

On eternal Being and new Becoming

by

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In Pasolini's masterly film *Oedipus Rex* (1967) Julian Beck played the role of the blind prophet Tiresias, an omniscient and deeply tragic figure who came to tell the plague-stricken Thebans the truth about their god-fearing but all too short-sighted king Oedipus. His sunken eyes, his long bestial hair and his steely voice which seemed to come from the deepest depths of time and space brought with it an inauspicious threat. Why, I ask myself, does this haunting image from my childhood now seem so relevant to the works of Nick Ervinck and particularly to LUIZADO (2012), a column surmounted by an image of a god, but also to other demons like KOLEKNAT (2009), BORTOBY (2009) and NOZIORZ (2010). Why do they fascinate me, but also make me tremble in the way described by Rudolf Otto with his now classic *fascinans* and *tremendum* pairing? Perhaps because these images bring me into contact with instances of a very concentrated life experience, obliging me to face up to what I would sometimes prefer not to see. Indeed, in Nick Ervinck's work I often feel a sort of knife at my throat, a compulsion to reflect on a laziness which would really like to see all the vital images from our tradition ordered, compartmentalized and so culturally tamed. The question however is what to do with what has until now been considered marginal, with that reviled Dionysus who repeatedly challenges order, with the vitality of life itself. Here I find in Nick Ervinck a crony and a chum, not the most obvious travel companion, but an extremely interesting someone who has chosen to live in the world of constant metamorphosis, always searching for an interpretation for the black hole which flouts and fires our imagination. He asks questions which have all too often been avoided, questions which no longer deal with the existing reality and the way we have represented it to date. Ervinck presents other possible worlds which – in our powerlessness – we simply label hybrid, demonic or grotesque, though well aware that we still know so little about parallel universes and morphic fields (a term introduced by Rupert Sheldrake).

Take for example the showpiece of this exhibition, LUIZADO, a majestic column a stone's throw from the Vrijthof, a new image of the Roman supreme god Jupiter atop a plinth in the centre of a historic city, near the entrance to the archaeological museum. Firstly this is an act of confirmation because, yes, we are children of Belgium' history and of an Occident shaped by many an occupier. Such columns in the middle of a Roman city centre on which a supreme god was often accompanied by several other aspects of himself (such as Sol, the sun god, and Juno, his spouse) always showed the organization of a geographic and mental universe. Though this is less clear today, a supreme god whose role as sun god (air, sky) is confirmed,

enthroned on a scaled column and recalling defeated Giants (with snake-like legs, so earthly creatures) has always represented the hierarchical organization of a whole way of thinking and feeling. We might say that such a column expressed the main oppositions with which politics and religion sought to structure daily life, high versus low, heaven versus earth, gods versus people, order versus disorder, head versus stomach, and always in that order.

Cultures come, cultures go and that is why this new Jupiter column by Nick Ervinck is a reminder of the inevitability of our historic existence and the models in which we have lived. But there is more to it than that, much more. This new Jupiter seems to be a Dionysian variant, a yellow dystopian construction which pushes life in all directions at once, a god of exploding and deliquescing energy, an ode to a centre-less centre. This is a telling statement because together with the artist's entire output, it really tells us that our former unitary portrayal of mankind has disintegrated. This statement is beautifully illustrated by ESAVOBOR, an enlarged Roman vase broken into exactly a hundred pieces. But at the same time it looks as if it can be put back together again quickly and so there is something of a space warrior or cyborg about it which can easily be transformed into a hundred other forms.

This is the basic idea behind the exhibition as a whole: we are living at a time of transition, we are looking to establish a new context for ourselves, somewhere between a thorough biological knowledge of our life and that of the cosmos, somewhere between the time-honoured trades that link us with the past and the virtual world of the future that avails itself of all the latest technological gizmos. Here under our skin, close to, in this network of veins, membranes and tissues, as well as far away in the cosmic space, we have learned to discover life differently and therefore we have also been obliged to integrate all these new findings into our interpretation of it. AGRIEBORZ and GORFILEH exemplify this: the blue head conducts a dialogue with the anatomy of the Neanderthal, the second work depicts a stuffed animal and a human being dressed in an animal fleece. Man is an ancient creation, but there is still so much he doesn't know.

It is usually with melancholy and much nostalgia that we look back to the Vitruvian Man, the architectural scale model from many renaissances and classicisms, the symbol of the perfect structure based on the human body (albeit always the male body) and a source of inspiration for religion and art for so many centuries. With our aesthetic awareness we still dream wholeheartedly of this temple of humanity which we saw at work all around us via the golden section and the Fibonacci series. But now there is more: the physics from our youth has become quantum physics, we swapped Kant's ideal world for Deleuze's fluid world, his rhizomes and nomads, our inner self is no longer conditioned by the fixed archetypes described by Jung, but by the never satisfied process of Desire advanced by Lacan.

