

BOMBSITE

THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981

Campana Brothers

by Vik Muniz

BOMB 102/Winter 2008, ART

(Interview, Sculpture)



Fernando and Humberto Campana, *Transplastic Exhibition*, 2007. Albion Gallery, London. Installation view. Photo: Ed Reeve.

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A few years ago, while working on a project in India, I watched a sitcom in which a man tried to hang a picture of his beloved fiancée. Not having a hammer at hand, he attempted to drive the nail by banging it with his shoe, a small chair, and a frying pan, to no avail. He finally succeeded by using the frame itself as a hammer. I was so touched by the scene that I could not help wondering if it captured the particular poetics of my third world culture.

In Brazil, the term *gambiarra* applies to a spontaneous and makeshift style of problem-solving that is very present in our tool-depleted yet resourceful tradition. Gambiarra refers to an unlikely mend, an unthinkable coupling, a solution so raw and transparent that it illustrates the problem at hand instead of eliminating it. Brazilians pride themselves on repairing airplanes with paperclips, catching fish with prescription drugs as bait, or using saliva as a building material. Consequently, cities, the government, and belief systems have become gambiarras themselves: the survivalist ingenuity of a people who live for the present alone compensates for the lack of material and psychological security.

I encountered the work of Fernando and Humberto Campana when they shared a MoMA Projects exhibition with Ingo Maurer in 1998. I felt an amazing bond with their irreverent juxtapositions of form and material, their gift for precariousness and absurdity, their gambiarra aesthetics. I was almost disappointed when I learned that we had the same origin: this so easily explained why we had so much in common. Born in the same state, sharing an upbringing as public school-educated sons of the military dictatorship, the three of us are seriously funny and deep about being superficial.

Since that exhibition at MoMA, the Brazilian brothers have been catapulted into the center stage of international contemporary design. Their production has been popular, consistent, and thoughtful. Their success has helped develop a new identity for Brazilian design and fostered a sense of hope for Brazil's young designers, a sense of possibility of attaining international recognition without relinquishing their local culture and habits, and especially, the beautiful, chaotic subtlety of the Brazilian spirit.

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Fernando and Humberto Campana, 2007. Photo: Cassio Vasconcelos.

Vik Muniz You started out in Brotas, a small town in the São Paulo countryside, and are now leading players of the international scene in contemporary design. How did that happen?

Humberto Campana I think everything was wrong from the very beginning. I went to law school in 1972 and soon realized that it wasn't for me. I left school with a law degree and began to research and work with my hands, making seashell-framed mirrors. I was living in Bahia—in Itabuna, a very small town—and that gave me time and space to get to know myself. All of a sudden I saw myself living there, without a car, far from everything, and that was very good. Here is where my story begins, my story creating things with my hands. At the end of the '70s, I came back to São Paulo and took many art classes—in sculpting, in jewelry making, in terra cotta. . . . I had never studied art before. One day Fernando came to help me in my studio. I had a small studio where I sold framed mirrors and then spent the money I earned on more classes.

Fernando Campana We lived in Brotas, a town of 10 thousand people with nothing to do. But, fortunately, the town had a great movie theater. The man who owned it was a lawyer with very good taste: he brought us Italian Neo-Realism, Pasolini, Antonioni and movies like *2001: A Space*

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Odyssey and *Rosemary's Baby*. . . . These movies were our window to the world. We had no television, so we went to the movies every night and during the day would try to re-create what we saw by making toys with stuff we found in our own backyard. I never liked to play soccer or any other sports—my thing was to build planes and spaceships with scraps of wood and the junk I found lying around. Humberto, on the other hand, liked to play with the soil, making dams, lakes, et cetera. When I got to São Paulo, my interests expanded from the movies to museums and galleries. Then I chose to study architecture, although I really wanted to be an actor! During the dictatorship, architecture fell more in line with the times. In my senior year of architecture school, in 1983, I got an internship at the São Paulo Biennial. There I met Keith Haring and Basquiat, although at the time I didn't know who he was.

When I was done with school, Humberto asked me to come help him in his studio, to be his delivery guy. Gradually I started giving him ideas.



OCA installation, *My Home Exhibition*, 2007, Vitra Design Museum, Weil Am Rhein, Germany. Exhibition featured installation by Fernando and Humberto Campana. Front

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view of museum exterior. Building designed by Frank Gehry, 1990. Photo: Thomas Dix.

