

Settling into the splendid wide spaces of Design Miami/Basel

June 14 2011

Nigel Coates

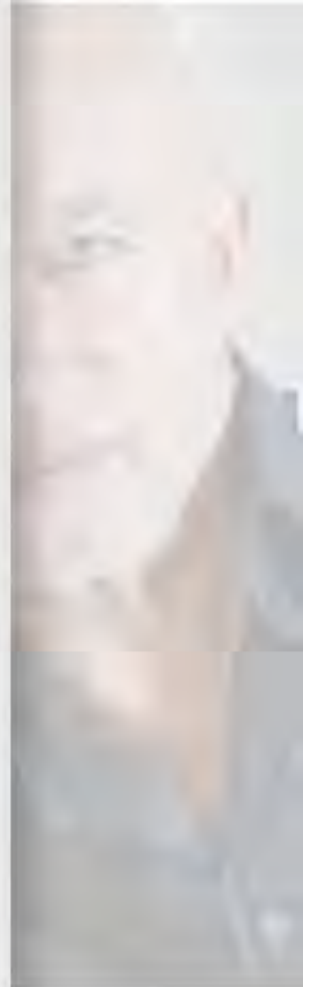
Five am start. Comatose, I climb aboard my taxi to go to Heathrow Terminal One for my Swiss flight to Basel. I'm off to Design Miami/Basel where I'm exhibiting with Cristina Grajales Gallery from New York. The streets of Basel seem exceptionally quiet, even for Switzerland. As it turns out, it's Pentecost, which could explain why TNT lost one of my pieces, which has turned up in Zurich and won't make it in time.

As I enter the hall, my eyes take a while to adjust: unlike other fairs, this one's dark wide alleys amplify the whole space, with very stylish stands every which way. Cristina's stand looks superbly composed and beautifully lit. In the show I have three pieces (second picture): sofas and a chandelier that were first produced for the Venice Architecture Biennale 2008. They were part of a dreamy installation with film, but here you can really see them as objects, as sculptures.

MENU In the afternoon two of Cristina's other artists – Suzanne Tick, Sheila Hicks and I – take a break for the Art Unlimited show in the next hall. What a splendid white open space, so big in fact that the surging art-obsessed crowd wants to devour the work. Impressive installations by Anish Kapoor (with a giant wax-covered cheese, second picture) and a giant (stripey red) enclosure by Daniel Buren (third picture). My favourite piece is an exquisite overscaled mobile with chunks of plasterboard as weights, which slices steadily through the air like a ship in the night.

Later, after the VIP opening back in the Design Hall, our tired gang makes it out onto the street in search of schnitzel. We find them late enough but at a price: Switzerland must be the most expensive country in Europe.

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Somebody.

Born in 1949, and trained at University of Nottingham and the Architectural Association, architect Nigel Coates is also a prolific designer of lighting and furniture. He has been Professor of Architecture at the Royal College of Art since 1995.

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Art Basel: two storeys of the best contemporary art anywhere

June 15 2011

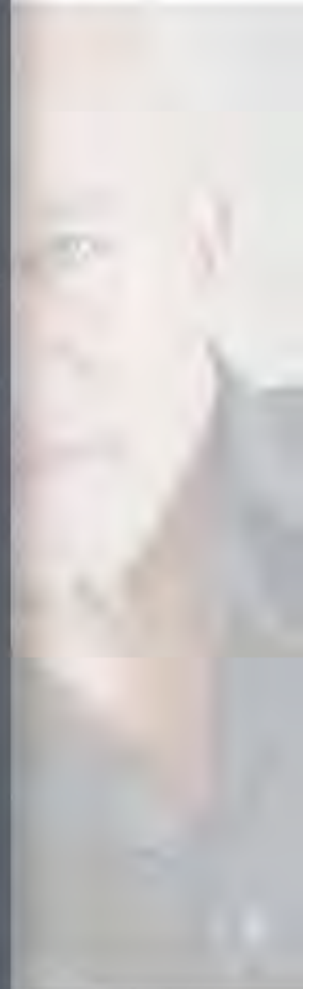
Nigel Coates

Go down to breakfast to discover my modest hotel full of well-heeled art folk. They must have got the last rooms available in Basel. One collector I recognise later in the day by spotting her multiple-faceted titanium bracelet at the next table. I meet my friends at the entrance to the main Art Basel fair beneath a huge Swiss clock with sweeping hands. The size of the crowd is worthy of a football match.