All of Nick Ervinck's work is steeped in the philosophy imposed on us in the West after the events of May '68 in Paris. Western ontology (what sort of knowable or unknowable worlds do we live in?) was toppled and exhorted us to once again go in search of ourselves, led by artists and scientists who did not now want to give shape to the proliferate energetic life. At least a century ago now art broke with the traditional mimesis which sought to represent man in every detail and explored his luminism (impressionism), the irrational imagery of his dreams (surrealism) and his ethereal reflections (symbolism), art movements which were followed by many an -ism, and dealt a definitive blow to the collective dream of unity and depiction. Nick Ervinck likes to slot into the now available gaps in the imagination and explores new perceptions, just as his predecessors did a very long time ago by means of new stories and new images designed to investigate and domesticate an unknown cosmos. We now know that we will never fully understand the world (Descartes' old dream!) and that we can only make 'the reality' 'our reality' in a very incomplete way. The world has exploded right in front of our eyes and our access to it has become more problematic than ever.

Nick Ervinck's entire output attests to this sort of transitional consciousness. The idiosyncratic titles he gives his works, such as YAROTUBS, IKRAUSIM and GARFINOTAY, suggest the exploration of unfamiliar worlds with degrees of longitude and latitude which seem to have become three-dimensional (GNI_D_GH_26FEB 2008). Sometimes they are peopled by insectoids (ARCHISCUPT IV), sometimes by coralloids (YAROTOBS), sometimes they even appear to show the human body after a cosmic disaster (LEJ-UT). A virtual world suddenly becomes part of our daily life and what until very recently came across as inhuman, inconceivable and uninhabitable slowly but surely permeates our imagination. Amazement and fear, call note and threat, because the organic we thought we knew so well is suddenly post-organic, fluid and hybrid. As a spectator you can only assume that a new space and a new perception of time are presented here and that sensitivity to the marginal continues. Hence the extraordinary conclusion that everything is both old and new, ordered but also floating, an urgent call to go and look at our old history books with new eyes. SIUMET can be seen in this context. It plays a clever game with a Roman soldier's helmet and what seems to be an eighteenth-century classicistic stately home and the well-known aesthetics of power and of history is replaced by a more flexible, gentler computer-controlled version. As Westerners we have literally inhabited this power for centuries and there now follows a phase of denaturalization and decolonization which shows the artificial character of these structures and deliberately goes a step further by means of new materials, forms and representations. BORTOBY, ANIHUAB and NAPELHIUAB show where we have come from: farmers start to manipulate nature, we see the onset of culture. Traces of branches and rocks, but also of algae and coralloids, source of all life, mysterious in their indefiniteness, doing anything but obey the rules of our Apollonian mind.

SIUTOBS and TRIAFUTOBS can be seen as extensions of the afore-mentioned. Images of an unfolded house containing a huge yellow egg and a series of brick houses floating somewhere in outer space, held together by yellow egg-like spaces, called 'blobs' (Binary Large Objects), seem to have stepped straight out of some science fiction adventure or the surrealist imagination of a Magritte. Inside becomes outside. Does the primordial egg of Brancusi or Dali evoke our mysterious origins, or should we situate that completeness (of life and of our cells) somewhere far off in the cosmos? And what should we make of the eternal gatekeepers GARFINOSWODA and NIKEYSWODA, old yellow and blue sphinxes? What is the secret they are guarding? Perhaps the secret that we ourselves are, the secret of our fundamental incompleteness as human beings, of the constant struggle we have body and mind wage? These images separate and unite, combine Yin and Yang, show the gentle embrace but also the thorny hostility. Because they have been given a place in the exhibition space not far from the death cult, they also act as transitional figures guarding the kingdom of the dead, but in their fluidity they can also instantly reawaken new life. Situated between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, our basic instincts which govern the construction and destruction of all that is human, they evoke both primeval fears and primeval desires; at any rate they are no strangers to something fascinatingly primary. The same applies to the SUCHAB sculpture ensconced between the traditional gods, a bright yellow dynamic challenger which once again illustrates the manipulability of gods, another mystery that has preoccupied man for so long. The same basic fluid structure as the yellow Dionysus which now sits enthroned on the Jupiter column, the same skeleton which combines primary human and animal characteristics.

And whereas this god of constant Becoming still symbolizes the transition between male and female, SNIBURTAD and ELBEETAD go a step further. They clearly evoke the female body, divine in its constant fertility, wilder and more ecstatic than Rubens could even dream of. Amidst archaeological relics which call to mind the Roman death cult, this Mother goddess does occupy a very special place. Her body is turned inside out, as a sculpture we see how it is supported internally, as animation we see the breathing and vibrating. So as witnesses of her life force we are again confronted by the incomprehensible *souffle vital* of everything that lives, not as a finished cultural product, but as proliferate, primitive and even monstrous energy. The reality is heterogeneous, intangible, mysterious and Nick Ervinck often shows highly disturbing aspects of it.

This perspective is not exactly humanistic, but perhaps the time has come to call the old humanistic vision of the world into question. Today man knows he is no longer the centre of his own existence, not of the world, nor of his own language. It's language that defines him, it is a collection of images and stories which allocate him a place of Desire and allow him to become a character in his own story. Consequently, this human being should learn to think and feel differently and the artist awaits the task of accompanying him

on this quest, searching for a new identity in times when many Great Stories no longer serve that purpose.

An end has come to the God of eternal Being and we now welcome the new consciousness of a continuous Becoming. Nick Ervinck is one of those artists who is only too aware of this life's task and confronts us with our deepest thoughts and emotions in a unique and challenging way!