

Nick Ervinck Meets History

Freddy Decreus

Until not so long ago, it was actually perfectly clear to us what time, history and tradition meant. It was reassuring to know that the only Time that really mattered was “on the other side” of our daily lives, wrapped up somewhere in the mists of the ages – from the standpoint of eternity, as the Latin phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* has it – floating in the Christian afterlife, in Plato’s World of Ideas or in an ideal universe where perfect unity and meaningfulness prevail. True knowledge had to be eternal, real (utopian) history had a goal and our Western belief in progress fit perfectly into this ideology. Sadly, after so many (world) wars, after all these centuries of senseless violence and crimes against humanity, these concepts – enlightened to a greater or lesser extent – are disappearing for good. Our complacent attitude towards the past and the nature of the history it has engendered has been destroyed and is more than ever susceptible to wide-ranging query. While historiography may well be a desire to know, investigate and organise, and reflect a profound need to understand ourselves and our human presence on this planet, it is also essential to ask from which position of power (Foucault)¹ all this is occurring, in what way an identity has been imposed on an historical subject (Žižek)² and how meaning is manufactured by the ruling bourgeois class (Barthes)³.

It is within this context that I wish to situate Nick Ervinck’s perspective on history. The framework for his conversation with the past needs, therefore, to be broad and sufficiently open-ended to allow for the death of many old certainties. This is precisely why he has become my friend-philosopher in recent years, someone who, having bombarded me with questions and images for which I could not initially find answers, has repeatedly frightened me, shaken me out of my academic torpor, provoked me and seduced me in equal measures. So I have asked myself why his images both fascinate and terrify me – in the manner described by Rudolf Otto with his classic phrase *fascinans* and *tremendum*. Perhaps it’s because I’m being confronted with life experiences that, distilled into highly concentrated moments, oblige me to look at what I don’t always want to see. Indeed, when contemplating the works of Nick Ervinck I often sense a knife at my throat compelling me to consider the lazy mentality that so cheerfully seeks to categorise, compartmentalise and thus culturally neuter crucial imprints from our past. With this, I found in Nick Ervinck a companion and a comrade, not an obvious fellow traveller but rather an extremely interesting person who has chosen to live in a world of constant metamorphosis, tirelessly searching for a means to interpret that which our imaginations both flout and crave. Consider the idiosyncratic titles that he gives to his works, such as YAROTUBE, IKRAUSIM and GARFINOTAY: imaginary words that suggest a desire to explore unfamiliar worlds or to establish degrees of latitude and longitude that have become three-dimensional (GNI_D_GH_181_FEB2006). These worlds may be inhabited by insectoids (ARCHISCULPT IV), or coralloids (YAROTOBS), or even appear to depict the human body after a cosmic

catastrophe (LEJ-UT). Is this extreme metamorphosis or a mental turmoil that has reached the point of explosion?

Over a century ago, art broke with the traditional mimicry that sought to portray human beings in their every detail and instead began to explore, through diverse art movements, human luminism (impressionism), fantastical dream imagery (surrealism) and ethereal reflections (symbolism), all -isms that dealt a definitive blow to the unity of representative art.

Nick Ervinck is comfortable in the new spaces that have opened up in the human imagination, exploring dawning perceptions, as his predecessors did so long ago, using different narratives and images to once again acknowledge and domesticate an unknown universe.

We have come to realise that we will never fully understand the world (Descartes' cherished dream) and that our ability to make "the reality" into "our reality" is flawed. The world has exploded right in front of our eyes and our access to it is more complex and problematic than ever. As an artist, Nick Ervinck poses questions that have all too often been avoided, questions that are no longer concerned with the working reality and the way we have represented it until now. So his work is often called hybrid, demonic or grotesque, labels that have long been used in art history to denote works of art that were hard to categorise. His attitudes to history, the past and the traditional are not easy to pin down. To this end, I start by examining actual traces of the past in his work and then look at the dimensions that were missing and are now present in his work.