At one minute past we are surging through the doors and in a continuous shoulder-to-shoulder shuffle towards the barrier. Angry VVIPs (I'm someone's morning date) are arguing with the security guards just ahead of me. Then the pressure breaks: people are climbing angrily over and under the barriers. I discover that apparently, we were at the exit turnstiles. The ones for the entrance are way over to the right.

Inside, comfortably beyond the mayhem, the fair is pure magic: the best contemporary art everywhere you look in a two-storey labyrinth. The event is so international that half of New York seems to be there. Of course there are plenty of young blades, most of whom must either be artists or gallery assistants, but there are also plenty of very mature collector types. We think of the money that is about to change hands in the building (and the amount already spent on surgery).

We head upstairs, and visit various galleries that one or other of us knows, including Maureen Paley, which has a giant Wolfgang Tillmans print of Princess Julia. Funny to see a friend frozen on an art wall. Down on the ground level the big boys strut their stuff, with the Marlborough flexing its Bacon muscles. I stop in my tracks at the site of Maurizio Cattelan's upside-down cops at Gagosian and across the way we marvel at the beaded giants by Liza Lou.



Tired and with overstimulated brains and somewhat splintered vision, we return to base, back to the design hall which is pleasantly quiet. I realise that on the adjacent stand to mine two of my mates are exhibiting. In a line, but with a wall in between, there's an Arad, a Hadid and a Coates. Quite a line-up. The back of my sofa reminds me of that famous Irving Penn photo of a torso with corset (that I'd seen in the flesh just minutes before).

Around six it's time to take off for the airport. Airside is swarming with French soldiers in fatigues. Those of us in civvies

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From Basel back to London; next stop, São Paulo

June 16 2011
Nigel Coates

Wake up in my own bed and brace myself for a hardcore day of meetings and packing – I'm off to São Paulo this evening to give a talk at a new high-end design fair. Shame they organised it to overlap Basel, but hey, I'm doing both.

First off I have a meeting with a greige bureaucrat. Overcast beginning to the day but won't let him get me down. We seem to be speaking different languages.

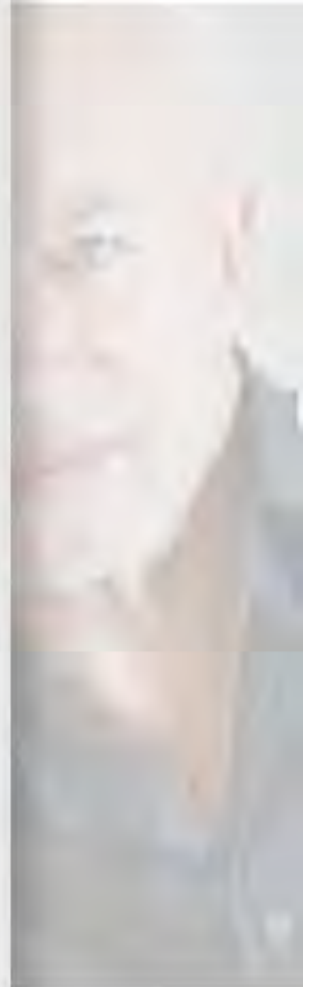
Spirits lift as I'm back in my South Kensington studio. There's a lot to get through before leaving tonight, including updating the team on my Basel experience and what I'd like them to be doing while I'm away. I need a few more images for the talk in São Paulo tomorrow, including some of my hotel projects and designs from various stages of my career.

I've named the talk The Architecture of the Object, but I want to begin with a take on the city. I love the confusion and layering of cities that are not quite perfect, such as London, Tokyo or indeed São Paulo.

Around 5pm we have a meeting with Angel Monson from [Vessel gallery](#) in London who wants to do a show with us this autumn. We're all very excited and talk about various lighting pieces and how they might work together.

Back home around 6.30 and I've only got an hour to pack. Can't find my favourite blue striped shirt. Maybe I left it in Italy? It turns up in my rucksack: it'll go perfectly with my hospital-blue chinos.

