

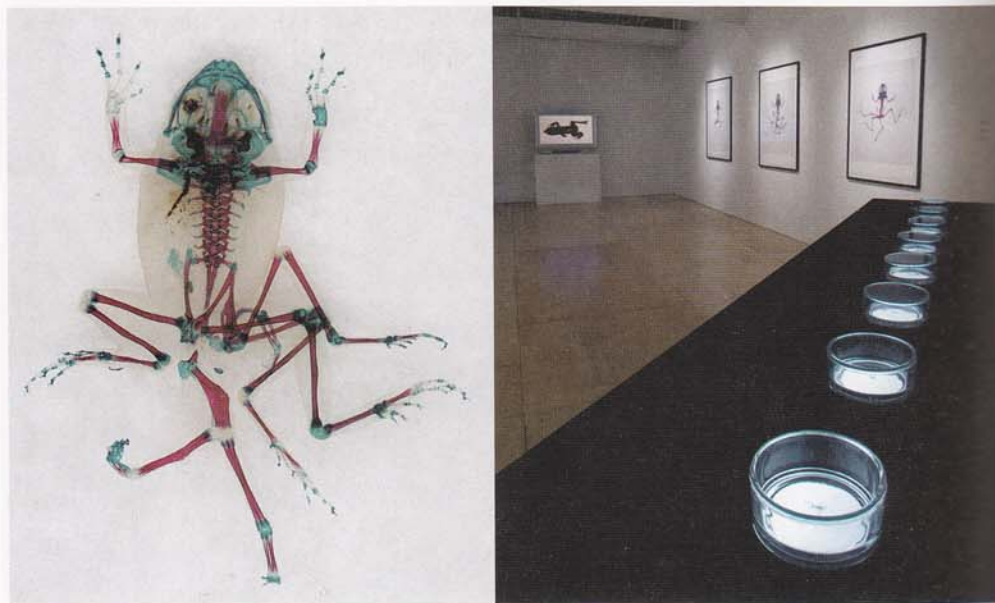
Brandon Ballengée: Deviant Histories

by Glenn Harper

Brandon Ballengée's multi-disciplinary works develop from ecological fieldtrips and laboratory research conducted in collaboration with scientists, students, and members of the public. As Jens Hauser points out, Ballengée's melding of eco-art and bioart includes "the collecting and conservation of amphibians or other wetland species with deformities and malformations—or promoting the growth of such anomalies in controlled laboratory simulations...selective breeding and micro-surgery projects to intervene in natural developmental processes, the presentation of these animals either alive, or cleared and stained in a highly aestheticized fashion, or the colorful, oversized, and abstract, yet seemingly alive scanner photographs of the specimens' physiologies."¹ Ballengée, who is based in New York, has developed projects in the Americas, Australia, Asia, and Europe.

Ballengée says that his work was inspired by observing nature and its decline in suburban Ohio, where he grew up: "A nearby stream emptied into a marsh that was filled with mysterious life. I would spend hours...catching and drawing vividly colored salamanders, diverse species of fish...and other fantastic creatures. When I was a teenager, the largest forest trees were cut and sold to a lumber company. Today, half the forest is under a housing subdivision and

Left: *DFA 23, Khárôn*, 2001/07. Unique chromogenic print, 46.5 x 34.5 in. Right: Installation view of *Malamp: The Occurrence of Deformities in Amphibians*, installed as part of "Biological Agents," at Gallery 400, the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008.





Above: *Love Motel for Insects: Lough Boora Variation*, 2010. Outdoor installation with black ultraviolet lights, wood, fabric, and invited insects, 2 x 30 meters. View of installation at Sculpture in the Parklands, Lough Boora, Ireland. Below: Installation view of "Praeter Naturam," at Parco Arte Vivente, Turin, Italy, 2010.

most of the stream runs through pipes.²² His "early work dealt with this sense of loss...As this interest grew, I wanted to dig in deeper, so I began collaborating with biologists and participating in ecological surveys. This evolved into conducting primary biological research and the fusion of my art with these practices."²³

