

The New York Times

Down From the Heights



“Big Bambú,” on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum, is being dismantled.

Librado Romero/The New York Times

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Published: October 31, 2010

Take 6,800 bamboo poles, 70 miles of colorful cord and plans for an art installation that will change every day over a six-month period and ultimately grow to 50 feet high. Add two artists and a bunch of rock climbers who like to listen to the Rolling Stones while they add to the piece, and drink pilsner when they’re done working. And then stick the whole thing on the roof of the esteemed, establishment Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It was bound to be a combustible mix.

“There’s the good and the bad,” Doug Starn, one of the artists, said last week while watching the piece, “Big Bambú: You Can’t, You Don’t and You Won’t Stop,” being dismantled. (It closed on Sunday.) “People like us — and rock climbers — we don’t fit into the dead artist thing. As much as they welcomed us in” — he said of the Met — “there were struggles all the way through. Us and the climbers are part of the piece, part of the organism. We live in the piece. We need to enjoy what we make, and we need to enjoy ourselves while we’re making it.”

Curfews and adjusting music volume became part of the creative experience for Mr. Starn and his twin brother, Mike. But it wasn’t all tension and sticky red tape. There was also enormous success: 600,000 visitors (400,000 had been projected), international acclaim, six marriage proposals in the bamboo thicket, and famous climbers like Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg; the artists Martin Puryear and Francesco Clemente; Bono, Lou Reed and Paul McCartney, who went up barefoot or — as Mike Starn put it — “‘Abbey Road’ style.”

And though the Starns had mapped out certain elements, like staircases and “living rooms” with benches inside the structure, plenty of things were unexpected, which was actually kind of the point.

They hadn’t planned, for example, to have bamboo cup holders, which sprouted throughout the piece (the climbers put them in), or the cresting wave of bent bamboo at the top, or the spontaneous wind chime that turned up toward the southern end. They could not have predicted that the roof’s wisteria

would wend its way all the way up the piece; that the red-tailed hawk Pale Male would regularly circle overhead; or how breathtaking Central Park would look from “Big Bambú” as the seasons changed. The installation had to close every time it rained and the climbers and the Starns had to stop work for a week when the artists ran out of cord, which was used to lash the poles together.

“We used up all the rope in the United States,” Mike said. “Then we had to wait for the ash cloud to pass so we could ship the rope from Switzerland.”

Met officials last week seemed satisfied, if still catching their breath.

“It is certainly the most complex and ambitious project to date on the roof,” said Anne L. Strauss, an associate curator at the museum, who organized the installation. “Their project has brought our sculpture program on the roof to a new dimension and literally to great heights.”

And the Met had to navigate some uncharted territory. To prepare for “Big Bambú” the museum secured approval from the city Buildings Department and ran its plans by several other city agencies, including the Fire Department. It plotted how people could safely go up the undulating sculpture, though the piece was a perpetual work in progress. And it came up with requirements that visitors sign waivers and follow strict rules (no sandals, no cellphones) as they ascended the installation’s winding walkways.

And there was more: How do you handle a fleet of rock climbers who insist on listening to Jimi Hendrix while they help construct the sculpture? And how do you enforce museum operating hours if the artists have Friday-night parties atop the sculpture that stretch past closing time?

Standing on “Big Bambú” last week, sipping bottles of beer in T-shirts and jeans, the Starns said they thought the Met had responded like a pretty cool parent.

“It’s amazing that the Met had the nerve to take on an evolving structure like this,” Mike said. “But we had to pull them along to create something about chaos. It’s a habitat. They wanted us out at 5 o’clock. But we’re not just here working. We’re a part of it. They didn’t like that — the beers. We finally got them to understand that this piece wouldn’t exist if it were too controlled. The vibe is important.”

The music was clearly a flashpoint. Ms. Strauss said: “There might have been from time to time some volume issues, but then those were addressed. We’ve had a very collegial working experience with them.”

When it came to the artistic side of the piece, the Starns were given a lot of rope (so to speak). “Big Bambú” took shape from one day to the next. Except for designated locations for the vertical poles to touch ground, placing each pole was largely up to the rock climbers. “That’s a moment-to-moment decision on their parts,” Mike said. The only time the artists exercised a veto is when “it wasn’t interconnected enough,” Doug said, “when it wasn’t part of the flow of the piece.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 3, 2010

Because of an editing error, an article on Monday about the dismantling of the art installation “Big Bambú: You Can’t, You Don’t, and You Won’t Stop,” on the roof of the Metropolitan

Museum of Art, misstated the length of cord used to make the work. It was 70 miles — not 7. The article also misstated the number of marriage proposals made in the bamboo thicket when the installation, which closed Sunday, was open. It was six, not three. Using information from the artists who created the work, Doug and Mike Starn, the article also referred incorrectly to its status when they ran out of cord. The rock climbers who were building it, and the artists, had to stop work but the installation was not closed for a week.

The Starns ran out of bamboo after using 3,200 poles and had to order two more shipments of 1,800 each. (They said they had to share the cost of the bamboo and the extra cord with the Met, which declined to discuss the matter.)

It was all worth it, though, according to many who waited hours for tickets or returned repeatedly because they wanted to see how “Big Bambú” kept changing. “It’s exciting for people to become part of an installation like this,” said Ryan Wong, one of the tour guides. “People are just exhilarated to be up there. You can see it in their faces. They say, ‘This is like being Robinson Crusoe or being on a wooden roller coaster.’ ”

A melancholy hangs over the piece’s dismantling, which is expected to take two months. The Starns will cut out whole sections to keep as relics and are planning to gather the thousands of photographs they took of the piece into a pile, which will become an exhibition of its own. “It’s a lot of ambivalent feelings, conflicted feelings,” Doug said. “There is also an excitement taking it apart. I’m not quite sure why.”

Many fans of the piece have suggested the Met make it permanent. “I don’t know how many times I’ve heard people talk about a petition,” Mike said. “But as far as I know, there isn’t one.”

The Met, whose roof sculpture program is in its 13th year, does not seem to have considered the possibility. “We use that space for a rotating series of exhibitions, so every time we invite an artist to work there, they know it’s for a limited amount of time,” Ms. Strauss said. “Next year there will be someone else.”

The rock climbers found it hard to go. One tried to sleep up there once — he just curled up until a guard discovered him and made him come down. The Starns said they understood the impulse. “If we could, we would camp out here,” Doug said.

“When we do this again,” Mike added, “we’ll definitely make living in the piece part of the contract.”

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