

A DIRECTOR OF HYBRID WORLDS

Nick Ervinck in conversation with Phillipe van Cauteren

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Phillipe van Cauteren: One year ago I selected you to take part in the exhibition Young Artist (Gent, 2005). That was the first time I actually confronted your work. But it was only recently, after seeing your exhibition at de Brakke Grond, that I really *got* your work. Strikingly, an incredible shift and development has occurred; I noticed an obsessive eye for materiality. How do you see this development of your work? Where do you locate your interest for materials?

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Nick Ervinck: First and foremost, my work is an ever-growing archive of images and shapes, in which I am searching for the interaction between virtual constructions and handmade sculptures. You could describe it as a kind of cross-pollination between the virtual and physical world. The digital images are constantly contaminating the three-dimensional shapes and vice versa. I love the contrast between the clean, smooth, almost industrial shapes and the more organic, brutish matter like dabs of paint, soil crusts or concrete-like matter. This way, I am really in search of the duality between certain shapes that are impossible to create virtually and those that are impossible to achieve in reality. My work becomes just that bit more interesting when I succeed in positing those worlds against each other. But I also want to familiarise myself with the characteristics of specific materials like wood, polyester or plaster. This way, once I start designing with these materials virtually, I am also aware of their possibilities and limitations. The more I engage with the virtual world, the stronger is the desire to re-implement this virtual world within reality and experience it physically. But also the desire to create these images as perfect and clean as possible in reality, like they are designed virtually, became stronger. My work has become more about the search for the almost superhuman, the divine; an object that almost doesn't belong to this world anymore. Something alien. By choosing that perfect finish and hard-wearing materials, I also want to take a certain position and partially dissociate myself from throw-away society. I see that developing within society at large and amongst many young artists too.

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Some time ago you wrote a very extensive text where you created a very personal framework within which to look at your work. At a certain moment you refer to your realisation that the world per se does not interest you. I am fascinated by that remark, because for me personally art always stems from reality. For you art seems to come out of a negation of that reality.

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I have consciously chosen not to engage with the emotional, the political, or the social aspect of

art. Initially, I felt very at home with the purely sculptural discourse, but that didn't turn out to be very rewarding. That is why I started looking for more of a symbiosis between sculpture and architecture. From the moment you start working with architecture you are of course in some way again engaging on a social level; albeit in a more national or urban context.

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As a matter of fact, aren't you seeking to generate your own complexity with a parallel universe?

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For me, that complexity is partly a given. My images are adaptations and processings of images taken from the world of my experience. When creating, I question what I see, hear, read and my own interpretation. I strip a space of its original function, its nature, to allow it to create its own reality. Casual looking is only a start. Not all civilisations represent 'space' in the same manner, for the simple reason that not all of them view space in the same way. I am designing my own world, but this one remains utopian. I only add to the confusion. This clean and virtual world with no room for specks of dust, tiny seeds and skin flakes offers a completely different feeling. As much as I try to imitate these small details of our society, it will always be an imitation. However, this un-emphatic sorting almost imperceptibly makes the notion of authenticity waver. The main incentive for creating is the need to know, to understand the world. And what better way to understand it than to create one's own complex world that in turn can open up worlds to others.

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I'm aware that your original ambition was to become an accountant. How did you end up in this complex universe? It is of course a story that will go well in your autobiography.

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Once I indeed wanted to become an accountant. I don't know what got into me back then. Art was never discussed at home. I never visited museums in my youth. So the decision to go to art school was definitely not a matter of course, although I have always been very creative. However, economics no longer captivated me, and because I had always been fascinated by architecture, I went to study architecture. But I found boring all those long-winded lessons on perspective, although looking back, that's where I got the necessary foundation. That's how I ended up studying ceramics. I thought it was a fantastic medium, but in the end I thought it would be too scary to dedicate my whole life only to that. When I was eighteen years old I was searching for the utopian idea of one single study in which everything was possible. I ended up in the 3D department, but there I couldn't really find my way with my sculptural ambitions. Back

then, I was mainly working in performance and video art. I have experimented with all sorts of things, from VJ-ing at parties, making wall paintings, spending time in the dark room at weekends and building booths at fairs. Eventually I switched to the Mixed Media department. That's where I was able to carry out my sculptural research and I finally found what I was looking for.

