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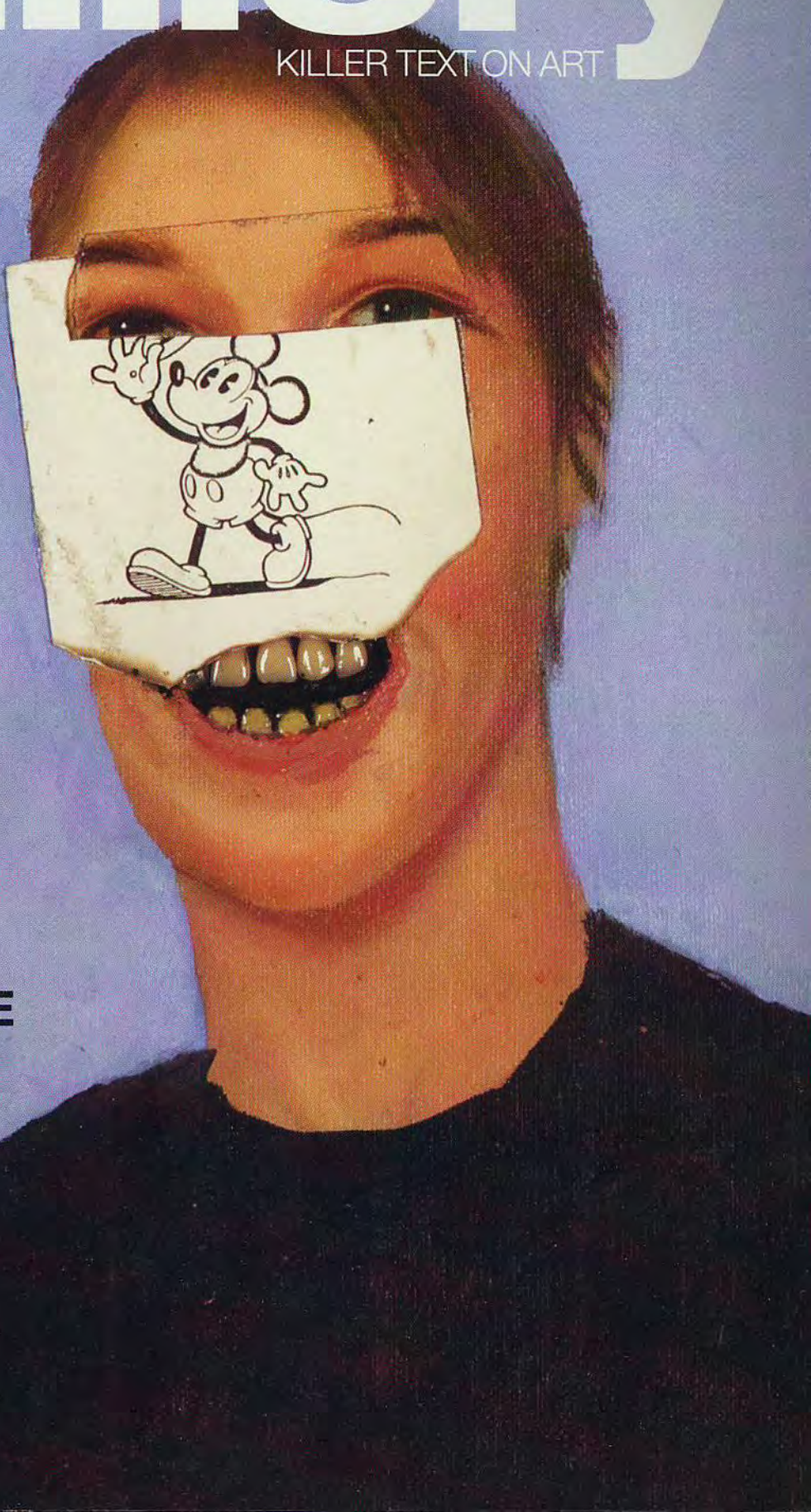
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BALL-NOGUES STUDIO CRAFTS PLAYFUL ARCHITECTURE AND EARTHWORKS

BY MARTINA DOLEJSOVA

PURPLE, WHITE AND ORANGE PAPER MACHÉ molds litter the East Los Angeles office space of Ball-Nogues Studio (BNS), byproducts of an exploratory process in construction and form-making.

Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues, who formed BNS in 2005, play with the semantics of what is architecture. Both earned their architectural degrees at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCIarc). Ball went on to design and build sets for films and television while Nogues found a place with Gehry Architects. Neither took the licensing exams, so in the professional world, they can't be called architects—but they are closely watched provocateurs in the ideas of architecture, art, urban planning and landscape architecture.

The majority of BNS' architectural structures are temporary, like *Yucca Crater* (2011). Yet they have begun to receive commissions for permanent work—mainly in public art such as *Talus Dome* (2011). The latter, a pile of approximately 950 mirror-polished, stainless steel balls in various sizes, suggests geological formations of snow drifts or talus cones below river bluffs. This permanent sculpture was fabricated in Los Angeles and shipped to Edmonton, Canada in 27 pieces. Its form is constructed for structural integrity, utilizing Antonio Gaudi's investigations of catenary arches.

In its simplistic beauty, *Talus Dome* has generated debate as to its purpose. When

asked about its placement on the side of a freeway and park, out of the way, Ball remarks, "There seemed to be a lot of confusion about our intentions... I wanted it to be of the landscape, kind of innocuous, but at the same time something spatial and spectacular."

The rough plywood structure that formed *Talus Dome* was repurposed for *Yucca Crater*. The two projects were "cross-designed" such that the method of production used in the first has become the central aesthetic for the second. Located in the barren desert near Joshua Tree National Park, 15 miles from the nearest human settlement, the synthetic earthwork of *Yucca Crater* doubled as an event and recreational structure during High Desert Test Sites in October, 2011.

Yucca Crater resembles a basin that stands 30 feet from rim to low point and is depressed 10 feet into the earth. The form is sprayed with a blue rhino liner, imitating the plastic-looking pools of California and making an impermeable surface to hold water. Rock-climbing holds mounted on the interior allowed visitors to climb and jump into a deep pool. With traditional construction, the

forms are never allowed any purpose but to support the final product. In turn this played two roles—one of making their work in *Talus Dome* and the other to make a social architecture piece that provided an experience, a climbing apparatus, and an engineered solution to getting one more use out of material that would have been thrown away.

Most projects at BNS take on the dimensional qualities of social architecture—whether installation, sculpture or structure, each tries to take advantage of technical capabilities in current building methods and the experience of the viewer/user. This is the type of architecture that could be compared to "social" media—connecting with people, bringing others together, and informing the public as well as a myriad of designers of its "status."

A new installation this summer at the SCIarc gallery titled *Yevrus*, applies the BNS studio technique of paper maché mold-making on an architectural scale. It features a rocket-like object made from paper pulp sectional molds of a Volkswagon bug and a speedboat. One of the VW sections acts as a door to open up

as a mock tanning booth or playhouse for children. In contrast to their 2011 works, it is strikingly phallic. As if using a trick from Duchamp, we can say, this is not phallic—but it is difficult to deny. While the construction method and the finished product look unpolished, the exploration of turning these iconic objects into another object is provoking and the structure is playful even in its objectivity and masculine projection. Ball explains, referencing Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's seminal book *Learning from Las Vegas*, "We're essentially taking a 'duck'... and turning it into a structure. We're starting with something for its [visual] qualities [as an object] and then we're transforming it." One can focus on the form itself, but it is the process and innovation in construction that challenges the profession. "We're assessing [the object] for its potential to become structure and then we're integrating it with all the other elements to form an architecture." ☺

Left: *Talus Dome*, courtesy Edmonton Arts Council

Right Top to Bottom: *Yucca Crater* during installation at HDTs, photo, Allison Porterfield; *Yucca Crater*, top down view, courtesy BNS; *Yucca Crater*, section, courtesy BNS

