BUILDING A SELF-SUSTAINABLE ART-LEARNING COMMUNITY FROM SCRATCH: THE CASE OF THE AROCENA INSTITUTE.

KEY THEME 3: Social enterprise and working with communities
SUBTHEMES: Art learning in museums; Museum and community.

ABSTRACT:
Torreón is a city in northern Mexico with more than 15 universities. Nonetheless, the academic offer on humanities is virtually nonexistent: there is not a single program on literature, art history, philosophy or similar subjects. Challenged with this panorama, in 2010 the Arocena Museum assumed a difficult but very important task, trying to resolve a severe academic deficiency that the region had, and aid the willingness of our community to learn art at an academic setting. A big part of our museum visitors had never been face to face with an original artwork, and wanted to dig deeper into what art means and the things that it had to offer to their everyday lives.

As a way of resolving this issue, the Arocena Institute was created: an academic center working hand on hand with the museum, offering courses and research facilities for the general public on five topics: art history, literature, philosophy, political history and music. Every semester, we interdisciplinary explore a single theme in a chronological framework: so far, we have explored from the Italian Renaissance to the Mexican Muralist period.

The idea of an art learning center in a museum is not new, but the way the Arocena Institute works is an innovative way to build a self-sustainable organization, as its spirit is to be heavily powered by the students who attend the courses, an audience that includes people from 12-years-old to 90-years-old seniors: from taking assistance to designing the syllabus of various of our programs, a lot of our alumni have a role in the Arocena Institute. The atmosphere of participation this situation creates, along with the low-cost courses that can be possible by this organization model, have been the core of a growing art learning community that—we hope—will endure for a very long time.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY:
Sergio Garza Orellana (Mexico City, 1986) has a BA in Communication Studies by the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico, and a MA in Art History, Museums and Cultural Heritage by the Universidad Pablo de Olavide in Seville, Spain. He has received the Soria Dukes Grant at Madrid, Spain, which allowed him to work in the Museo Nacional del Prado. Sergio now works as a curatorial assistant at the Arocena Museum, in Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico, where he has been collaborating in exhibition planning, research, and various IT, media and education projects since 2008. He is also the academic coordinator of the Arocena Institute, a center affiliated to the Arocena Museum, with a special focus on academic research and life-long learning for the museum’s community. Sergio was the academic and operative coordinator of INTERCOM’s 2009 meeting in Torreón, and is now a board member of the committee.
I want to start this short presentation with a very personal study case, one that I have had the privilege to witness on a first hand basis, as I have seen the formidable transformation of a person foreign to art history into a published scholar: my own grandmother.

Irma, or “abuelita”, as we fondly like to call our grandmothers in Mexico, had never studied art history or any courses on similar subjects, college-level or otherwise. In fact, for the past 35 years she has been a devoted housewife that attended her family with the greatest care, but distancing her away from her college education or any similar instruction for that matter. It was not until 2010, when she was 71 years old, that she formed part of a project that started in the Arocena Museum, the one that I am a part of, that she was able to immerse herself in the world of art learning. She started in 2010 from the basics and she has continued her education at the museum since then. With great pride, I can say she has just published her latest paper in last November 2013.

How did this transformation happen? Without taking her credit, as she is one of the most dedicated students that I have ever seen, one of the most important factors that allowed her to become the researcher that she is now, was the art-learning program of the Arocena Museum, called the Arocena Institute, the main subject I am going to try to analyze in this presentation. This is a successful story that, I hope, maybe other institutions can replicate or adapt if they are in similar circumstances.

The Arocena Museum is located in Torreén, Coahuila, in the northern part of Mexico. The city has a demographic interest for the young population in the region, as it is home for more than 15 public and private universities, creating a strong community of students and academic research. Nonetheless, this college atmosphere has one uniqueness: none of the universities offers a single program on classical humanities. Being a predominately industrial area, the programs that the academic institutions now offer mainly focus on engineering, business administration and other industry-driven careers, lacking what has been traditionally known as the classical humanities: literature, history, philosophy, music or art history.
Not indifferent from this situation, Torreón has also seen some of its darkest times in the past few years: the rate of murder, robbing, and general criminal activity has continually risen throughout the past decade. The “war on drugs” that the past federal administration started took a high toll in Torreón, awakening feelings of terror and despair within the community. As the years went by, more and more people, myself included, were faced constantly with death, and thus, began to seek answers to some of the most basic philosophical questions that, slowly, acquired different shades and meanings in the context of this situation. People that before this had never had an interest in history, philosophy or art were suddenly starting to look for answers in classical humanities, seeking what they had to offer to our everyday lives.