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In your work you usually depart from digital codes and manipulations of your computer.

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Actually, no. I often take roughly handmade sketches or a physical object in my studio as a point of departure. I don't always first virtually design the sculptures in full. Most of the times there is an interaction between both worlds. For instance, an object is first created in my studio. I elaborate on that on the computer, which is then further elaborated on in the studio. In this way you deal with constructing and/or designing in a different manner. Certain shapes could not have acquired their exact form without the intermediation of the computer. The way in which you virtually combine, cut or paste a sphere with a cube, I take with me to my studio and vice versa. I exchange the knowledge and possibilities of both worlds.

Originally I had started to virtually rebuild a oil-drilling platform. Out of that I realised the first physical element. And eventually I also realised the oil-drilling platform in a bigger scale, which was the step I needed to make back then to switch back to small-scale works. Next I was short listed for the Provincial Prize for Fine Arts and I was given the exhibition space in Knokke as an award. I wanted to make one large installation but didn't have enough space in my studio to experiment with this. Switching to the computer was just a small step for me, because there I could outline this installation virtually and create a preliminary sketch, a kind of digital model. From these sketches for exhibitions the computer prints eventually developed as well as the modules and animations.

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In your work, there is a constant interaction between the virtual and physical worlds. A kind of experience-oriented practice of the studio itself.

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In fact, this duality between the virtual and the physical permeates my whole life. I played with LEGO until the age of fourteen, until it wasn't really becoming for a boy of that age. After that I got seriously addicted to computer games. Especially the intelligent games, or so called god games, like SimCity, Tycoon Traffic, SimTower, Warcraft, Caesar, Red alert etc. When I started studying visual arts, I found an excuse to take up 'handicrafts' again. I also noticed that computers offered more options in terms of graphics than computer games only. There I produced an enormous amount of sculptural elements and also gained a foundation for thinking spatially. When I studied at the 3D department, I came across sculpture again and got attracted to all kinds of digital effects. The computer pulled my leg, as it were. Meanwhile I learned how to use the computer for my own needs. At the Mixed Media course I was able to make spatial

works again. As you see, this duality has been present in my whole life. During the time at the academy people have often told me that I had to choose between the virtual or the physical realm, but I am convinced that the strength and richness of my work lies in the combination of those two worlds. Eventually, a logical consequence will be to develop in my studio those things that cannot be done virtually, and to virtually develop the things that are impossible to realise within the physical realm. I have to explore a medium to its fullest potential before attempting to bend its rules.

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Your archive contains over 29,000 images. How did it come about and how are those images collected and organised?

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Because of what happened in the summer of 2001 – the changing of courses and actually being in New York and going through the 9/11 ordeal, I started scanning all the photo-negatives I had made up to that moment in my life. From there on I started selecting and soon ended up with a photo-archive of largely 5,000 images. The 'GNIURKS' archive has been constructed around a structure in which the building blocks of my 'alphabet' are stored: man-made things, things I made myself, fragments of memories of my life. The archive is literally divided into the format of the alphabet: the E stands for exhibitions, the V for virtual images, etcetera. Every letter has its own category, which again has sub-categories. The titles of my computer prints and modules consist of figures and characters. These are direct references to the names of the files in my digital archive. Every object takes its name from its position within the archive. The titles of the sculptures originate from turning over and mixing the letters and words linked with the sculpture. Not so much with the intention to create an explanatory title, but rather to look for a surprising, exotic sound. GNIURKS is an autobiographical archive, a never-ending compilation of fragments with which I attempt the impossible. It is an archive in which I try to sum up my life and my mind. In addition to lots of sketches, photographs of studio situations, exhibitions, sculptures and virtual preliminary studies, my archive also contains images, mostly taken from the internet, that are a potential source of inspiration. Details from our complex society are brought to life, adapted and altered. This way I try to get a hold on what I see, and try to understand form, tension and energy. I search for a different route through the objects, a route that pleases me. But in the end, the whole archive which originated from photographs taken of the real world, has been consumed by this sculptural research. In fact, within the context of my archive, reality has been completely absorbed by my own world.

