

# contemporary conversations



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# BALL-NOGUES STUDIO

IN CONVERSATION WITH MARCO ANTONINI



Opposite & Above: Maximilian's Shell, installation at Materials & Applications, Los Angeles, 2005. Photo © left: Neil Cochran, above: Oliver Pees.

THE winner of the 2007 Young Architects Program at Long Island City's PS1 Center for Contemporary Art was a major crowd-pleaser and background to millions of (often) drunken, Facebook-clogging 'me and my best friends' summer pics. A psychedelic canopy of pink-ish mylar tiles, *Liquid Sky* was the labour of love of the Los Angeles-based designers/fabricators, Ball-Nogues Studio. I was impressed by the nonchalant mix of high- and low-grade materials (individually lasercut mylar tiles meet utility poles and artsy, organic rope nettings) and by the active role of architectural elements in defining the audience's emotional response to the environment.

**MARCO ANTONINI:** What inspires you to accept (or apply for) a commission?

**BENJAMIN BALL:** It's usually the client.

**GASTON NOGUES:** They will approach us with a proposition, and if we feel we can have a fruitful collaboration with them, if the project affords us the option of experimentation ... Budget is less of a problem, because we like the challenge of lower budget projects, as well as high budget projects. We're good at figuring things out for very little money.

**MA:** That's pretty evident in your whole practice. Your projects are quite ephemeral. Do you have a specific interest in temporary installations? Would you like to switch to more permanent ones?

**BB:** I think we're interested in both, we enjoy working on temporary structures but that's just been our practice thus far. We approach a temporary project with the same level of seriousness with which someone would approach a permanent one. We're very interested in how the design of a project is informed by its ephemerality – how can we





Previous Page: Skin+Bone: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture and installation for the opening night Fete at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2006. Photo © Joshua White. Above & Below: Liquid Sky: winning installation for the 2007 Museum of Modern Art Young Architects program at PS1 Contemporary Arts Center, New York. Photo © above: Paul Johnson, below: Mark Iantz.



structure a space that is engineered and imagined for impermanence.

MA: And what about permanence?

BB: We didn't set out to make a statement about impermanence. But there is no language about impermanent structures, no regulations. It enables us to be very inventive and innovative. These projects tend to be smaller in scope, allowing a direct connection between the design and the fabrication.

GN: Rather than experimenting digitally, we make sure that our experiments get tried out in the real world. We're looking at opportunities to do that.

BB: It could be a movie/stage set, a window display, a temporary pavilion, an installation.... I started thinking this way when I was working in the movie business as an art director and set designer; I found out that I could experiment with architectural or

spatial ideas on an impermanent movie set, and that approach has carried into the practice we're involved in now.

MA: Your projects tend to delineate self-contained environments. Do you consider the place and time where projects take place, their context?

BB: When people visit one of our projects they are often carrying with them the understanding and permanent memory of that place, so we try to play off the social, political and aesthetic context as well as trying to create an immersive environment. We also want to take a critical reading, a critical approach to the environment in which the work stands.

MA: Let's talk about materials. How do you take into account the environmental impact of your projects? Are the materials recyclable? What happens to them after they're deinstalled?

GN: That's an idea we've been working on and developing. The idea came about after doing these projects and taking them down. Often stuff can be recycled. For example, the Rip Curl Canyon installation was completely recycled.

MA: That was just cardboard and wood, right?

GN: Right. We did the piece so we could disassemble it and break it down into raw material. We're interested in designing temporary structures that become something else afterwards, breaking them down into parts that can become a product, designed beforehand. So, basically, a structure with a dual purpose.

BB: We just received a grant from the Graham Foundation [Chicago] to study a concept that we call Cross Manufacturing, exactly what Gaston described. We're imagining a temporary structure comprised of components that can become something else after the structure has been taken down – a consumer product on a different scale. It makes me really uncomfortable when I see temporary structures thrown into the trash.