Collecting specimens has become the heart of Ballengée's work. For "Hudson River Projects" at Wave Hill's Glyndor Gallery in 2003, he presented *Breathing Space for the Hudson: Charting the Biodiversity and Pollutants of the Hudson River*, a survey of the river's health in the form of fish tanks, each one representing a different section of the estuary—from salt to brackish to fresh water, along with aquatic life from each region. High-resolution digital prints of five uncommon underwater creatures scanned from specimens complemented an interactive element: viewers were encouraged to look up their homes on four suspended maps





Tropical Cloud Forest Displacement, part of the ongoing series "Eco-Displacements," 2006/07. Mixed-media sculpture, natural history specimens and artifacts, and video by Valerie Druguet and David Rosane, 3 x 1 x 2.5 meters.

that identified sources of pollution along the river, from New York City to Troy. In an earlier work, *The Ever Changing Tide* (2001–02), Ballengée collaborated with scientists on the collection, identification, and documentation of the numerous aquatic organisms available for consumption at seafood markets in Flushing, New York. The research resulted in gallery exhibitions (at the Queens Museum and several natural history museums), as well as a multilingual installation in a local fish market showing fish species (many available in fish markets such as the one hosting the installation) in danger of extinction.

A significant portion of Ballengée's work deals with amphibians: "Since 1996, I have been focusing on the global decline of frog, toad, and salamander species and the increased numbers of deformities I find in their populations. Amphibians are a 'sentinel' species...About one-third of them are declining or already gone. A world that they cannot live in cannot support much else."⁴ He considers his various projects dealing with amphibians as part of an overarching project called "Malamp," or the "Malformed Amphibian Project."

Several recent projects in England have continued the "Malamp" series, in addition to investigating other species. In 2007, in collaboration with The Arts Catalyst and SPACE (a London gallery), Ballengée and local ecologists conducted research and led a series of fieldtrips into the meadows and marshlands at Gunpowder Park in the Lea Valley, on the border between London and Essex. A study day, with urban ecologist Dusty Gedge and wildlife photographer David Cottridge, gave artists an opportunity to develop their ecological art practice and allowed environmentalists to engage with artists. Ballengée also used his residency in the park to delve into the reproductive cycle, with *Love Motels for Insects*. These sculptural works use ultra-violet light to study and photograph spiders, moths, beetles, and other nocturnal creatures. To accompany the installation, he organized an urban bug hunt that revealed the insect life of Hackney. (Ballengée's other habitat-sculptures include *Micro-habitat for Snakes*, created for the Geumgang Nature Art Biennale in 2004.) In the months following the on-site segments of the Gunpowder Park project, Ballengée worked with scientists to examine and document the collected specimens.

During the summers of 2007 and '08, at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Ballengée collected samples from ponds and lakes to research rates of deformity and mutation in resident frogs, toads, and newts. In the summer of 2008, he set up a public bioart laboratory in YSP's Longside Gallery, inviting visitors to discuss the project and participate in his research. During both summers, he led school groups and visitors in collecting samples and conducting aquatic surveys. These U.K. projects, which resulted in the monograph, *Malamp: The Occurrence of Deformities in Amphibians*, also led to "The Case of the Deviant Toad," a 2010 exhibition at the Royal Institution of Great Britain, exploring issues of biodiversity and ecological change.

Ballengée's "Praeter Naturam," a 2010 exhibition at the Parco Arte Vivente in Turin, collected and summarized the results of his public actions and research at sites across Europe, Asia, and North America since 1996. This survey and other recent projects demonstrate that Ballengée continues, as Sara Feola says, "to explore the ever more urgent aspects of global climatic change and the ever growing influence of man upon the environment."⁵

Notes

1. Jens Hauser, "Sculpted by the Milieu—Frogs as Media," in *Brandon Ballengée: Praeter Naturam*, exhibition catalogue, (Turin, Italy: Parco Arte Vivente, 2010).
2. "Bio-art with Brandon Ballengée," in John K. Grande, *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* (Grosseto, Italy: Pari Publishing, 2007).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sara Feola, "Praeter Naturam," <<http://www.curamagazine.com/en/?p=1408>>.