Neo-disco roller installation at Faena Hotel

Saturday, October 11, 2014

By Silvia Rotenberg
For The Herald

The skating rink's design is bold, bright and colorful. And the fact that it's in a museum type space gives the work a different dimension: how often can the museum visitor skate through a gallery? It's rebellious, crazy and in line with the way Faena decided to change a neighbourhood 10 years ago. This rink is a new work of Asume Vivo Art Focus (AVAF), like the hotel, it is also 10 years old.

Ell Sutroback, initiator of AVAF is excited about the re-installation of the rink here in Buenos Aires. "It's different than the 2004 Central Park skating rink. The shape alone is different. It was oval with a whole in the middle for the DJs to play, and here we have a circle, following the shape of this space."

Furthermore, in New York the rink was already in use for rollerskating. It was as a Public Art Fund project that AVAF intervened in this public space, putting a designed sticker field to enhance the enjoyment of the dancing skaters. "I had been the place, and had been intrigued ever since I moved to New York. I saw it as an icon of the city. Everyone was skating there. People from different neighbourhoods, all races, gays, straight, such a great diversity, which makes it very New York."

You moved to New York from Rio — did this unity in diversity surprise you?

"Well, I think it's a bit more complicated in Brazil. Even at the beach, it is segregated. Maybe the carnival makes people gather in a similar way. But carnival is once a year and this skating rink in Central park is open from April till September."

It was not easy to carry out the project in Central Park. The Central Park Commission was not fond of the dancing skaters being there, and used everything in their power to sabotage Ell Sutroback's project. "With the project I was enhancing the skaters' presence. And the commission objected to it. Because of their music, and the assumption that they'd bring drug dealing to the park. In the fight with the commission I became very close to the dancing skaters, almost part of their community. My struggle became their struggle. " In the end the work materialized but only for three weeks at the very beginning of the season."

Sutroback's engagement can also be found in the imagery he uses. In the design of the rink one can discern, along the abstract forms, different icons, such as Brazilian singer Rita Lee, "Queen of Disco," Sylvester, and Yoko Ono. For Sutroback they, amongst others, are symbols of the period of the late '60s and early '70s. His era of disco and dance inspires him, as it shaped New York in an important way. The music that marked the era was the music of an underground community, in which everyone was included, like on the skating rink. People of the same sex could even dance together.

Lady Bunny, who moved to New York from Atlanta in the early '80s, confirms this. "I was a little too late for Studio 54, but I found my home in Club Pyramid. There was a club culture, where a lot of artists, gay, straight or "gender fluid" had a safe place. The disco was our clubhouse, where we lived our lives. We could all be ourselves. The way we wanted to be: dance and kiss. We felt safe and free there."

Lady Bunny is the star DJ at the festivities. She discusses her choice of music with Sutroback and they find each other quickly in the style of music fitting with the roller skating installation: late 70's, early 80's dance and disco it will be.

"No, we have never met, but we know the same people," both acknowledge. "It was Xerena's (Camelot, Brix) idea to link us," adds Ell, "and I have no doubt that it will work very well.

AVAF, Ell Sutroback, together with French artist Christophe Hameau-Person, is used to working with other artists. "In the projects we have done, we have more or less worked as a curator, always bringing other people in. We are a duo and have worked with different people every time, hence the pseudonym, instead of working under our own names. AVAF is not just him and me, it is all the others too, and can include you as well."

An example of artistic inclusion can go all the way to naming a show. Ell shrugs and smiles when I ask him about the meaning of the title of the current show: Angeles veholes aranaos fugaces. "I don't know. They came up with it. At one point I wanted to name all shows following the same acronym of our name, Asume Vivo Art Focus. I signed all my mails with AVAF and received suggestions for titles. We started collecting those and sometimes we use them, not even knowing anymore who came up with it."

Working with different people every time and creating site-specific installations make it difficult to recreate a work. "The work here is not the same as it was in New York. It is and it isn't. It is not in public space, but in a gallery, it is more like a sculpture. A sculpture, that the people will activate. And for me personally, it gets a different meaning, it is more nostalgic. Perhaps, also because it is here, in South America. I go back to the time when I went roller skating when I was ten, in Rio."

Sutroback finds it refreshing, though, to look at older work in a new contest. He also considers it an exercise for AVAF's retrospective in Sao Paulo in 2016. "We have to rethink the projects, as there is no right or wrong of them. We do not make objects and mostly work on with a site. Lately I have started to paint, which is a new sensation in itself and also demands another way of working with Christophe which is a very interesting process."

Even though at a ten year celebration with an originally ten-year-old work, nostalgia is not centre stage here. It is about bold fun, festive fun referring to the crazy early 80's in New York with individuality of unique individuals, that sometimes do not feel at place anywhere else, at its heart. Lady Bunny represents this more than anyone else. "But don't be fooled," says Lady Bunny "it was not just fun. The 80's was a difficult time too. The gay community was also scared. We were dying. I saw my friends dying. Dying like flies..."

But I am not all into gay rights, and especially not its movement — I am for human rights for everyone, male, woman, and any one is in between. Being part of a new generation, I'm a gay community, I do feel I can teach the next generation something; don't be fooled by new AIDS drugs — just use a condom.