VM What marks the beginning of your collaboration as designers?

HC A collection of iron chairs we did in 1989, called *Desconfortáveis* (Uncomfortables). I spent many years trying to figure out who I was as a sculptor, and it wasn't easy. At one point I took a trip to the Grand Canyon, and as I was going down the Colorado River, my boat capsized and I almost drowned. That next day I drew the design for the first chair: a heavy chair made from iron plates cut in a swirling pattern. When I returned to Brazil I actually made the chair, and from the scraps, Fernando created another chair that was more functional and lighter. Thus began our collaboration.

FC This was very symbolic because I never wanted to create furniture. I wanted to make a sculpture by copying his chair, but instead ended up creating another chair: there was a positive and a negative. Forty chairs followed and our first exhibition was developed, in which we probed the artistic potential of discomfort, the poetry of the distorted, the poetry of error. Until then we had been trying to work with materials that required very careful polishing and finishing, such as marble. We were never very good at this.

VM You had also been working with steel. When did you start regularly working with less orthodox materials?

FC In '93 we had an exhibition, *Edição 93*, at the Nucleon 8 gallery in São Paulo. It was the embryo of much of what we do today. It included the rope chair, the cardboard furniture, the *Blow Up* — seemingly random piles of metal rods in the shape of vases, fruit bowls. We experimented with different materials, from rope to cardboard.

VM How did the idea to work with each of these materials come to you?

HC After *Desconfortáveis* — for which it was relatively easy to weld iron plates — I decided that we had to move on.

FC We had been making functional sculptures, and in order for us to become furniture designers we had to find a way to bring more industrialized elements into the series. After *Desconfortáveis* we got a lot of press and could easily have become designers working with iron, but we wanted to find new ways to express our ideas. Then we began working with many different materials, like discarded wood, tree branches, aluminum—

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HC Even charcoal. We made a screen out of charcoal that took us a year to complete. Every day we would attach another piece of charcoal.

FC It was interesting because at the time of *Desconfortáveis* we were offered a small space at the entrance of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP). For us, showing at MASP was a dream come true, but we didn't want a little space at the entrance: we wanted an entire floor of the museum. Then Adriana Adam, the owner of Nucleon 8, came to the studio and said that instead of exhibiting at MASP we should do a show at Nucleon 8. We wondered how smart it was to trade MASP for a small gallery in a hippie neighborhood. But the gallery was in a loft and the exhibition took on a whole new dimension when we set up the work there. We put the chairs on slabs of stone, we created a sound track, served risotto. The exhibition showed design in a very different atmosphere. It was an enormous success. People went crazy!



Ideal House, 2004, IMM Cologne, Germany. Designed and furnished by Humberto and

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Fernando Campana. Interior detail. Photo: Estúdio Campana.

VM Whenever I am thinking of my own work I have to imagine these two guys in my head: one is an anarchist hitchhiker on mushrooms, and the other is a Republican watch-repairman from Wyoming. These two guys fight inside of me until they come up with something okay. One of them always sort of wins (guess who?), but if he were to work by himself, no one would understand what I do. Do you think that always having to work toward a consensus has affected your relationship to your public in any way?

FC It's easier to work as a team, since it is a way of combining our thoughts, discussing our projects, making bridges between our points of view, and, thus, creating better designs.

HC Working as a team affects the way the public sees us: not as one person, but as a brand. Sometimes the creative project comes from one of us and the other helps to develop it. Sometimes we create together. Either way it is easier to always involve more than one point of view.

VM When and how did you reach the international market and begin your partnership with the design firm Edra?

FC In 1993 we had our first article published in *Domus*. It was a four-page article by Marcus Romanelli. He then worked with Paola Antonelli, who later became MoMA's head of the design department. The timing could not have been more perfect. From 1994 to 1997 we went through many crises. Just when we were ready to give up everything, we got a phone call from Massimo Morozzi, Edra's art director, who wanted to show the rope chair. Instead of sending him a drawing of the chair, we created a video showing how to build the chair step by step. They loved it and decided to produce it. The following year, I got a phone call from Antonelli. The first thing she asked me was, "Are you not happy with the exhibition?" This was in 1998. It turns out she had faxed us a letter inviting us to have an exhibition at MoMA, but we never received it. She called in August and the show was scheduled for November, around Thanksgiving. Humberto was in Africa at the time, and I didn't know if it was possible to do it. She said the space was ours, so we worked like crazy! They had that big Pollock exhibition at the same time. After that, things took on a different dimension. We had shown at MoMA—people now said that we could do no wrong. But we wanted to stick to our own ideas and ideals. After that show we had to work like madmen to do justice to our recently gained reputation.