[Click here to read the next instalment of Nigel Coates' Diary of a Somebody.](#)



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An immense, sprawling city of design, fashion – and light

June 17 2011

Nigel Coates

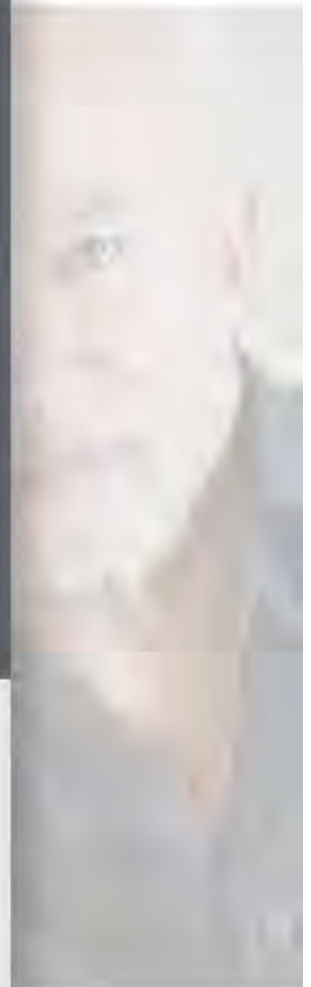
I emerge from the overnight flight at 6am feeling like a refugee. The driver, Tony, is there to meet me. He's originally from Basel, which is bit of a mind-bender considering that's where I was earlier in the week. He predicts a 90-minute drive to my hotel in Jardins, the smart area of **São Paulo** that's just west of the largest feature of this immense sprawling city – the tower-lined Avenida Paulista.

I spend the morning in the hotel until Tony takes me to meet my host, Waldick Jatobá, for lunch at the OCA, a shallow white dome with a ring of porthole windows. This is one of **Oscar Niemeyer's** cultural exhibition spaces in the Parque Ibirapuera, the largest of which is the Art Biennial Matarazzo Pavilion. I'm here to contribute a talk about collectable design for the first Design São Paulo week that is taking place in the OCA. Waldick's a very affable guy, an ex-banker and design aficionado who has put together this first sizeable venture.

On the upper floor the influence of the Campana brothers on the Brazilian design psyche is very much in evidence, with an installation of their prototypes made from tangled wire, rope and fluffy toys. Next to it is a beautiful red tunnel with very witty pieces by the couturier Maurizio Galante. There's a gorgeous armchair covered in cactus print, soft and spiky at the same time.

At the end of one of Niemeyer's signature ramps, on the lower level, more than 20 galleries occupy plywood "houses" making up a favela world of handmade but elegant design. It's an exciting moment. There's an army of organisers and press people.

This first design event has been paired up with São Paulo Fashion Week, which is being held in the Matarazzo Pavilion next door. My talk, Architecture and the Object, is at 15.00 in the



OCA auditorium, and will be simultaneously translated. I begin with my work as a radical architect, how this first got built in Japan, and how design emerged as a bona fide language. I tell them how I'm inspired by the messiness of cities, that layering and disjunction speak volumes. I go on about narrative in design and how, whether working in wood, glass or plastic, I try to marry techniques and meaning.

Halfway through I'm told that the headphones aren't working; the translator will join me in front of the audience. The crunch

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A passion for art in the rundown backstreets of São Paulo

