

PLACES & SPACES

LINKING ART, SCIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY WITH LASERS



NYC LASER 2014. Norman Ballard's laser demonstration. Courtesy SAiA.

By Pamela Segura
Contributor

The lights were turned off and Norman Ballard stood at the center of a medium-sized room talking about his work as a laser sculptor. Behind Ballard was a screen for his PowerPoint presentation; before him, an eager crowd. He powered through a history of laser production and contemplated the ways in which art can address the human value of laser technology. Novelist Victoria N. Alexander followed Ballard's lecture and spoke of biosemiotics, a discipline that looks at life forms as "signs" that relay and receive information. Betsy Damon, at last, spoke of the position water occupies in typically Western cultural contexts. Damon used the cultural significance of water to highlight the ways in which artists can use their works to explore issues of water vulnerability.

The lecture space, in the Manhattan studio of artist Ellen K. Levy, was intimate and informative. Questions sprang from audience members, which fostered conversation about the complexities of nature and how artists' profound awareness of instability helps to harness those complexities. This gathering is one of many Leonardo Art Science Evening Rendezvous (LASER) events at which artists and scientists showcase their work and engage in casual conversation.

The first LASER gathering was held at San Francisco University in January 2008; the first New York City LASER followed in 2009. Nowadays, LASERs are springing up in other places like London, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Santa Cruz and Palo Alto in California, and Chicago. Each LASER event has its own personality, but the premise for each one remains the same.

"The primary goal is to simply create a forum for cross-disciplinary conversations and allow the opportunity for artists, scientists, curators, writers, and thinkers to share their research," says Patricia Olynyk, co-director of the LASER in New York City. "The atmosphere of the gatherings is relaxed and collegial. Conversations are never forced and the outcomes of our meetings are open ended."

LASER's acronym-heavy history is a story of multiple collaborations. LASERs are hosted by the Leonardo Art and Education Forum (LEAF), which is sponsored, in turn, by Leonardo/The International Society for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology (Leonardo/ISAST), a nonprofit organization that fosters connections between scholars, scientists, researchers, and thinkers in interdisciplinary work.

The story of the New York City LASERs begins in 2003, when Levy, who now runs the series with Olynyk, was president of the College Arts Association (CAA), a collective founded in 1911 to promote scholarship and teaching in art as well as the history of art. Levy proposed to the executive board at CAA that Leonardo/ISAST should become an affiliate of the organization. From Levy's initiative, the Leonardo Education Forum was formed and represented Leonardo at CAA events. Eventually, LEF grew to include LEAF as Leonardo garnered more

affiliate organizations. Levy became chair of LEAF in 2008. In late 2009, Roger F. Malina, chair emeritus of the board of directors at Leonardo/ISAST, suggested that Levy begin her own LASER gathering like the ones that were already taking place in California. The LASERs in New York are now held every month and a half, according to Olynyk. Some take place at Levy's studio space, where Ballard, Alexander, and Damon presented their research this April.

"Ellen's studio space is 'agnostic,' in the sense that it is non-disciplinary specific and open to everyone," Olynyk says.

In 2011, DASER, a sister lecture series of LASER, was first hosted by the Cultural Programs at National Academy of Sciences (CPNAS) under the leadership of cultural programs director J.D. Talasek. Talasek entered the art and science community about 12 years ago, when he became the assistant director of the arts program at NAS. "I came to be interested in how art [and] science discussions form the platform [for] a network of ideas that more accurately reflects the complexity of our current reality more so than any one constructed discipline possibly could," says Talasek.

He became aware of the LASERs that began in California and decided to create a similar program in Washington, D.C. "The goals were simple," Talasek says. "[I wanted] to create a regular meeting place where people interested in cross disciplinary work could network." DASERs are now held every month.

Fitting together different pieces of culture shapes the DASER experience, as the diversity of lecturers at DASER highlights. Claudia Hart, an artist and associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was inspired by the "mathematical and technical rigors of spatial 3D-imaging" that Amy Bastian, an associate professor of neurology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, uses to analyze movement and brain trauma. Robin Shannon, an actor and associate director of DeafVibe, interpreted the work of multimedia artists and composer Randall Packer.

In February 2014, three years after the first DASER lecture, Heather Barnett hosted the first international LASER event. Barnett di-



NYC LASER 2014. Courtesy SAiA.

rects these international LASERs at the Central Saint Martins in the University of Arts London and the University of Westminster. Barnett, like Olynyk and Levy, is an artist and educator. Her work focuses on biological systems and scientific processes.

"I set up the London LASER after meeting Adrienne Klein [LEAF chair] in New York and talking to her about the interdisciplinary courses I'm involved in and the amount of art [and] science activity in London," Barnett says. "The idea came...from us sharing enthusiasms for art [and] science education, research, and practice."

Barnett, with the aid of Jared Davies and Kristina Pulejkova, set up the London LASER through the MA Art and Science program at the Central Saint Martins and Broad Vision, an art and science program at the University of Westminster. The LASERs in London have featured the works of David Finnigan, an Australian science theater artist who focuses on climate change, and Dr. Daniel Glaser, a neuro-

scientist and director of Science Gallery London at King's College.

"There is so much going on in London in the area of art and science, and we want to share this idea," Barnett says. The students of the graduate and undergraduate programs at the two host institutions assist Barnett. They help spread the word and film the events for the archive.

These links between art, science, and technology at LASER and DASER events can continue to grow and their influence will propagate, Talasek says.

"I think one of the benefits of DASER—and similar platforms that attempt to facilitate connections for individuals—is that we meet on a regular basis and provide opportunity for networking and discussion," Talasek says. "A single [proverbial] drop or a single DASER doesn't impact that much...but over time and with more LASER programs popping up, it can seriously change the entire terrain."