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Ideal House, 2004, IMM Cologne, Germany. Designed and furnished by Humberto and Fernando Campana. Interior detail. Photo: Estúdio Campana.

VM Recently, it has become impossible to buy any vintage work by Zanine, Tenreiro, or Sergio Rodrigues without spending a small fortune on auctions. What do you think of the recent international interest in Brazilian

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design from the '50s and '60s?

HC I think that '60s Brazilian design had elements of functionality, of ergonomics, of refinement, also a certain authenticity with tropical roots because of its use of materials such as wicker, not to mention the immense diversity of hardwoods to choose from—

FC Especially because of the wood. Most of those incredible designers worked with a kind of material that today, for environmental reasons, is either no longer available or simply forbidden. Back then its use was interesting but now it has taken on a more historical aspect. I like what Sergio Rodrigues is doing now: he's using lyptus, a highly renewable hybrid hardwood, and has found a way to modernize his work without contributing to deforestation.

VM Do you think the current interest is due to the materials used back then or the design's formal attributes?

HC I think the form also has a tropical flavor. It's very playful but is built with a lot of love.

VM Though your work subverts conventional lines, are you influenced by this tradition?

HC I think so. We have a certain curiosity in everything that was modern.

FC Oscar Niemeyer's pieces, for example, have an aerodynamic quality that attracts me. When I saw *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it blew my mind in terms of the furniture design.



Fernando and Humberto Campana, *Corallo Chair*, 2004, hand-bent steel wire with coral pink epoxy paint finish. Produced by Edra. Photo: Edra.

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VM When the movie came out, in Brazil we already had airport terminals resembling those designs, for instance. But your work is interesting because it's like a future in reverse, using recyclable materials.

FC There's this new book out, *Antiques of the Future*. We met with the editors here in New York. I find it very interesting: things point to the future but the building processes or the materials used are rooted in the past or the present.

HC In that sense, I don't feel part of a Brazilian design heritage: when I began designing I saw how wasteful it was to use wood. I didn't want to follow that path. I thought I had to do the opposite. Also, these modern pieces were very well made, very polished, whereas my nature is chaotic, unpolished. . . . I think Fernando helped me understand this disorder in my way of thinking.

FC But we respect Lina Bo Bardi's and Flávio de Carvalho's work.

VM Isn't he the guy who used to wear skirts in the '30s in São Paulo?

FC Precisely, but he only did that because he thought that in a hot country like Brazil, men should be able to dress more comfortably. It was purely a design issue.



Fernando and Humberto Campana, *Leather Works Chair*, 2007, alligator and reptilian printed leather. Launched at the Salone del Mobile, Milan, Italy, 2007. Produced by Edra. Photo: Edra.

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VM Though you have achieved international acclaim, you continue to live in São Paulo and remain very connected to your hometown, Brotas. What role has São Paulo played in your work?

HC I think the city of São Paulo is a factory of craziness. The beauty of São Paulo is in its ugliness, and this ugliness forces you to find beauty.

VM The virtues of the ugly woman that Vinícius de Moraes praised so much!

FC The ugliness that is Brazil, with its mix of everything inhabiting the same place. São Paulo is a kaleidoscope. Near our studio you see people from everywhere. It used to be a Jewish neighborhood. Then Italians came. . . . Today it's a mix of African, Chinese, Korean, and Middle Eastern people. It's like a big souk. People selling things from all over. It's crazy! It forces you to see beauty where beauty doesn't exist. If you want to create something, it's even more stimulating. In Rio de Janeiro, everything is already there. It's great to be a musician, an actor: everything is so inspiring. But when it comes to industrial creations, like ours, you have to find beauty where you live, where you work, and it can be horrible. Sometimes when I'm going to the airport, I see the sun setting and I think to myself, "This would be great in Rio."

VM As a Brazilian artist, do you think you should cultivate alienation in order to preserve your tropical roots, or do you think this is irrelevant? Do you feel a need to protect your identities as Brazilian artists? I call this the "fruit hat syndrome."