Ordering the world seems to be one of my existential needs, even if my way of doing that is often not a logical one. My system consists of making an inventory of absolutely everything the world has to offer in terms of material and non-material things. With my systematic order I have always struggled with chaos and random-ness, especially when it comes to my own body and soul. The personal quest and trials that slowly but surely shape my system, are an important aspect of my body of work. It gives it its inner logic, which to a certain extent runs in alignment with our everyday life and world.

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I am asking you this because just now you very explicitly linked the origin of the archive to 9/11.

You were only standing 50 metres from the two towers of the WTC. For somebody who claims that the world doesn't interest him, it looked as if you were melting a bit.

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Everyone is aware that the 9/11 attacks were an extraordinary experience. Besides the shocking, tragic, political and social aspects of the event, I was above all captivated by the forbidden beauty of the collapsing towers and the citizens of New York who I suddenly got to see from a complete different angle. In the end, I felt more like an extra in a movie. This feeling was probably enhanced by the fact that I witnessed the whole ordeal from behind the lens of my camera. Somehow as an artist, having been at the scene and returning home with that much film and photographic material, it seems obvious that you would want to produce work on that. I was there by coincidence, however it is not what I make work about. That's not what I had been working on at the time either. That's why, back home, I consciously chose to put it aside and continue on the path that I was on. But now there are more references to the WTC towers in my work, maybe because of a subconscious drive.

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Have computer games been a breeding ground for what you are doing right now?

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The strange thing is, I have never dwelled too much on my past. But eventually, all your memories do come back to haunt you. Throughout our lives, we collect experiences and all of a sudden the puzzle comes together. My strength, therefore, is the enormous foundation I have at my disposal. The challenge, of course, is to re-assemble this huge foundation.

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We have used the word architecture more than once. For me the term also contains a certain dramatic, theatrical component.

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Ultimately, in an exhibition and even more so in a virtual environment, you are like a kind of director arranging the set and props. I really like powerful, aesthetic, theatrical stagings. Definitely the exhibition in de Brakke Grond is actually impossible to get photographed. Almost with every picture that I show to people they ask me for pictures of the actual exhibition. By building these black boxes in which the works are presented, the actual space disappears, and with it immediately also our way of recognising space. People are no longer aware of the difference between the virtual and the physical. Because the environment has disappeared, our points of reference also disappear. We are able to momentarily fence off the world outside and leave it behind. And that's how we are able to enter as a physical being this virtual, other world. That's how sculptures hover, so to speak, within a virtual space and the visitor, as it were, literally steps into the virtual realm. This is where the visitor no longer is a consumer in a tomb filled with objects, but rather a traveller in an audiovisual world. In this temporary dimension, the

actions of the artist or spectator can be reshaped and restructured over and over again. This process, this interaction between reality and art, clearly manifests itself in the installation at the Expozaal of de Brakke Grond: a platform was built around the 11-metre 'Ienulkaar' construction, creating the illusion of an archaeological site with only a few simple interventions. The effect is an immediate shift of the usual relations between art works and the public: not the sculptural object, but the audience is placed onto a pedestal, and instead of standing in front of an object of experience, the spectator now finds himself inside an experiential environment.

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Is the specific architecture of an exhibition space a point of departure for you?

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Not always. But I often do try to take the architectural, sculptural or historical values of a space as point of departure. For example, I have rebuilt the complete Loppem Art Gallery and virtually removed the walls of the building, leaving only the wooden cross-beams of this old shed. And I labelled it art. By doing so you elevate the space that shows art to the status of being art. Another example is the 'nOva' rehearsal studios at the 'nOna' in Mechelen, which I completely reconstructed virtually and attached a mirroring on the walls. As a result you get a kind of doubled perception as you walk through this virtual space with the camera. Not every space is an interesting challenge, though.

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A recurring element in your work is the use of the colour yellow. This colour almost becomes the basis of your sculptures as well as your thinking. Can we refer to an 'Ervinck yellow', like there is an Yves Klein blue?

