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Graduate
Center

BGC Teen Voices: Spotlight on Contemporary Designers

Marufa Kasham
Mariel Villeré

MARIEL VILLERÉ BY MARUFA KASHAM

Marufa: Could you briefly introduce yourself and your work?

Mariel: My name is Mariel Villeré, and I have a background in architecture and design, principles that are woven into a number of different experiences and projects. My creative work is assisted by full-time job frameworks that are definitely in the category of alternative careers in architecture. I started out in 2008. I graduated from Barnard, and, as we all know, the recession hit shortly thereafter. I was actually working in the Skyscraper Museum in lower Manhattan, in Battery Park City, primarily working on projects related to development in China and the relationship between the skyscrapers and urban planning, as well as what was happening to New York in the 1920s. This experience really tilted me away from practicing architecture in a firm and towards curatorial practice, making publications, and public programming; to opening up the conversation I loved in an academic sense, thinking about systems and the way that a city works, from infrastructure, to buildings, to how people interact with each other depending on the form of our built environment.

After that, I ended up going to MIT for a graduate degree in history, theory, and criticism of architecture and art, and continued working in the arena of exhibition-making and public programs. Then I worked for the Parks Department because I wanted my work to speak to a wider public. I think that is where my interest in environmental art was really heightened, especially working at this scale of what I would say is contemporary practice and socially engaged art, which is more performative in nature and really brings in educational opportunities for a wide public. In that role, developing a public arts program for a park that was in the process of being developed, [I was] thinking about how art and artists could play a role in urban planning and the shifting of our shared city, and what public space looks like in 2020 and beyond. This project is the Fresh Kills Park in Staten Island, it was a landfill park project. I was looking at how we, as humans, engage with the environment, specifically our consumer habits and how that has really damaging effects on the environment, but also how much possibility exists for re-engaging, as well as transformation and education. I worked with a lot of artists, sort of swirling around in that arena. At the same time, I created side projects,



Freshkills Park Field R/D field trip to Freshkills Park (image courtesy of Dylan Gauthier)

publications, and exhibitions that really looked more in depth at the human element of climate change and the environment. I am now working at the Graduate Center at CUNY and sort of breaking off pieces of prior experience, and really amplifying what it means to think about community and engagement, but from within an academic institution, and how to broaden access and equity in our society through education. What I'm specifically working on here is developing adult continuing education, but with the addition of cultural programs. Finding ways to make hybrid programming that resembles the kind of work we're doing at Fresh Kills, which is interdisciplinary and addressing some of society's most pressing issues. I really think that needs to be done at an interdisciplinary level, through interdisciplinary exchange, and that was actually how I was educated in architecture, to bring it full circle. My education in architecture was not just about buildings and forms. It was really about how to borrow and interface with other experts to create the most productive kind of space for people to be happy and successful. I'm doing that now through programming rather than making a building.

MK: What sparked your interest in the relationship between architecture, science, and technology?

MV: While being at MIT... Going back a little, I think my interest in going there was to really dig into that intersection of architecture, design, science, and technology in an authentic way. What I was noticing in architectural discourse was a lot of appropriation and response without a full engagement with the practices and disciplines within science and technology. I wanted to go to the heart of things, and really interact directly with people who were

involved in artificial intelligence, robotics, and material sciences, and understand them from within a little bit better. That was definitely the atmosphere I was in, but I ended up not taking that on in my graduate work in such a direct way. I focused more on adaptive use. For example, I focused on Documenta, a show in Kassel. It's part of a biennial circuit that happens every five years, the first of which was in 1955. I worked on that show as my master's thesis. This is where my understanding of environment and nature solidified, which I would say was the other jumping off point for me working at the Parks Department. Continuing around that theme of authentic engagement with scientists, my counterpart at the Parks Department was a neuroscientist, and was bringing in ecological researchers to the park at the same time I was bringing in artists. We were really trying to foster an exchange between artists and scientists at Fresh Kills, and collectively shape that place as a future open park. Throughout the projects I've taken on — the bigger picture that I have — is a curiosity about how folks working from different disciplines can address a similar problem through collaboration.



Freshkills Park Field R/D program with speaker Robin Nagle (image courtesy of Natalie Conn)

MK: Yeah. When I saw your work, I was most interested in this focus on environmentalism, in addition to engineering and designs, I was really fascinated by that.

MV: Well, the Fresh Kills project is really complex, so there is a big engineering component there, and even geoscience, like physical science. There's just a lot there. I interface with a lot of scientists from all specializations.

MK: Can you talk about your favorite project to date?

MV: I'm most proud of a project that resembled a residency program at Fresh Kills. It's meant to be a very flexible framework for artists to engage with the Fresh Kills site over a long duration of time. What we were doing there was bringing the public in before the park was open, including artists, and they were given special access under this program called "field research and development." We successfully launched this with seven artists in the first cohort. The format was one that included annual site visits for their personal, individualized research projects, which may have been historical, social, or environmental. In addition to reading and research on their own time, we would come together every month or so and have a guest speaker, a conversation, or a seminar-style discussion where we all read the same text and discuss it. This was really a working group, and they would give each other feedback on the projects that they were pursuing individually, which helped inform the development of the residency program itself. We had special advisors to the park project, and [...] how other artists in the future could be a part of it. What I really like about this model is that it's flexible enough to change as the park [changes] in the physical sense. As pieces of the park are built out, artists can work on the sections that are closed and over time.

We made an exhibition, but there's a conversation about another exhibition and publication in the future. So hopefully this will serve as an example to other land management groups, municipalities, or private [companies] and to artists that are interested in engaging in these topics as we face unprecedented environmental challenges to society, and hopefully [will] inspire this sort of interdisciplinary problem-solving that I've been talking about.