HC I think my work would look very different if I lived somewhere else. I think Brazil forces you to develop a mental agility, because of its ups and downs.

FC I was born before the dictatorship, and I lived through it as well as many other crises—both political and economic. Because of this I think I can be a lot more spontaneous and creative than someone from a more stable country.

HC Another thing I find essential is the Brazilian spirit, a certain emotional generosity. In more developed cultures they have lost this. People are blasé; they are ghosts walking down the streets. It's the spirit of the natives wanting to touch the colonizers that we still keep alive in different ways.

FC Also from our childhood there's Jeca Tatu and Mazzaropi. Along with Italian Neo-Realism, I saw a lot of Mazzaropi movies. My grandmother was

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friends with him. He was a peasant clown. It was wonderful to grow up between these two universes. Monteiro Lobato is great too. We also were lucky enough to attend a great public school, where we learned French, history, literature. . . . Today, if you go to a public school in São Paulo, all you learn is how to smoke crack.

HC I think globalization started in Brazil with all our mixture of cultures and races.



Fernando and Humberto Campana, *Cartoon Chair*, 2007. Upholstery composed of mixed plush Disney toys (lions, dogs, alligators, etc.). Produced by Estúdio Campana. Limited edition, 25 pieces. Photo: Albion Gallery.

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VM Sometime in the mid-'80s I remember walking into a bodega in New York and seeing guavas for sale. I wondered how they got them there before they went bad. Later that same year I started seeing kiwis and all sorts of exotic fruits. After that I began seeing exhibitions with names like *China Today* and *African Art* or *The Inuit Experience* everywhere. These were cultural packages. I even wrote an article on globalization and cultural packages called "The Year the Guavas Came." Do you think that you are seen in the international market as Brazilian designers?

FC I think so. Yesterday, for example, I was at this dinner at the Guggenheim and someone asked me how it was possible to remain tanned all year round in Brazil. I answered that if all else fails, we go to a tanning salon. I was kidding, but I love Brazilian stereotypes.

VM Has the image of your work changed within Brazil?

FC Often Brazilians have very little idea of the work that we do outside of the country. We try to keep people updated but it's very hard. For example, it was very hard to publicize our MoMA exhibition. Things take time.

VM Do you think there's an abyss between the general public and the design community in Brazil?

FC No, on the contrary. Today people are curious; there's genuine general interest. When people go to the supermarket, they choose the better design, the most beautiful package. But I think we lack a certain media culture. Up until the '90s there was a column on architecture and design in *Folha de São Paulo* that came out every Tuesday. It's not like that today. No one talks about architecture or design anymore but fashion events are talked about for months on end. I don't have anything against fashion but I think you have to be informed about everything. We are getting ready for the Architecture Biennial in São Paulo, and only last week they published something about it. Had it been Fashion Week, they would have picked up the story months ago.

VM In New York, star architects receive almost as much press as fashion designers.

HC I think that in Brazil most people think that design is something very polished, always in the Bauhaus style. Design tells a story, paints a picture, but many people still don't understand this.

FC Our young designers are making a name for themselves overseas but are not known in their home country.

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Café Chair, 2006, and *Transrock Chair*, 2006/7, plastic chairs and wicker prototype. From the Transplastic Collection. Designed by Fernando and Humberto Campana and produced by Estúdio Campana. Photo: Fernando Laszlo.

VM Your works seem to spring from the collapsing of high and popular culture, from your bringing commonplace materials and attitudes into the world of design. It's as if you wanted to bridge divisions of class, culture and aesthetic value. Is there a gap between the high and low aspects of your production?

HC Of course there is poetry in transforming common materials into noble designs, but we started using these materials for motives that have little to do with the bridging of high and low. At the beginning of our career, our fondness for low-cost materials, as well as our peculiar handmade

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designs, had to do, mostly, with our lack of resources. We simply did not have enough money to invest on machinery and expensive products.

FC For us it was a way of showing the beauty of materials that are often ignored by common bystanders, so as to subvert their point of view. As I mentioned before, living in São Paulo, where the unpleasant and the ugly dominate, pressed us to exercise the transformation of chaos into beauty. It takes effort and careful looking for the city to reveal itself as interesting, vibrant and poetic.