So, this is the general landscape in which the Arocena Museum opens its doors in 2006. Initially, the museum was planned as a high-end museum with a very important European and colonial art collection that chronologically ranges between the 15th and the 19th century. As an important part of the mission of the museum, we also regularly offer very important temporary exhibitions, with a very long list of associates that vary from local museums, to internationally known institutions as the British Museum, the NYC Art and Design museum, or the Prince Klaus Foundation in the Netherlands.

One problem arose from this situation: we tended to offer very specialized exhibitions to a public that, in most cases, had never set foot in an art museum before they visited us. Challenged with this panorama, in 2010 the Arocena Museum adopted various strategies to try and resolve this issue. As one of them, we assumed a difficult but very important task, trying to resolve a severe academic deficiency that the region had, and aid the willingness of our community to learn art at an academic setting, closing the gap between the exhibitions and our audiences. A big part of our museum visitors had never been face to face with an original artwork, and wanted to dig deeper into what art means and the things that it had to offer to our everyday lives.

As a way of addressing these problems, the Arocena Institute was created: an academic center working hand on hand with the museum, offering courses and research facilities for the general public on five topics: art history, literature, philosophy, political history and music. As often museums do, we started by offering some individual courses and conferences on specific topics, mostly related to our temporary exhibitions. Sadly, we did not had a very strong reaction from the
community. Very few people attended these programs, mainly because of two reasons: firstly, the courses we were offering seemed very specific and unconnected. Secondly, only a few people wanted to invest a moderately high amount of money in them. We needed to change strategies and change our approach.

So, we continued by offering connected courses instead of individual ones. The attendance was a little bit higher than previously. We started from the very basics, offering tools instead of historical contexts. The courses were named accordingly to each area that the Arocena Institute explores: learning to see was a first approach into the elementary tools for art appreciation. Learning to hear, did the same but with tools that could help people listen to complex music. Learning to think set the basis for philosophical thinking, and learning to read explore the fundamental blocks of the written word. Learning to rewind was a highly acclaimed course, as it set the fundamental theories on historiographical thinking in an audience that was used to a more traditional facts-and-dates vision of history.

This strategy soon started to call more and more people. I cannot stress enough the importance of our interdisciplinary approach. Some people arrived to the Arocena Institute because they liked listening to music and wanted to dig deeper into the musical panorama, but soon enough something wonderful started to happen: this people, that firstly only wanted to take the music course, stayed for the visual arts course too. The audience who was interested into art, stayed for the philosophy course as well, and so on. One thing was made clear for us: the traditional systems of art-learning have a tendency to imagine invisible separation lines between music, literature, visual arts, philosophy, science history and political history. The museum setting allowed us to partially erase those lines and build a more complex approach into cultural history. We realized of something wonderful: we lacked most of the ties that bind universities to a four-year programs or a curricula to complete. We had complete freedom: we could linger for 400 hours of study in one single chronological theme, like the Italian renaissance, if our students were willing to do so (and most were!). The first theme was precisely that one, the Italian renaissance, a theme that was in correlation with our permanent collection, and we explored a single culture in most of its different approaches: music of the renaissance, philosophy of the renaissance, art, political history, micro-history, literature, science and so on, all within
the same chronological framework that bound all together. We devoted one full year to the Spanish Baroque period and its relationship to New Spain, or Mexico, in colonial times. After that, we had the enjoyment to explore a full year of the great changes that occurred in the first half of the 19th century in Europe and Mexico, and we are currently studying one of the most fascinating periods of Mexican culture: the beginning of the 20th century with great personalities like Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, Manuel Ponce, Carlos Chávez or Silvestre Revueltas, and great phenomena as psychoanalysis, the participation of women in public activities, the introduction of cinema and so on.

As you may imagine, back in the beginning of the Arocena Institute, we had another problem: it was expensive. Expensive for the museum and expensive for our public. It seemed that the audience in our courses was mainly middle to upper economic class, conformed mostly by people that had enough means to afford paying a middle range tuition, and enough time to spare in leisure activities. The question was: how were we going to offer low-cost courses to a broader audience? We had a lot of people that approached the museum looking for a reduction in the tuition costs, or simply, a full scholarship. The courses soon started to cost money to the museum, instead of being a self-sustainable project of our institution, as it was intended in a first place.

