

Interview: Rodrigo Arteaga on Placed into Abyss

Placed into Abyss, an installation for the Kostka Gallery by Rodrigo Arteaga (b. 1988, Santiago, Chile) was selected as the most successful project within the international open call for artists for 2018. Arteaga currently lives in London, where he is finishing his studies at Slade School of Art, University College London. Together with his brother Pablo Arteaga, the artist created an installation which presents an encounter of two cultures: the project starts with the story of scientist Frank Stainbridge and his attempts at building greenhouses and presenting exotic Latin American flora to the stunned British public of the mid-19th century. The interview was conducted by the curator Eva Riebová.

Can you briefly introduce us to the story of Frank Stainbridge?

Frank Stainbridge was one of the assistants accompanying Alexander von Humboldt on his expeditions through the tropics of Latin America in the early 19th century. He brought his own collection of plant specimens back to England and organised the construction of a greenhouse especially designed to house his collection of plants. The audience responded with excitement. Here are some words from one of the visitors: “The exotic plants that grew there were the equal of masterpieces of art capable of arousing original sensation in even the most jaded viewer. They suggested platonic archetypes possessing the sharpness and precision of detail that make the surrounding Norfolk landscape seem inauthentic, an inferior copy rather than real nature.” A violent storm shattered the glass of the greenhouse and the plants died of exposure to the cold weather of northern England.

A few years later, Stainbridge decided to reconstruct the greenhouse, this time replacing the original plants with hand-made ones. He hired many craftsmen to help in this very ambitious endeavour, which resulted in over 3000 man-made specimens that, in his own words, were “neither art nor even beauty but the fabrication of a novel and different, a man-made Nature, free from decay and deprecation.” After only a few months, a religious fanatic burned it all to the ground in the belief that it was an offense to God to try and mimic his powers. So that was the end of that.

It seems that you are making an artistic re-enactment of what Stainbridge did: you are “re-creating” his “re-creation” of tropical nature in England within a gallery context. What made his work so compelling for you and inspired you to base your project on it?

In a way, I’m replicating Stainbridge’s project, but for me it’s more about the idea of the hybrid between nature and culture. There is also the idea of the container for nature and the displacement of the tropics into the European landscape – it’s the idea of a limit. Like the glass of greenhouses. What is that barrier that separates us from other species, or what is this place that we consider for us and then for others? I think whether it’s a vitrine or window, it seems to be an important material for me.

But it is not only the story of Frank Stainbridge that I am interested in. There is also the connection between Latin America and England that I wanted to explore further. I live in London, where I encounter the massive effort to collect and classify the world and bring it to one place through the means of museum collections. In that sense, the British Museum is an intense emotional experience for me. They have everything from everywhere. They even have Moai statues! And you start wondering: all of these things come from different parts of the world, but they are no longer there. And all the cultures that brought them to life are now left without them.

The post-colonial critique that you just mentioned has been a strong topic in contemporary art for the past decade. Where does your project stand within this particular discourse?

I think colonialism is a very important topic and worthy of consideration in art works. At the same time, my project is a certain homage to the scientific approach, the thirst for



knowledge, and experiments by the explorers of that era. It's like a critical fascination. I have been thinking a lot about whether it is possible to do both at the same time.

Did you have to adjust your project for the conditions of the Kostka Gallery, or more specifically for Czech audiences?

The work resonates differently in every place. But I think there are some universal issues which help us discover new relations in the discourse of each specific place. The project was conceived universally – as open to discourse and to see what happens within. I think it's very interesting to use a space as industrial as the Kostka Gallery. Furthermore, I really love the fact that it used to be a glass factory. I think it comes together very well with the history of the greenhouse.

Returning to your roots, could you describe from your perspective the differences between South American and European perceptions of nature?

Well, the European influence in Latin America is massive. Chile was under Spanish rule for around 200 years. But still, the indigenous people in Chile have a very good position for humans in regards to other species. They have a much more spiritual connection with nature and they don't have a complete separation between nature and culture. I think we have a lot to learn from them. But unfortunately, Chilean government policy is not very different from anywhere else and they see nature as a way of making production and money. I have recently been studying Timothy Morton – he has an interesting point of view which contributes to the debates around the Anthropocene era. Morton says that a lot of people argue about the beginning of the Anthropocene – whether it started with the invention of motors, coal mining, the use of fossil fuels or the steam engine... Morton offers a comparison with murder: When does murder happen? Is it when the bullet hits the victim's brain? Or is it when the bullet leaves the gun, or when the trigger is pulled? His argument is that the Anthropocene era started with the beginning of agriculture. This really resonated with me. I think it's important to consider what this action of controlling nature means from the position of the one who controls.

Your installation is created using recursive principles. Could you elaborate on why you wanted to use this particular format?

I'm inspired by the idea of making greenhouses, but I'm placing this idea into an absurd repetition. The recursive principle is already alluded to in the title of the show, Placed into Abyss, which comes from the literal translation – or perhaps a mistranslation – of the French “misse en abyme”. It's the idea of one thing within another within another. It could also be a nesting doll or a dream within a dream... This project becomes the almost completely absurd repetition of the structure of greenhouses, and if you were to keep going with this logic, it could also incorporate the architecture of the entire room, or even the whole factory house. While creating the project, I studied the history of greenhouses as I represent different historical phases of the construction. The fun fact is that the first greenhouses were built in Roman times, when the Roman emperor Tiberius wanted to eat a fresh cucumber every day, all year round.

Rodrigo Arteaga: Placed into Abyss
28 February – 2 April 2018
Kostka Gallery
Curator: Eva Riebová
Curator's Assistant: Zuzana Belasová
Opening: 27 February 2018

MeetFactory Gallery and Kostka Gallery are opened daily from 1pm till 8pm and according to the evening program.

The entrance is free.

Contacts:

Zuzana Kolouchová → PR → zuzana.kolouchova@meetfactory.cz → + 420 739 055 862
Eva Riebová → curator → eva.riebova@meetfactory.cz

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