VM This transgression in your work, of taking everyday materials and turning them into something beautiful, is at work now in a project where you take those horrible plastic chairs one sees everywhere and combine them with wicker. Can you talk about this project?

HC It originated in a vision we imagined: what if one day the earth was covered in plastic? Plants would have to adapt to this plastic soil.

FC I had read somewhere that the soil in the Mediterranean is made almost entirely of plastic, that there's no more organic soil left. Imagine a plant growing out of plastic. Then we made an ironic game of it. Lounge or parlor chairs were originally made of wicker, for ventilation and lightness, but then the wicker was replaced with metal, then braided plastic string, and, finally, cheap and ugly plastic-injection molding. Our project was a counterattack: wicker overtaking everything like a parasite, and trying to regain its place through prostheses, hybridism, and the joining together of the chairs. These are objects that somehow tell their own story, a mutant evolution.

HC We also wanted to revive techniques that are almost dead now, such as manual wicker braiding, and humanize the object via its production.

FC We worked with the Crello company in São Paulo, who were the only people left doing this kind of craft. The company was about to close down and lay off people who had spent their lives doing work that requires a lot of thinking and concentration. What happens to these people when they lose their jobs? They drink or smoke crack. We were able to bring back 10 employees who no longer had jobs.

VM How did your *Favela* project come about?

HC São Paulo is the largest recycling center in the world.

FC Other people's trash becomes useful for the poor people living on the

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streets. Cardboard boxes, wooden crates, they are all reused.

HC This inspired us to make something out of nothing but what already exists. That was the idea: to create a world out of scarcity.

VM When I am in Rio, I am extremely bothered by the “favela tours” in which khaki-clad tourists are driven around in safari-like jeeps so they can take pictures of poor people.

HC Your last exhibition in São Paulo, of photographs with classical themes made of piles of junk, makes me think of this recycling. Your vision for the show was so marvelous it made me jealous



Fernando and Humberto Campana, *Campanas at the Garden*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2007, London. Detail of Bamboo installation (left) and Victoria Regia seat (front right). Photo: Fernando Campana.

VM Sometimes, through the use of materials, you are able to subvert ideas. For example, if today you draw something, people will look at your drawing and focus on its degree of likeness. Does it look like the object it depicts, does it resemble it? No one looks at the drawing itself, at the idea

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of the drawing. If you make a chair out of wood or steel, people look at it in terms of comfort. No one looks at the idea of the chair as an epistemological device. What I like about art is that, though we are surrounded by objects, like the chairs we are sitting on right now, some bring with them images, ideas. Like a clock—all clocks give the time, but only some make you *think* about time.

FC Humberto and I were looking at some watches and talking about how differently we feel about time depending on whether the watches are analog or digital. When they are analog you feel the seconds, the time in between minutes.

VM Making art is sometimes like trying to make your bed while you're still in it.

HC Paola Antonelli once said that if we think about everything that has been made already, why make more? Why write more books, or make a new film? So much has been done already! But it is man's capacity to dream, to see beyond what is that creates this need to re-create, to redesign.

VM But your work also deals with an ecological idea, an idea of posterity. How do you see your work in the future?

FC What in past years worked against our ideas—the idea of recycling, of reusing—is now working in our favor, because everyone talks about it now, and is trying to humanize the process. Without meaning to, we have stumbled upon something that is very right. It started out of our need, you know, at times not having the resources for the right equipment and having to adapt to our own scarcity of tools. But this is who we are, you know? We are now working with a new line of shoes for the brand Grendene—we're calling them the Melissa shoes—and we have a greater public consciousness in mind. A larger percentage of recyclable materials will be used in the sandals, and the shoeboxes will have messages, like cigarettes packs here, about how and what to recycle. In Rocinha we'll have a drop box where people can put their old shoes so that the community can recycle them to make jewelry and other things. Each new designer for Grendene will have to provide a solution for the reuse of the shoes.

VM What other projects are you working on right now?

FC We are redesigning the interior of a hotel in Athens. We are recycling

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everything that is already inside the hotel (built in the '60s). We are taking the carpet and creating patchwork rugs with it, extending the bar with our wicker prostheses. It's very cool. We are also working on the set design for the Ballet National de Marseille's performance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which premieres in Luxembourg in December.

VM It's my favorite book. My last book, *Reflex*, has the first line of the *Metamorphoses* as an epigraph: "My mind is bent on telling of bodies changed into new forms."

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