

IN-BETWEEN WORLDS: REALITY AND VIRTUALITY IN THE ART OF NICK ERVINCK

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A large yellow ball lies in the middle of a faceted brick column structure, which is lit up from the inside. The object is intricately detailed, stands on a heptagonal base, light shining through some ornamental slits. At first, the viewer is irritated. Not that the sculpture doesn't evoke associations: the images that layer themselves in front of the inner eye range from Renaissance baptisteries to archaic temples and the well in the fairy tale about the frog prince. There are rather too many than too few references, and none of them is unambiguous. The fact that the sculpture with the title CORECHNOTS is only knee-high, but that a very similar object appears as an approximately thirty meter high building in a landscape on a digital print (which enriches the multitude of references with allusions to utopian architecture, such as El Lissitzky's "cloud-irons"), obviously makes it a model. Or is the opposite the case, does the print show a larger-than-life-sized digital model of the sculpture? Does the sculpture belong to the virtual world and has entered our reality? Or is it a design for a different reality?

Nick Ervinck's works play with the viewer's image of reality. They trigger a dialogue between print and sculpture, between virtual and real world, and it is in this in-between space that the young Belgian artist's works live. Mostly, they exist in several media simultaneously, without being subject to a linear system of interdependence. "My virtual images constantly infect the real world and the other way around", Ervinck explains. Accordingly, questions about a chronological order or a hierarchy of media are futile. Study is final work, computer rendering is sculpture, image is object.

Complexity as an answer to a complex world

Ervinck's works form a parallel universe, which obeys exclusively to its own laws and is inhabited mainly by architectural objects, by blobs, boxes and archetypes. In his film installations, these become unexpectedly dynamic – morphing, growing, shrinking and bubbling to the heart's content. The short film sequences are in fact visual poems, which one can keep watching for hours without getting bored, even though they don't have a narrative structure. The sculptures become snap shots that have been transported into the tangible world, meaning that they can be read as materialized film stills. This absurd thought barely formulated, however, one already has to ask oneself again whether the opposite might not rather be the case, and the films illustrate the different developmental stadia of the sculptures.

It doesn't make things easier that the different media are increasingly converging in Ervinck's oeuvre. By definition, computer animation is a fast, modern medium and sculpture is a slow, traditional medium. Ervinck, however, is working on perfecting both in order to let them become as "realistic" as possible, as paradoxical as that might sound in the context of his art. Considering the increasing refinement of computer technology and the skill that Ervinck is acquiring at making his sculptures, this should eventually lead to optical congruence. Will Ervinck's universe have become reality then? That's probably not even his aim. As he once said, he isn't interested in the real world. That might be true, as in fact Ervinck creates art about the creation of art and about creative processes, a kind of meta-art, which can appear nearly autistic in its obsessiveness, perfectionism and surrealism. On the other hand, Ervinck does create his art in response to reality. "The world is complex", says the artist. "As a reaction to this, I have decided to create an even more complex world, which helps me to understand the real world." He has been working on his alternative world for years, even though it can only be realized partly or in models.

Art and perfection

And yet, makeability plays an important role in Ervinck's art. As counterpart to the graphical

evolution of the computer images, he researches the possibilities and limitations of materials in his sculptural work. For SIUTOBS, he produced thousands of tiny bricks, measuring 5 x 9 millimetres, just big enough to still lay them. Here, his predilection for manic puzzlework meets his perfectionism and his fascination for the limits of makeability. "I'm looking for the extreme in miniature. How small can something be if it's still supposed to be perfect?"

Therefore it comes as no surprise that Ervinck wanted to become an accountant when he was a teenager. His penchant for systemizing, tabulating and planning the world – albeit according to an utterly idiosyncratic system – has resulted in a personal image archive, which counts nearly 18,000 images, organized in alphabetical order. As anagrams, constructed from several words, the cryptic titles of Ervinck's works also relate to the system of this archive. He is the librarian of his own universe. Besides his own works, the archive originally also included photos found on Google, but by now the computer animations have gained the upper hand. Or as Ervinck puts it: "The virtual world is increasingly sucking up reality". It only adds to the intricacy of this artistic hall of mirrors, that the images of reality were taken from the virtual space of the internet.

