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Alfa Art Gallery strikes a responsive chord in anniversary fete

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Music & media mavens mix a marathon mash-up

SEBOUH GEMDJIAN

Tuesday, February 2, 2010

Alfa Art Gallery kicked off its second year anniversary on January 29 with "The Caged Bird Sings," a jam session featuring six musicians in a cage – for 24 hours with only meal and bathroom breaks.

Dancers added a visual aspect to the music at the opening, and juxtaposed it to the works of the rest of the artists, which they used as props in their routines.

The unifying idea was Albert Einstein's claim that "everything in life is a vibration," as interpreted by local experimental musician Michael Durek.

"The idea that we communicate vibrationally has always interested me," Durek said. "Someone can be smiling at you and saying all kinds of happy things, but you can just feel the unease beneath what they're saying. Also some people can walk into the room, and not say a word, and put you at ease. You can't explain it, but they just emit this sense of calm, and it's contagious."

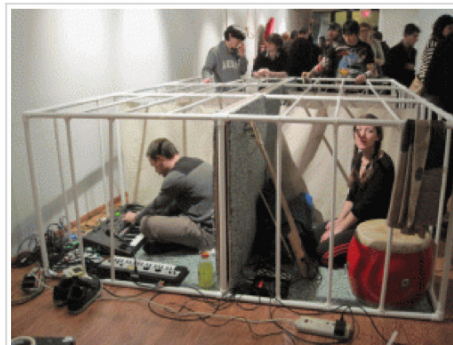
An hour before the opening the gallery was an empty room, except for a white cage and a few people, stretching. There was a globe hanging from a rope. Across from it, a cardboard spiral hung in a corner. Sound check followed. Some sounds were soft; some, not so much. Guitarist Tsubasa Berg sat next to a duct-taped guitar in the corner of the cage as the lights went down and a projection became visible.

Curators Michiko Mull and Natalie Trainor gave an overview of Alfa Art Gallery's first two years, followed by an introduction of the Cook Campus Weather Watchers (a living community of Rutgers Environmental Studies students). Co-proprietor Galina Kourteva gave a statement calling for controversial programs in both science and the arts to receive the support to make them accessible to a broader audience.

The Aquatic Ape theory, which proposes that man evolved from an ape that lived in the water, was the theme of "It Came from Beneath the Sea," Eric Clausen's series of collages and sculptures. "The scientific community does not support the theory at this time," he said, "but it's such a wonderful theory. Believing it is an act of faith for me." One of his installations was a blue globe hanging from a rope, with the words "Six Monkey Powder" cut out in wooden blocks radiating out of it. The statement, Clausen said, is a word play of "Sex, Money, Power."

Sustained feedback started a dancer's interaction with Clausen's pieces. Her foot held the "Six Monkey Powder" globe. Fingers from the audience tickled the guitar which was laying on top of the cage. Berg, Rutgers student and cage-resident guitarist, manipulated the home-made fuzz box.

"My piece is activated by the dancers," said painter Sarah Garnett of her tie-dyed fabric with sleeves on a double frame. "The dancers and the piece become one unit. It is a merging of human and object. The fabric is a limiting and an expressive factor." Her performance piece was accompanied by the synthetic, ambient sounds of a vocoder played by Robert L. Pepper, member of the Brooklyn-based group, PAS.



'But even within this false cage, we can communicate with each other, give and receive love, and experience joy.'

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Artist Michelle Provenzano, instead of interacting with her shadow, detached herself from it. "I painted an ink shadow on satin and mailed it to the gallery as an act of surrender," she said. As part of the performance, a dancer danced with Provenzano's satin silhouette. Shadows were also predominant in her "Slips" watercolor series. Anne Percoco, a 2008 MFA graduate from Rutgers who spent some time in India setting up art projects through the Asian Cultural Council, also expressed vibration through shadow play. She installed a time-delayed shadow generator on her laptop and had a dancer interact with her past movements. The shadow of the dancer was delayed 30 seconds, so was the shadow of the shadow, and so on, generating an infinitely recursive pattern of shadows on the wall. The accompaniment was purely percussive, from the hand drum of Amber Brien, another PAS member.

lan Trask's spirals made of industrial cardboard were also incorporated into a dance improvisation. It began with a dancer hidden behind one of his pieces, using her posture to blend in. She was joined by another, and their fluid motions responded to a saxophone played by Dave Tamura of The Jazz Fakers.

Participating choreographers and dancers included Laura McComb and Jilliana Richcrick of And Dancers, Nicole Mahncke and Michelle Puskas of The Nikki Manx Dance Project, Carla Menchinella, Emily Pope-Blackman of HoverBound, and Ann Peters.

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