a few of these talks ganged up together. The tech was not set up in advance, with no testing done beforehand. The inevitable glitches and confusion ensued. Time to switch from one artist to the next was not factored in, and as a result there was a lot of time wasted trying to transition from one person to the next. Is there not a more respectful way to handle artists' talks? Ten minutes is really too short a time to do justice to even the simplest of ideas, pieces or bodies of work.

There was another disappointment for me and that was the lack of discussion around virtual, mixed or augmented reality. I scanned the programme daily for panels, workshops and talks that dealt with this subject matter but often came up short. Having said that, I was able to connect with a few practitioners, many of whom are represented in this issue of the *Journal of Virtual Creativity*, but I did not find the kind of in-depth dialogue I was hoping for around this topic.

As Manizales is the main coffee growing region of Colombia, there was some concentration on that when it came to extra-curricular activities. People raved about a visit to a coffee plantation. I was de-installing that day and so did not join in with this adventure but wished I had the time.

The other delight for me as a North American was to visit the Juan Valdez cafes situated around the city. There is a nostalgia around the Juan Valdez coffee commercials in North America that made this fun and lighthearted. Naturally there was too much to see and do so this is, necessarily, a very truncated account of the tourist attractions of the city and region. The verdict is that I would definitely go back and visit Manizales again.

To be honest, I have not been to too many ISEAs, four in total now, and they have all had their charms; however, I wanted to particularly give a shoutout to the people of Manizales who were so incredibly helpful, gracious and warm to me. I travelled to Bogota, as well, for a day and once again I was treated very well there too. So my sense is that Colombians have a culture of refinement and generosity that worked so well for hosting this international event. This graciousness has been further in evidence in the number of follow-up e-mails I have received from the hosting committee thanking the invitees for attending.

Reference

ISEA (2017), 'ISEA2017', Manizales, 11–18 June, <http://isea2017.isea-international.org/>.

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Contributor details

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