MA: You said: 'We studied techniques so we can move beyond them and into the realm of creating atmosphere.' How do you visualize your ideas in the first phase of your creative process? Do you use software from the start?

GN: We don't have a linear process. We often start with a 8.5 x 11 in. sheet of paper and start sketching, thinking of ideas. Then we move on many fronts in parallel, so we'll have hand sketches, computer sketches, physical models... a fitting example for that is Unseen Current, the project we're doing now in Chicago at Extension Gallery, which is made out of miles and miles of string. For that we have a very useful computer model, a 1":1" [3: 61.5 cm] scale model to understand the whole space in a way you don't necessarily see in a computer rendering, and a full-scale mock-up that we're working on to understand what it means to go to that level.

BB: We're looking at it with a variety of media and tools and, in this case, the computer model is truly a design tool, because it is limited by the fact that we manipulate the rendering according to the material properties of the physical models and their reaction to gravity.

MA: Do you feel that computer renderings and their particular working environment could bias the final outcome of your projects?

GN: We need to know how it will feel once it's built, not necessarily how it looks on a computer screen. That's why you don't see us doing many fancy renderings.

BB: We also try to realize work that could not be fully understood in the digital realm, where materials are activated by gravity, light, the elements.

MA: How important is the atmosphere that your works create?

GN: The atmosphere is everything. We like to work with light almost as a material. And this is why the models I was talking you about before are a means to an end. What we're trying to control is atmosphere, the effect.

BB: When I was younger, I would imagine a project and then make it, but in the making something would be lost. So when we say we want to move beyond technique, it is to avoid losing something in the translation from concept to fabrication.

MA: Are you considering other collaborators with visual artists, in the same way you did with Sheila Pepe for the hammocks of Liquid Sky?

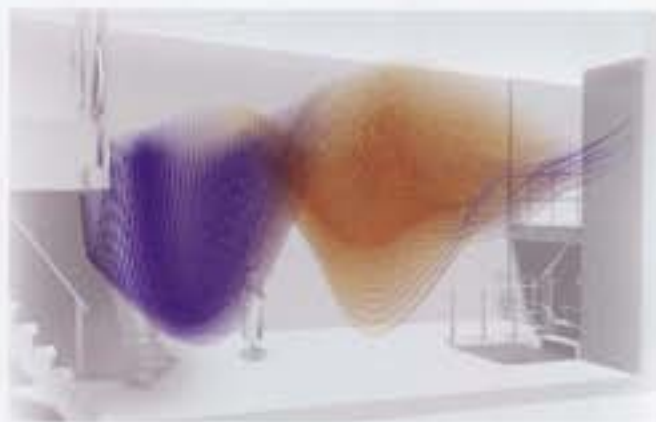
BB: We love collaborating. For Liquid Sky we decided we wanted to use netting and that it had to be tight and so on, but Sheila developed the connection and took the hammocks outside of the realm of design as problem-solving and into three-dimensional drawings in their own right. We loved the fact that they had that handcrafted quality, in comparison to a different kind of craft – the technical structure overhead.

MA: It seems like you guys are pretty busy. I was wondering if your own practice is changing in relation to that, and how. Are you going in new directions? And how do you see your own projects evolving in the future?

BB: That's a very good question. I guess because we're getting larger and larger commissions, and more of them, we'll have to delegate to other people more often. When we work at a smaller installation we have the opportunity of doing the fabrication ourselves, which we're really good at, but when the projects grow you lose some control. The focus shifts from knowledge of the hand to communication.

GN: You don't really lose control, you just take your own hand out of it. I think one thing the way we work has taught us is how to have a dialogue with people to get what we want without having to swing the hammer ourselves. I think we're more than comfortable relinquishing control of something as long as we work with like-minded people.

MARCO ANTONINI IS A NEW YORK-BASED FREELANCE ART PROFESSIONAL.



Unseen Current, 2008. Installation. Courtesy of Ball-Nogues Studio, NY.