

ON SLENDER SKELETONS, NON-EXISTENT VOLUMES AND UNSAID SPACE

A CLOSER LOOK AT NICK ERVINCK'S WORK

Introduction

Nick Ervinck (1981) thinks primarily with forms. There are artists who think primarily in images, like Magritte, artists who think primarily in words, like Duchamp, artists who think primarily in colours, like Bernard Frise, artists who think primarily in compositions, like Mondrian, artists who think primarily in textures, like Walter Swennen and artists who think primarily with forms, like Hans Arp, Henry Moore and Nick Ervinck. What is unusual about Ervinck's work is that he thinks with forms in two ways; he has two starting-points. Firstly, he has mastered the craft of creating 3D images with computers and, secondly, he actually goes on to execute some of the resulting forms on a large scale, using polyurethane foam, polyester, filler, multiplex, enamel paint and scores of other materials. His most extraordinary sculpture to date, his contribution to an exhibition at Museum M in Leuven, is the result of this dual technique. The artist began by drawing the sculpture in a 3D programme and then produced it on a large scale, laptop to hand. What is extraordinary about this approach is that it produces forms Henry Moore could not have made. We see how the new embraces the old and at the same time transcends, complements and enriches it. We should not forget, however, that Ervinck's work does not derive from Moore's work, but from an intense manipulation of new techniques. The similarities between the work of the two artists emanate from the limited material possibilities of nature and the limitations of our senses and techniques. And from the spunk of the two artists who dare to surrender to both the richness and poverty of form. Perhaps what is most moving is this: that by deploying his talent and specific technical possibilities as logically as possible, Nick Ervinck arrives at an oeuvre that creates its own forerunners, just as Borges wrote about the oeuvre of Kafka.

That said, and reflecting on what I might say about thinking with forms, I remember how Borges always spoke condescendingly about the so-called psychological novel and how he adored books which dared to be mere intrigue. Perhaps not totally defensible, but it does provide a useful image for thinking about visual art... For what is a psychological novel if not a novel in which the 'personality' of the characters is wonderfully consistent with the words which characterize them? How could it be otherwise? Intrigue is very different; it can be weak or strong, surprising or predictable. How predictable was it in the seventeenth century that in the second part of his imaginative adventures Don Quixote should encounter readers who had read the first part? Similarly you might say, along with Milan Kundera, that the most extraordinary novels are those in which things happen on a constructive level which can only happen in a novel, just as things happen in the films of David Lynch which are only possible in a film. Well then, artists like Nick Ervinck do things which are only possible in sculpture. And only now. The Greeks couldn't do them, the Chinese and the Aztecs couldn't do them and Henry Moore was unable to in his time. Here we place our finger on the throbbing pulse of history.

Three large sculptures

To date, I have seen three large sculptures by Nick Ervinck: the sculpture he tailor-made for the Kunst Nu space at S.M.A.K. (EITAZOR, 2009), the sculpture he erected on the roof of Museum M in Leuven (NIEBLOY, 2009) for the exhibition 'Parallelepiped' and the monumental sculpture he designed and built for a large building in Ghent (WARSUBEC, 2009).

The form of EITAZOR, the sculpture he made specially for S.M.A.K., was based on the flower motif of nineteenth-century wallpaper. We recognize this motif in the outline drawing on the wall. The resulting form is free. The sculpture's finish is beautiful, particularly when you consider that it arrived in six pieces, because otherwise they could not have got it in. I was bowled over by that relatively huge object which fitted exactly between the two walls of the corridor-shaped space.

NIEBLOY, the sculpture created as a contribution to the group exhibition 'Parallelepipeda', looks like the drastically worn down skeleton of a three-metre-high boulder. Because of their marrowbone-like edges, the openings in the sculpture evoke an image of a monstrous, many-mouthed creature. It is not my intention to attach meaning to this magnificent sculpture; I am merely trying to describe its form. The openings are shaped like Le Corbusier's 'pommes de terre': undulating oval shapes. As I walk round NIEBLOY, I recall one of Henry Moore's sculptures, three metres high and rounded at the top and consisting of two parallel parts each of which contains a large round opening. Walking round this sculpture, you can see how the two openings start dancing with each other and sometimes create a widening or narrowing lancet-shaped opening. In Ervinck's sculpture we see a similar effect, but much more beautiful, stranger and livelier. Towards the end of his life, Moore increasingly used bones, stones and other natural material to create forms. One of his workshops still houses a gigantic elephant's skull. Ervinck's sculpture reminds me of that – of that and of the stunningly beautiful, inevitable form of a tusk, a hoof, a fin or a wing. (In Henry Moore's house old artefacts sit side by side with stones, shells, corals, the tooth of a narwhal and hundreds of other objects from the natural world.) Yet I would never want to reduce this sculpture to existing forms. What is so wonderful about it is that it is *not* a skull and that Moore would never have been able to make it because the form is much too complicated. Ervinck can make this form because he can design it in 3D programmes. Here we see a fine example of how the simultaneous progress he makes with 3D drawings and traditional sculpting leads to new forms.