June 18 2011

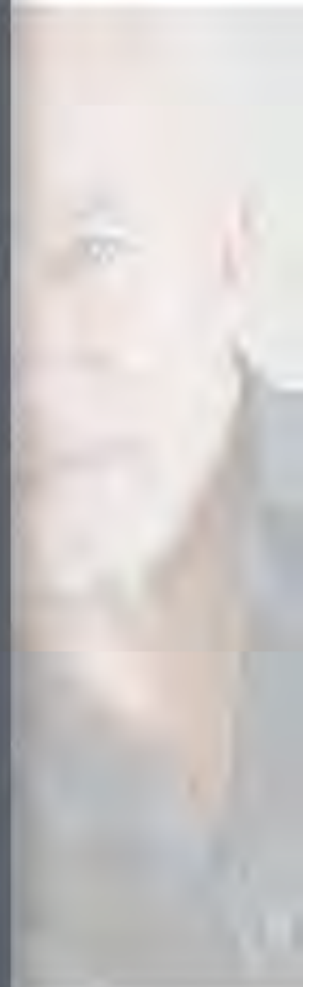
Nigel Coates

I spend most of the morning in my hotel room, writing my blog for the day before. It's a pretty standard non-environment designed to show no trace of occupation. Limed oak doors and a Piranesi print are evidence of the self-proclaimed "European style" of the whole building. At 12.30 my driver is waiting on the forecourt to take me to lunch at MAM, the Museum of Modern Art. I'm meeting two people from one of the leading galleries in São Paulo, the Galeria Baró. Over a buffet plate of (typically Brazilian) fish with tomato and banana, we chat about how the art world is edging towards design. Will I go and take a look at their two gallery spaces? Yes, I'd be delighted.

We're heading through the leafy Jardins area to their new design space, a small but delightful stack of rooms with clever design pieces made from existing furniture, rope, beads, footballs. Brazilian design seems much closer to witty re-use than to manufacturing in the industrial sense. It has a spirited brashness and a great deal of humanity.

We continue by car along choked-up avenues, up and down winding roads, and crossing from one "polis" to the next. We finally reach the gallery that is in the (as yet) most rundown of these, a street lined with rubber tyre shops, welders and gloomy housing blocks. The gallery itself turns out to be enormous: an ex-garage with a sweeping industrial roof. The space is so big that they have six different shows going on simultaneously, including a vast print of Iguazu Falls covering the largest glazed wall. Dappled sunlight illuminates it from behind, and amplifies the double take on being a tourist at this major destination in the south of the country.

We head back to the OCA, a trip of only six kilometres but it takes more than an hour, zigzagging through the gridded streets but failing miserably to avoid the Friday congestion. Gijs Bakker,



the founder of Droog, has been speaking to the Design São Paulo audience. We've never met so have a lot to learn about each other. Later we're both invited to dinner at our host's home. We arrive before the other (many) guests.

Waldick is a passionate collector and is pleased to show us around his art-packed apartment. The study has many gorgeous Brazilian photographs corralled onto one wall. Almost lost among these is a gorgeous Louise Bourgeois of abstract erotic shapes apparently getting to know one another. It's dedicated to

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'In Rio, even speeding is tinged with a langueur'

June 20 2011

Nigel Coates

The first non-starter of the week: I've completed the ritual of packing, and arrive in perfect time at the airport for a 13.00 flight to Rio. They keep changing somehow lost in my writing, I lose track and miss. They've changed gates at the last minute, and now until 15.00. Category B (ie boring) nightmare.

With extended waits, airports expose their true natures. This one feels more like a station. Planes come and forth between São Paulo and Rio. The only food on airside is cheese puffs, the shops uninspiring. Garbagemen in blue overalls push brooms in a sweeping choreography that must be invisible to most passengers. They seem to be waiting on Gate 1 for my flight.

It's five years since I've been to Rio; over this period the cost of living has doubled in value. Everything seems expensive now. Brazil's booming economy. Since the topic of the week has been tax, I can't help thinking that the excruciating import tax on luxury goods, apart from the VAT – has inadvertently saved Brazil from the global obsession with international brands. Applying the same principle to design, it means that a piece of Moroso or Vitra costs more than a unique piece by a Brazilian artist/designer.

Even though there's no music in the car, my taxi driver uses the steering wheel as a percussion instrument. Car drivers play music in their bones. Driving at 90km per hour down the canyon of apartment blocks just behind Copacabana, near Atlantica, we startle a woman in shorts and flip-flops with a poodle. She drags it in haste from the middle of the road. Nothing is slow in Rio, but it's not fast either. Even speeding is tinged with a certain langueur.

June 20 2011

'In Rio, even speeding is tinged with a certain langueur'

The first non-starter of the week, a boring nightmare.

Eventually we arrive at my friend's doorway, a door in a high wall topped with broken glass. He has acquired an ex-seminary, tucked into the lower slopes of a favela-encrusted mountain just three blocks back from Ipanema beach. The plan is to house his design office here, and make a home big enough so that all his friends can stay. It's got a healthy lack of designer detail: more stripped-down colonial than modernist. What an exciting project lies ahead for my friend; there's a real sense of optimism that seems so far from the European reality of austerity.

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