MK: When you're starting a project, an exhibition, or a piece of writing, I was curious [about] how this process starts, as well as what inspires you when you start a project.

MV: I'm someone who likes to understand the ways in which people are already working in a particular space, whether that space is an organization or a physical space, and what

intervention or response I could make that would be meaningful and productive rather than controversial or antagonistic. That's kind of my starting point, through observation. I would say conversation is a huge part of my project, and the field R&D project grew out of a number of conversations I was having with the eventual collaborator, Dylan Gauthier. [The final project] evolved into something that didn't resemble our original conversation. I would say that's the case with a number of different projects as well. I think it's interesting working with artists who are process-based, who [like] to [view] their work as socially engaged artwork, because it's very different from going into an archive or going into an artist[']s studio and selecting works that are either already complete or in process[es] that are physical in nature, like a sculpture or a painting, and instead working with them to develop something new with many more variables. It does resemble much more [...] a science project, with a hypothesis and a series of observations and some sort of summary of your findings. I think that's a very interesting [...] conundrum for a curator working with a socially engaged artist through conversations that evolve, and in some way, it's co produced.

MK: What is your research process, from beginning, to gathering ideas and artists, to the final exhibition?

MV: Well, there is a lot to be said [about] people it's starting with, and really that describe[s] my projects over the last five years. Like, starting with one person and being led to another, and that person leads to someone else and so on. Often it's [about] very slow word of mouth, and relationship-building — I count that as research — but it's also checking out books from the library, reading about shows or reading about someone's work through an interview, going [to] exhibitions and gallery shows, sort of keeping up to date with policy and the public media coverage of environmental issues and what the science community is publishing for a broader public. It's sort of keeping up with these bigger conversations and drilling down with particular people and how they interact with others, and [what the] themes and priorities are in the work and how that can create another conversation with another artist's work. I am thinking

specifically of my process in sort of everything leading up to the exhibition I did at NATUREArt called "The Department of Human and Natural Services" [...] [It] was on display at this gallery called NATUREArt in Bushwick, last year, March [and] April. It was a group show about how to construct a complete environment, and to do that through artists, objects, artifacts, ephemera — creating a set, and letting the art speak for itself. How that can be achieved when a lot of that art is not necessarily object-based to begin with. For example, one of the pieces was the artist being available by phone to talk to the people who came to the gallery. So a gallery visitor would call the number that was preprogrammed into the desk phone, and they would talk to Alison Roe, the artist, about their feelings about climate change. She was acting as a therapist, effectively an emotional labor specialist. She was a therapist, on-call for gallery visitors. That's very much an unpredictable piece, and [we were] thinking about how that fits into this larger context of six other artists' work, and how these interactions create a new kind of interaction, literally and figuratively.



The Department of Human and Natural Services at NURTUREart, Brooklyn. Artists: Ellie Irons, Catherine Grau, Christopher Kennedy, and andrea haenggi, Li Sumpter, Nancy Nowacek, and Allison Rowe (images courtesy of NURTUREart)

MK: What is it about parks that you love?

MV: I think they're really, for people living in dense, urban places like New York, for reprieve and recreation and oxygen, but what I also like about them is that — similar to what I was describing with that particular gallery show — [...] there are interactions that are unpredictable, and I love chance encounters. And dog parks [are] especially fascinating places, because you

could communicate through your pet, and your pet sort of describes your social standing for the time that you're there, so there's that non-human aspect and unpredictability. I love the openness, even in the smallest parks.

MK: Who is your work for, and why do you think it's important for people to know about your research?

MV: Over the years, I think I'm finally able to say confidently that I aspire to make work for the general public. My hope is that people find something of interest in it, and that might not be the same thing. I think it would be more successful if it was not the same thing that they find across... A group of people [...] might have different things that they relate to in a single piece. I don't know about the research piece of it, but I would say... A different project I think about when you ask that question, when I think about a successful project, is one that can operate on several levels and be appreciated at face value, and for those who have a certain body of knowledge at many other levels. I would say it's for anyone who chooses to engage with it, and hopefully that is a wide enough breadth of people and not [...] one kind of person. I try to think of my research process as one that is [meant] to translate as well and make it relatable, like [to make] the information relatable.

MK: What's your favorite city and why?

MV: That's a tough one for a New Yorker, isn't it? We always like to hate on New York, but we're always here. Second to New York, it would be New Orleans. I love it there because I could never live there, but it's a really special place to me based on family history and being there when I was in college. I went to New Orleans after Katrina to kind of understand the rebuilding process from a number of different perspectives, including the sustainable architecture side of things and [the] historical contribution. And then I think I find it such an important city, personally for many, and I think it's an important example for a lot of people to look to [for understanding] how we have engaged [with] nature and how urban planning and development has gone wrong in trying to control nature, and how we can continue to learn from that mistake from the beginning.

ABOUT

Marufa Kasham is alumna of the Bard Graduate Center Lab for Teen Thinkers. Currently a junior at the University at Albany, she is studying biochemistry and political science, and her other interests include biotechnology, activism, fashion, and journalism.

Trained as an architectural designer and historian, **Mariel Villeré** researches, writes, and organizes exhibits and cultural programming at the intersection of architecture, art, landscape, and the city. She is currently the Program Development Director in the Office of Academic Initiatives and Strategic Innovation at The Graduate Center, CUNY. She was formerly the Manager for Programs, Arts and Grants at Freshkills Park/NYC Parks, where she worked to build the art program for the landfill-to-park site through an inquiry-based artist residency program, Field R/D, and through the on-site Studio+Gallery she founded in January 2018. Her work has been the subject of articles in Hyperallergic, Art in America, ArtSpace, and BOMB Magazine.