Firstly, western heritage is palpable and crops up everywhere, be it in a very ambiguous and provocative way. The images from past times are there, imparting their vibrations, which we, as westerners, are primed to enjoy. From the powerful helmeted knight (RACHT) to the dismantled Roman helmet (SIUMET); from the Roman Jupiter column in Tongeren (LUIZADO) to the unfolded seventeenth century house with its yellow egg inside (SIUTOBS), or from the Rubenesque Venus (SNIBURTAD and ELBEETAD) to the Knokke cottage project (EWATONK), each piece is an artefact that imposes its specific time and place on the viewer. We know the historic references because we know our western history and have been deeply immersed in it and, in fact, are only able to identify ourselves as westerners through these very representations. SIUTOBS and TRIAFUTOBS are perfect examples of this: unfolded houses containing giant yellow eggs and a series of brick houses that seem to be floating somewhere in outer space, held together by yellow, egg-like spaces, called blobs⁴, which images seem to have stepped out of a science fiction story or from the surrealist imagination of Magritte. Inside becomes outside, the primordial egg of Brancusi or Dali evokes our mysterious origins – or perhaps all this beauty (of life) and perfection (of cells) should be attributed to somewhere far off in the cosmos? We have our history but also so many opportunities to escape it, to think beyond it and to create other worlds in a playful spirit. And what is the secret that is guarded by the perennial gatekeepers GARFINOSWODA and NIKEYSWODA, old sphinxes in yellow and blue? Is it the conundrum that we can be to ourselves, the mystery of our fundamental incompleteness as a species, of the constant fight between body and mind? These images

divorce and unite, combine Yin and Yang, exhibit the tender embrace as well as sharp hostility: these are transitional figures that guard the kingdom of the dead while having the fluidity to invoke new life. There is something fascinatingly primary here: located between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, our most basic impulses and the governors of our constructiveness and destructiveness, they evoke both primeval fears and primeval desires.

This is a weighty statement since what it is telling us, together with the artist's entire oeuvre, is that our former unitarian view of humanity has shattered. This position is beautifully illustrated by ESAVOBOR, an enlarged Roman vase broken into a hundred pieces and yet which appears to be simple to put back together: a shape-shifting piece as though a space warrior, or transformer, or cyborg.

With each work we find ourselves abruptly pulled out of our historiographical complacency, the historically known radically traversed by the completely unknown, our consolidated aesthetic challenged by an intruder, leaving us reeling with a sense of surprise, alienation, *umheimlichkeit*. A fracture appears, incomprehension installs itself in the historical gap and cultural trauma makes its entrance. What are we supposed to do with this fundamental unease and newness? What was only an undercurrent now abruptly surfaces; the repressed can take its rightful place and expose the past's obsession with power. By introducing new media and techniques, generating sculptures of literally towering dimensions (CIRBUATS) and by using scientific methods to interrogate science (tracheotomy in AGRIEBORZ), the artist exposes the old world through conduits that until now were never examined. This is inconvenient, undermines ancient religious associations with the secretive gods of punishment and reward and shifts the focus to the here and now, the creative present and the utterly uncertain future.

Between the historical figures that we all are and past history, a number of limbos appear, in-between worlds of shadow and possibility that have previously been dismissed by art historians with terms like baroque or surrealism, but which were really simply creating space for the uncensored imagination. In these gaps in history Nick Ervinck installs the principles of Otherness and Outsiderness, which were not included as established opposing principles. He evokes a world that can be consistently and fundamentally questioned, which is, naturally, the age-old dream of artists: that the viewer be forced to regard reality differently from how he or she normally would. Since the entire western world has long believed that there is direct access to this reality and to ourselves and that language is the medium to get us there, it was normal to think that concepts such as our body, our humanity and our history could be taken for granted. Now it seems that they were all constructs, did not "naturally" evolve and thus were utterly manipulable. This is a shock for it means the end of the old dream of the rational and self-explanatory subject, of the idea that culture does not intervene, that there is an eternal Truth and Beauty.

We are living in a time of transition, seeking a new identity for ourselves, somewhere between an intensive biological knowledge of our lives and an understanding of the cosmic nebulae, between the time-honoured crafts

that connect us to the past and the virtual world of the future that only exists through cutting-edge technology. We have learned to explore the world differently, w both from the close-up, cellular perspective of our own networks of veins, membranes and tissues and the cosmic one of far distant space and we have therefore found ourselves obliged to integrate all these new findings into our interpretation of reality. AGRIEBORZ, an exquisitely drawn, complex work, simultaneously terrifying and attractive, both a maze and an excrescence, shows the human head a few millimetres under the skin and functions as both an ode to our invisible constitution and a reminder of the centuries-long competition between the different types of brains that have made us what we are today: unfinished products of nature engaged in a constant battle for survival. The grey monster that is KOLEKNAT also grabs us by the throat since it clearly falls outside of the iconography that we know and therefore trust. From a cognitive perspective, the audience is asked to test the image against the entire universe and all its possible and impossible forms; aesthetically, the piece speaks to our desire to keep on dreaming about phantasms. The two survival tactics complement each other and are the foundations of science and art. It is with sadness and nostalgia that we look back at the much more human vision of Vitruvius, his architectural scale model that was employed by many Renaissances and Classicisms, the symbol of the perfect proportions based on the human body (albeit strictly the male body) and a source of inspiration for religion and art for so many centuries. With all our human hearts and aesthetic senses we continue to dream of this shrine to humanity, manifested in the use of the golden section and the Fibonacci series. And there's more: the physics from our youth has become quantum physics, Kant's ideal world has been exchanged for the fluid world of Deleuze, his rhizomes and nomads, and our inner world is no longer circumscribed by the fixed archetypes of Jung but redrawn as Lacan's unending process of desire. Nowadays, we are happy to accept that life vibrates and oscillates, swells and deflates, goes from stasis to metastasis. Nothing is more debasing in its untold vigour, though, than the sentence with which Deleuze and Guattari commence their masterpiece from the 70s (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972–73), a work in which they paint humans as great big "desiring-machines": "It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks." A late but necessary addition to the all too serene environment in which the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian worlds were defined in all their orderliness. However, new energy means the expulsion of fossilised energy elsewhere, the breaking up of old worlds in order to generate new ones.