The answer to this problem was, as it often is, in the willingness to participate of the different areas of our communities. We started to try and reduce our costs in the traditional way: looking for sponsors in some of our most important business associates. Following this path, we received some funding, but not nearly enough to make this project a sustainable one.

We found the real answer to our problems in asking for help to the people who already were a fundamental part of the Arocena Institute, our teachers, students, and prospective students. Firstly, we had a meeting with our teachers and discussed several strategies on how could we lower our costs, so more people could be a part of the Arocena Institute. In a superb act of generosity and commitment to the project, our teachers were willing to lower their fees, and in some cases even give lectures for free, in order for the museum to lower the tuition fees of the program for the general public. This situation happened only because the teachers knew that what was
happening at the Arocena Institute could really transform our community, and only if the museum was going to be as committed to the project as all of the people that it involved. Other ways to reciprocate were found: a strong publishing program was launched, which included a large number of those teachers that collaborated with the Arocena Institute. The Arocena Museum was open freely to those teachers and their college students for general visits, and they were invited to special events. These and other similar activities showed that the commitment was mutual.

Once we could lower the tuition fees of the program, our students doubled their numbers. But it was not enough, as high school and college students, elderly people, and other strategic sectors of our community were still not being able to afford the low cost tuition fee. The perfect opportunity arose, as we were having problems at the Arocena Museum too. As the museum grew, so did the number of our visitors, especially school groups, and we were lacking people who could guide our audiences through our collections, specially school groups on their visit. So, we began offering full scholarships to those Arocena Institute students who were willing to donate some of their time to collaborate with the museum, teaching young people some of the things they were learning in our classrooms. Most of the college students and elderly people were thrilled with the idea, as most of them had enough time to spare. So, soon enough, a significant part of our guides began to be part of the Arocena Institute too.

This situation, finally, created a sustainable environment: if the teachers donated their time, so did our students. If our students donated their time, they would become guides that could reach a much higher population of elementary school students and other sectors of society. As more people become part of the Institute, the museum began to grow very significantly, not only in quantity, but also in terms of commitment to be a permanent part of our community.

This virtuous circle our art learning community began is one of the fundamental strategies that the Arocena Museum now follows. It does not only guarantee successful courses, but also creates new forms of participation within our community. My initial example, my grandmother, is now the volunteer coordinator of a study group that expands the reach of the Arocena Institute. Our younger volunteer, Natalia, who is only 15 years old, helps down with taking assistance and making sure that everything goes according to plan on our courses. Everyone of our students has a
particular function in the Arocena Institute, and also within the museum, functions that vary from turning on the lights, to helping in calling on new teachers and programming our yearly offer.

As an abstract of this presentation, I would like to present seven concepts that conform the very core of the Arocena Institute, seven principles that can be replicated in places where similar circumstances allow a community similar to ours:

1. Art learning is much more than just visual-arts-learning. We, as museums, have the possibilities to implement more complex approaches to culture and art as a whole system.
2. It is important to let everyone know (specially business associates) that art learning is not a futile or superficial activity. In fact, art learning can be a powerful tool to transform a community and give them hope, understanding and empowerment to change a difficult social reality.
3. In hard times, do not hesitate to ask for help to the academic community. A lot of professors and teachers are willing to donate some of their time, if there is a certainty that they will be helping to build a path to empower the local community. This do not means that a teacher’s job should go unrewarded. There is a lot of possible ways to reward them besides an economic compensation. Be creative.
4. In hard times, do not hesitate to ask for help to the museum’s public. A lot of people is willing to donate time, and even in some cases, money to let the art-learning happen. In fact, art learning can be much more meaningful and deep to a lot of people if they not only attend classes, but also practice some of these acquired skills in a museum-community setting.
5. Keep your courses concise and short. Most teachers will be willing to donate 8 hours of their time to give a series of conferences, but they will hardly accept to give a full semester of them. The best way to resolve this issue is to connect several courses (and their teachers), so they can have some continuity.
6. Keep your courses connected. Connected to the community, connected to the other activities in the museum, current exhibitions and the permanent collection. But specially, connected to everyone’s lives and interests.
7. Do not be afraid of changing strategies. If something is not working, a change
may be good for your community.

The Arocena Institute is a big part of my grandmother’s life now. And, I’m sure, she does not see her participation as a leisure activity, or some hobby she likes to do in her spare time. The commitment it requires is essential into conforming a community of students, teachers, coordinators, guides, and staff of the Arocena Museum, and it creates an atmosphere of participation that can only be possible by this organization model, the core of a growing art learning community that—we hope—will endure for a very long time.