Finally, I would also like to say something about WARSUBEC, the monumental addition to a building in Zebrastraat in Ghent. This building actually forms an open ring with the opening in the ring serving as the entrance. The saddleback roof, which was originally planned, is missing on both sides of this opening. Invited to create a work for this site, subject to the restriction that the roof could only support a limited weight, Ervinck came up with the idea of building a vault resting on the walls. This vault looks like the polished aerial roots of a gigantic ivy plant whose shoots have grown together. Or a sort of hollow fungus. Or a rampant coral. The sculpture consists of two parts which are mirror images of each other, like the building. It is self-supporting. The windows of both the adjacent buildings reflect the sculpture, thereby creating an endless reflection of the already mirrored sculptural arrangement. While seeming to protect you, the sculpture also provides numerous through-views. It is both an open and closed structure.

What I remember most about seeing these three sculptures for the first time is that each has a totally different form. In the case of the S.M.A.K. sculpture, it is a form which veers outwards with rounded feelers or tentacles. The form is symmetric. It gradually becomes thicker and then narrower between the middle and the far ends as if the centrifugal forces are greater there... The sculpture on the roof of Museum M is not symmetrical; it can be placed on the ground on any of its sides. The openings are potato-shaped... The sculpture in Zebrastraat consists of two equal, but separate parts. The openings are not potato-shaped. Neither are they the result of an algorithm. They were created by intuitively distorting circles in a drawing programme.

The large print entitled AGRIEBORZ was also on show at Museum M. It conjures up the image of a human head with shoulders, but is made up entirely of marrowbone-shaped elements

reminiscent of veins, nerves and muscles. Ervinck based this 3-D drawing on anatomical illustrations, including drawings produced by the team of Dr Pierre Delaere, an ENT specialist. However, it is definitely not an anatomically correct reproduction. It is a spatial drawing, which it will probably be possible to print in 3D later on. As I peered at this drawing, I sensed that it was not symmetrical, but I couldn't find any asymmetry. Ervinck told me the drawing is symmetrical but that the reflections on the sculpture are not the same on both sides. You can see this most clearly in the middle of the drawing, on the black part.

Three characteristics

Three general features give Ervinck's work its specific character.

The first characteristic is the great 'maquette feeling' of his sculptures. The architect Luc Deleu uses this word to refer to architecture which looks as if it is made of cardboard with the result that its true scale escapes us. Ervinck's sculptures are characterized by the fact that they can be executed on any scale. Perhaps they derive that characteristic from their affinity with organic structures and their monochrome, seamless finish.

The second common characteristic of Nick Ervinck's oeuvre is that his sculptures are executed in a variety of media. Other authors have likened this to painters who also make the occasional etching or photographers who write poems: a frivolous whim which prevents an artist working in a single discipline. What is specific about Ervinck's work, however, is that he makes headway in one area through his achievements in another. His extraordinary ability to make 3D drawings and his experience of printing these 'drawings' three-dimensionally enable him to arrive at new spatial objects like NIEBLOY. On a small scale Ervinck operates on the edge of what is currently possible by working with 3D printers which can print thin, complex forms you cannot make by hand (because you can't reach them).

The third characteristic of Ervinck's work stems from the fact that he sometimes wants to erect his sculptures in an environment which seems to make them virtual again, especially when you photograph them. For example, the Kunst Nu space at S.M.A.K. was painted black all over, apart from two outline drawings which looked almost like spiralling reflections of the sculpture on the walls. On the other hand, he has also made really virtual sculptures. Not only in 3D montages in which he places sculptures in photographs or reconstructions of existing museum environments, but also in the form of an exciting proposal for a virtual gallery designed by a firm of architects. Ervinck was invited to be the first to show his work in their virtual space.

Conclusion

What does it mean to say that someone thinks in forms? Don't we always think in forms? Ever since De Saussure came up with the idea of looking at language as if it was a collection of sounds which are linked to certain meanings largely by chance, many writers do seem to think that visual artists look for forms to package and transport meanings. Yet that is almost never the case. (I use the word artist when referring to a real artist, an innovator whose work affects us, not people who practise forms of imitation art as a hobby or for commercial purposes.) If Michelangelo's David expresses the birth of the individual, the same applies to Greek tragedy. It is not the idea that is new, but the form. Conversely, you might say that it is the creation of new forms (Greek tragedy and Michelangelo's David) that makes the imminent birth of the individual possible. The individual is born in the act of creating, in the creation of the tragedy, in the hewing of the sculpture. The meaning stems from the form. Michelangelo creates his own possibility from nothing: he creates a place for himself and at the same time also for others who come after

him. The world has been a different place since Gerard Reve. More open. And what did he do? Added new meanings to the world? I don't think so. He sought a literary form so as to come to terms with himself. He created a place for himself by creating a new form...

And Ervinck?, I hear you ask. What is his work about? And then I remember something Luc Deleu told me recently about Le Corbusier which I have often written about myself without knowing that Le Corbusier had already called it the "unsaid space": space made larger and wider by adding something small to it. You see this in the work of Ann Veronica Janssens, in the work of Tamara Van San and in the work of Nick Ervinck. These oeuvres look very different, but they show the same silent pent-up energy and the same belief in new forms which actually broaden, deepen or enrich the world. It is no more than that. We need not speak of intrinsic, moral, political or other values here. The space opens and becomes living space, breathing space, thinking space and feeling space. But how do artists do that? They do it by making the possibility of a new approach to reality visible and thus bringing about a slight change in our experience. It has something to do with humour: a relativizing discernment which creates ambiguity. It has something to do with embracing the ambiguousness of all the things in the world, which can mean everything and nothing, depending on the place, the time and our needs. It has something to do with openness towards the world as it is, which gives you a hold on it and enables you to add something to it and perhaps even change something.

Hans Theys, Montagne de Miel, April 5th 2010