As surreal as Ervinck's universe may seem, though, it does incorporate references to reality. With the exception of the abstract blobs and boxes, many of his creations are figurative. They're archetypal building-, boat-, and sometimes even animal-shapes. He once saw a coral in a shop in Venice, was immediately fascinated by its structure, bought it and took it to his studio in Belgium. Since then, he has been making as accurate ceramic replicas as possible of the coral, in order to find out how far art and nature can converge, searching for a perfection that transcends human shortcomings.

Deus Artifex

In fact, Ervinck deals with age-old, basic artistic topics. The question whether the artist is capable of transcending nature and producing a world of his own goes back to Aristotle and Plato and has been running through the entire history of art theory. In the end, it's the question about the *idea* and whether it develops *a posteriori* from the contemplation of nature or *a priori* from the artist's brain. If one follows the first definition, the artist is limited to imitating the visible world; if one follows the second, he is an image of God and can create his own worlds from nothing.

Ervinck fuses both concepts in his art. He strives to perfectly imitate elements of the natural world and at the same time to perfectly create an artificial world. As *deus artifex*, he builds a universe that follows his own rules and which he controls. While the sculptures are subject to the fallibility of craft and material, these imponderabilities are practically ruled out in the computer animations. They're subject only to the limits of technology and its handling. "The straightness and controllability of the virtual world appeal to me", he says. It's no wonder that he avidly played with Lego-stones as a child and later became addicted to computer games, mainly to the so-called "god games" like SimCity – games in which the player creates and controls a virtual microcosm. As an artist, he continues this fascination and is constantly busy constructing and deconstructing his own cosmos. His quest for control doesn't only concern his works, but also their surroundings, and the different manifestations of his works always react to or even influence the exhibition space. Placing his works as pre-fabricated solitaires in a White Cube isn't his kind of thing.

Mutual fertilization

Maybe the reason for this is Ervinck's explicit interest in architecture. "I see more energy and innovation in architecture than in sculpture", he asserts. In his works, he plays with architectural stereotypes just as much as with the ideological and aesthetic antagonism of blob and box. By turning the laws of architecture upside down, he creates impossible architectural images, which are perfectly normal in his world. Sometimes the combinations seem abstruse, like the huge yellow egg inside a brick building which is folded open, its façades turned outside in (SIUTOBS). One can think of the most famous and mysterious egg in art history, the one in Piero della Francesca's *Pala Montefeltro* (1472), or one can read it as a symbol of fertility. After all, the artist often talks about a "mutual fertilization of the real and the virtual world". Ervinck himself, however, simply explains the

egg as "the ultimate blob-shape". He understands SIUTOBS as "an ode to architecture, in which the walls, liberated of all function, become pure sculpture."

According to him, corals are also a kind of blobs, because they can grow endlessly in all directions (which, by the way, is something they have in common with his image archive) and because their complex shapes can only be imitated perfectly with the help of digital technology. However, their relation to the scale of architecture is even more concrete. A few years ago, Ervinck realized during a stay in Berlin that the city is permeated by conduit pipes, which form a huge, invisible coral structure. That gave him the idea of building his coral sculptures out of standardized PVC pipe segments from the DIY shop – not as final works, but as nearly life-sized models (YAROTUBS). The aim is to eventually make them from metal. If there is anything that can stop Ervinck's creative and perfectionist urge at the moment, it's financial limitations. "In fact, all my works are studies", he says and leaves open whether that is a conscious decision or not.

Another computer animation shows a coral sculpture made of brick, its branches ending in chimneys (GNI_D_GH_177_SEP2006). As with this work, it's often easy to place Ervinck's visual language in the tradition of Belgian surrealism. Accordingly, hardly any discussion of his works lacks a mention of Magritte. The artist himself mainly feels related to the free thinking of the surrealists. His aim is to not fulfill the viewer's expectations of logic or realism. In this way, he confronts the viewers with these expectations and at the same time grants them entrance to his own universe, where librarian's mentality and limitless creativity, control and anarchy, microcosm and macrocosm come together.

by Anneke Bokern