

Nick Ervinck

My own space The sculptural work of Nick Ervinck

by Evert Crols

Nick Ervinck's question was very simple: 'I am looking for an architect who wants to write about my work. Usually, my work is reviewed by specialists in the visual arts, and I'm curious to see whether an architect would approach it from a different angle.' To be honest, I was flattered by the question and so I took up the challenge. Writing about sculpture is new to me. I decided to pay Nick a visit in his studio and sound him out.

The studio, in a shed he built himself behind his parental home in Kortemark, is packed with sculptures. The racks at the back contain works he made during his fairly recent years at art college, and on the saw bench and various work benches stand more sculptures in the making, held in vices. The first thing that strikes me is the variety of materials: wood, metal, synthetics, glass... Pieces of wood and metal are neatly stacked around the spots where he stands to work. The studio smells of synthetics. Nick explains how he came to examine and combine different materials and their specific characteristics. Not surprisingly, he chose to specialise in multi-media at college. It is typical that his current studio, though still quite recent, is already starting to get too small for him. Nick is a passionate sculptor, with golden hands and especially, great ambitions.

The majority of his sculptures combine flowing, organic form with strict geometric form. This combination produces a tension. The organic forms confront the geometric forms and vice versa: they penetrate each other, surround each other... Some of the sculptures are born from a kinetic impulse, conceived out of a movement. The starting point in this case is a two-dimensional plane. From this plane, the sculptor extrudes a succession of volumes, with each volume developing from the previous one. The sculpture grows, much like a living organism. In that sense, the complete sculpture could be called organic. Nick generally starts with the hard form, an architecture of blocks that are distorted and repeated. Then an organic part starts to grow somewhere. The formal vocabulary he uses is a remarkable

parallel to the contemporary architectural discourse on the duality of 'boxes' and 'blobs'. Blobs are complex irregular forms that can be generated on a computer but could not possibly be designed on a drawing board, let alone be executed in architectural practice, at least, for the time being.

The realisation of a sculpture is therefore frequently akin to freezing a moment of an animated process, a kind of freeze-frame or still. Some of the larger pieces are good examples. However, most of his works still consist, both digitally and physically, of a single, stationary image, though they never lose the tension created by the sense that the image could start moving again at any time. The symbiosis between a virtual world and the physical world reflects Nick's fascination with innovative 3-D software and computer games as well as with the traditional artist's studio. On the one hand, the images are born from animation, and on the other, the artist explores animation in his sculptural work. This technique allows him to digitally design and test a sculpture before proceeding to its execution. It offers unprecedented possibilities for investigating and checking the complex forms of a sculpture in advance.

The same approach is also evident in the set-up of the exhibition. The works are often presented as objects in space, sometimes on a pedestal, but frequently without. Their furniture-like scale lends itself well to such a set-up. However, the exhibition space itself is brought into play as much as possible. The works are chosen carefully and combined in ways that show their connections. The distribution of the sculptures in the space has been tested in advance in realistic computer simulations, enabling the artist to visualise the effect and correct it where necessary. It is a highly efficient working method that is indicative of the artist's ambition and displays notably similarity with the working method of an architect. An architect will rarely or never build without first having thoroughly examined every detail by means of plans and scale models.

In fact, the sculptures or their fragments often refer to architecture, and here and there even to existing buildings. For instance, there are the miniature walls built of real tiny bricks and with tiny window-frames, the towers on a sculpture referring to the Twin Towers, the extrusions of churches and the forms derived from actual historic fortresses or barracks-like buildings and boat architecture. But Nick does not

stop at referring to architecture in the abstract or actual buildings. Here and there, he even incorporates the architecture of his surroundings in a work, e.g. the wooden trusses of the roof of his temporary studio, Kunsthalle Loppem. These architectural forms are always processed though, and are never copied literally. They lend the sculptures a degree of recognisability, a scale-model feeling. At the same time, they have an alienating effect on account of the manipulation of these familiar elements: buildings are folded open or unabashedly fused and blended together, or they sprout bits of pieces of furniture, such as table legs and racks.

Another reference to architecture and recent architectural history is contained in the sculpture 'lebanulk 2004-2006'. The work drawing for this sculpture, a beautiful piece in itself, shows the sculpture in a collage that places it in a panorama of the city of Florence. It so happens that Florence was a cradle of this kind of utopian images a few decades ago. In the sixties, it was the home of Superstudio, a collective that took a critical stance towards the position of architecture in the growing consumer culture of that era. In 1970, Superstudio made the collage 'Rescue of Historic Centres', in which all that can be seen of Florence is the well-known Duomo, emerging above the water, with boats sailing around it. Today, Nick Ervinck places 'lebanulk 2004-2006' in Florence as a modern Noah's Ark. The detail drawing for 'lebanulk 2004-2006' shows Nick's fascination with this kind of scaling exercise on the one hand and betrays his source of inspiration for these baffling collages on the other.

Moreover, there is something strange about the scale of his sculptures. They are not conceived on a particular scale and seem to be equally suited to being scaled up or down. In their virtual versions, the images float in an undefined void and offer nothing for the viewer to go on. But even the physical sculptures seem to lack a definite scale. As a spectator, you are kept guessing whether you are seeing the actual sculpture, at full size, or a scale model for a larger version. An enlarged version of, for instance, the sculpture 'Xobbekops 2004-2006', should enable the spectator to literally enter the work and experience its space. It is not surprising then that Nick's studio is getting a bit too small.

A striking feature of his exhibitions is the combination of different end products of the same work, all beautifully detailed. For instance, he often combines the sculpture

itself with a detail drawing or a print of its virtual version. The detail drawings are autonomous works that look very technical and seem, at first glance, to contain highly accurate measurement indications for the work. They are the architectural plans for his sculptures. Nick is considering adding animated images in future, which should have the effect of drawing the spectator even more deeply into the artist's universe.

Nick Ervinck's sculptures represent his own universe, from which he wants to understand the world. They are crossovers between architecture and sculpture, with references to design, nature, science, science fiction and new media. These works of art urge spectators to change the way they look, perceive, experience and think. With his young but already sizeable oeuvre, the artist is purposively heading for a goal he sees clearly before him. The methodical attitude and the passion for recording which he brings to this undertaking are a tangible proof of this. Every sketch, photograph or folder is carefully scanned and filed away. He is an archivist who is devising his own filing system. In his method of continuity, one image leads to another, and so on, eventually fulfilling an ambitious long-term plan... which includes the spectator.