Nick Ervinck demonstrates how one can aesthetically challenge renowned architectural and intellectual spaces, alter their functions, completely transform them. You only have to turn a building on its head, show it inside out, produce a see-through digital sketch of it or turn its inner seams to the outside. How enthralling it is to see a building complex decked in a full-sized veil and looking like an ancient sphinx (CIRBUATS). How fascinating to observe "gates of paradise" that reference Ghiberti fronting a contemporary chapel, with their organic look of marine flora and fauna

(IMAGROD) or what appears to be a sepulchre with a demon hanging from it (ARCHISCULPT I). It doesn't really take mental gymnastics to understand that he has taken motifs from Bruges lace or 19th century wallpaper and expanded them in 3D to create his illusory worlds (EITZO/EITZOR), but once the scale increases we seem to lose our existential balance. This position as artistic and philosophical go-between doesn't prevent the artist from having a fine old time. In fact, he often plays God, the Creator, who amuses himself by trying out the impossible and thereby introduces us to a new, clean and perfectly ordered world where there's no guilt or punishment, no religious wars to fight and where there are no compulsory rules or myths attached. One is reminded of the "God games"⁵ that Nick Ervinck used to play as a science fiction fan, when he would wage war and build and destroy empires.

The God game that he has designed as an artist is based on the same profound longing to create a new category of (eternal) life, to empower the indestructible demons. As with Magritte or Delvaux, the limits of his imagination are his ultimate and sole opponents. Many of these virtual realities did not previously exist but are now descending on us at ever greater speed, in their alternative forms and with their speculative potentials, often promising to shine a light into the dark hole of reason.

And what a creative pleasure it must be to be able to design a new bio-architecture of the world, to use our bodies as a fundamental source of energy. Works such as PRAHIARD, AGRIELEJIF and SURIELEJIF are reminiscent of illustrations from medical textbooks – you dive under the skin and there it all is: chutes of veins, muscles and cavities, organs and spaces that appear so perfect and symmetrical. This is surely the playing God fantasy: to be the architect of a new human, without skeleton or bones, without an interior or exterior, for the time being trapped in the virtual space of a universe that still needs to be defined and mastered. To then dream of a new bio-printing technology that can print organs and bones, call it human segments, and thus assist in mechanising the human body.

The body, cursed and reviled for more centuries than it can recall (Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang*)⁶, is finally taken seriously as the source for a streaming energy that connects it to all the energy in the cosmos. Suddenly, you realise that you can have the courage to strive for a somatic architecture and an embodied technology, in which forms and images may be ideated in deep organic stratifications, somehow always biomorphic, evolutionary and in flux: like the life of the body itself.

This existential exercise is the main reason that I so strongly welcome and cherish my philosophical friend Nick Ervinck: as a master magician, he plays with my preconceptions, shapes the world I live in and shows how speculative meaning is. Art meets philosophy, mythology meets science. So let us indeed cobble these disciplines together and by so doing find temporary relief from the theoretical black holes that undermine meaning.

1. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966;
English translation: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1970.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989;
The Year of Dreaming Dangerously, London: Verso, 2012.
3. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris: Seuil, 1957;
English translation: *Mythologies*, London: Paladin, 1972.
4. Blobs: Binary Large Objects.
5. *God games* are virtual life games in which, to a large extent, the player controls the game. Examples are SimCity, Traffic Tycoon, Warcraft, Caesar and Red Alert.
6. Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (Conte de fées médiéval)*, a quest for the intimate and fluid body, was an orgiastic morality play that premiered at the Avignon Festival in 2003.