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When I was a kid, I only wanted to wear yellow clothes. When I started attending secondary school, my style got more austere. The last thing I wanted was to stand out in a crowd. But after three years wearing a school uniform, yellow came back with a vengeance. During my first years at the academy I was literally dressed in yellow from head to toe: yellow socks, shoes, trousers, sweater, overcoat, I even had a yellow backpack, wristwatch, mobile phone and bike. I can actually feel my mood being affected by colour. There is too little colour in this world as it is. Yellow in particular keeps me active and vivacious.

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What is the relationship between your sculptures, your prints and your design sketches?

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My digital prints offer a window onto a digital world and also onto a different reality. These vistas show possibilities taken from my research in which sculptural elements can re-position themselves within ever new compositions and meanings. Within those real-looking rooms, racks and platforms, there are polymorphous, synthetic forms that are brought to life as mutated molecules by an artistic computer animation. Walls are no longer walls, and gravity no longer exists. I play with sculptural shapes at the blink of an eye, I lift monumental 'buildings' and put new life into them. A home changes into a sculpture and unfolds into nothingness. It is a dynamic game with images, materials and space, and a balancing act between conscientious calculation and inspired improvisation. At a certain moment the prints were no longer suitable to represent certain ideas and I started to develop design sketches and modules to show my sculptures and archive, and to show how they could manifest themselves within the physical realm. That way you can better anticipate what a sculpture is going to look like, what the dimensions are, what the materials are and how it might be inserted in our concrete reality than with a print. This allowed me to create designs for a much larger scale, or preliminary sketches for public space. Even if those are not yet within my reach, I can already document and clarify my idea. Ultimately, I am creating a dialogue between the sculptures and the sketches, between the sculptures and the animations, between the prints and the modules. This way the audience will have no problem translating the physical sculptures into the digital world and imagining the animated images within our reality. Also, you can visualise how the sculpture will 'behave' when animated.

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In some cases, some of the objects or shapes look like some sort of organised coincidence that has escaped, or lost itself to a kind of volatility, controlled by some major power. Do you intend to give the spectator an orchestrated experience between the virtual and concrete realities?

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At the crossroads between the virtual and the real, new, hybrid sculptural and spatial possibilities come into being, and I can fully explore them in new experimental spaces. This specific context, the dynamics between an independently created virtual realm and the three-dimensional sculptural work, opens up new possibilities of experience. In my exhibitions I would like to be a kind of director. Some of the works are conceptual, the literal executions of ideas. Some are drawn by hand, others are sketched on the computer. This allows for a fascinating interaction between possibilities. There are also works that have originated rather intuitively and are a direct result of a deliberate action. These images are much harder to get, but all the more interesting because of that. It is about an activity that lingers between the conscious and subconscious. It is about breaking away from traditional representations of thinking and perceiving. I have to be able to act '*sans histoire*', without having a story to justify or explain my actions.

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Sometimes it looks as if you know quite well where you want to go to. As if all the works you have made until now could be seen as a logical route or consequence. As if in fact you actually knew exactly where you were headed and the only thing left to do was executing your plans.

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I know exactly where I am headed, but that 'exactly' can of course be taken broadly. There are still quite a few steps awaiting me that I would like to develop further. Each time I create or do something I try to look for a new challenge or experiment with something new. This way you can also evolve with your work instead of being stuck in the same place; otherwise I'd rather give it all up. When I first started exhibiting my work, I was often irritated by the colour of the walls or the ceiling, by the lighting or a particular floor, or a wall that seemed wrong. In short, I didn't have complete control over the whole space. That's how I developed the idea and the desire to build a completely controllable environment for which I could determine the ceiling, floor, in short, the whole interior. To me the sculpture Xobbekops was a preliminary sketch of the first completely controllable space. In reality Xobbekops is a 1x1m model. The idea is one day to produce it full scale, as it is shown on the module. This would become a 'space' of 2,5 x 2,5 metres you could enter from the side. But like all of my works you can approach this one from different angles, too. To me Xobbekops is both a space, a model, a sculpture as well as a preliminary sketch for a building. At the same time it hangs between abstraction and figuration. It is linked to architectural and sculptural theories. And again, this way it can be placed within a very large context. Of course you are aware that you have to work towards such a challenge one step at a time. And first I have to gain a lot more experience before I will be able to effectively built a complete environment.