

Digital heroism

Interview with Nick Ervinck

By Christophe De Jaeger

Christophe De Jaeger: Games such as Warcraft and SimCity have had an important influence on your work. In these God games, troops are sent to war or the ins and outs of a city are controlled. Thus each player acquires imaginary powers. Do you also experience this feeling when you build your own virtual museums to place your sculptural designs in?

Nick Ervinck: Certainly so, as an artist you are acting like some sort of God. And it is this feeling that intrigues me so much in the virtual world. You are in full control of natural laws ranging from the sun to gravity. You can create a sea of trees or conjure up multiple suns in an instant. This virtual world hardly has any financial limits. Unfortunately, there are some software-technical restrictions. I also carry this virtual thinking through into exhibitions. In those exhibitions, I act as some sort of director. I create my own world and allow the public to have a taster of it.

C.D. : In a virtual world, you can let your imagination run wild. Yet I have to question this. You build that virtual world using existing software, available on the market. This software sets limits within which you need to work, is that not too restrictive for an artist who acts like a ‘God’?

N.E. : I am indeed fully aware of the restrictions of the software. That is exactly something that I play with in my works. I want to continuously by-pass the limits of the software. It was not primarily created for artists, but for the commercial world of architects, gamers and animators. As an artist you do of course have the luxury of taking advantage of it. However, not only does the software impose limits, a limited knowledge of these extensive programmes can also have a restrictive effect. Yet within these limitations your work field is infinite. On the other hand, it is because of this double limitation that I, in addition to this virtual world, find it interesting to continuously look up the interaction with the physical world. For instance, I use clay and paint to try out objects that cannot possibly be made virtual. I want to use this study to further and further explore the limits of each medium.

C.D. : It is impossible for an individual artist to master all software. However, can he appeal to a group of specialists for the realisation of his work?

N.E. : I have always been fascinated by technology and virtually and physically I subject myself and my work to ever-increasing demands. As an artist, my technological application is profound. However, within the light of the technical possibilities in our current society and disciplines such as the animation industries, specialists with years of experience and the necessary machinery, it is rather meaningless. I try not to compete with these businesses. 3D animation films such as Toy Story or Monsters require years of hard work by a team of more than one hundred persons. For example, there they work with specialists solely focusing on the creation of virtual fire for a whole year ...

Cooperation with specialists for some works is a logical step forward in the future. The sculptures and animations become technically more complex and in terms of contents I become more and more demanding. Like technology imposes restrictions on that what can be realised, our intellectual framework – formed through time and culture – imposes restrictions on imagination. I want to use my work to open up new horizons, by studying new possibilities, to image those and to subsequently introduce them in our reality.

C.D. : A cooperative venture with other people does of course clash with the romantic image of the artist as a genius individual?

N.E. :perhaps this romantic image is overstated? I can to an extent imagine this romantic image with Van Gogh. However, if we look further back in the past, we are faced with gigantic studios such as that of Rubens. Today, cooperation does not have a very positive ring to it, but it will become inevitable in due course, certainly so in the case of larger projects. I work with an enormous amount of intensity and, as an artist, I start on the basis of a personal message and style that I gradually develop, perhaps this can be referred to as romantic.

C.D. : According to you, an artist should not specialise in technology alone. The digital software is only a means to shape a personal concept. What position does digital software take up within your work?

N.E. :I can see a whole generation of young people growing up who have mastered the software much better than my generation and who also offered more opportunities in that field. However, those means alone do not create proper art. Understanding art, knowledge of the history of art or an interaction with other media remain necessary ingredients for the creation of a proper piece. I myself, for instance, study the art of sculpture through technological software. Main feature therein is the interaction between virtual and physical sculptures.

C.D. : How does this interaction between real and virtual worlds affect your work? Why did you decide to carry out this study?

N.E. :I experienced that virtual-physical duality at a very early stage. Like many other youngsters, I first played with Lego blocks before making the transfer to intelligent games such as *SimCity*, *Tycoon Traffic*, *Simtower*, *Warcraft*, *Caesar*, *Red Alert*, etc., also referred to as the *God games*, at a later stage. At the School of Arts, I discovered the further graphic possibilities of the computer, while during the Mixed Media schooling I returned to sculptures.

I am convinced that my strength and potential lies exactly in the combination of those two worlds. A logical consequence is to use a studio to study those matters that are virtually impossible and to virtually study the things that are impossible to realise in the physical reality. This way I study and use the characteristics of each world or I play with the restrictions and possibilities of different media.

C.D. : Can you also explain this in ‘shape-technical’ terms? I am still convinced that the shape of your work prevails over contents. You form part of that group of artists to whom the shape in itself is more meaningful than the interpretations associated with your work by diligent art historians. Can you tell us something about the extreme sensitivity for shapes?

N.E. :I am an observer asking questions. While working, I query what I see, hear and read. The reality as we know it is no longer a subject in its own right, but the result of a dispositional process in which depictions are the product of imaginary and intellectual workings. My works show how I think and work. Personally I would never argue that the shape is more important than the intrinsic message, but it does form part thereof. I have an enormous passion for the creation and design of matters that did not exist before, preferably non-functional matters which I can further subject to my imagination running wild. I love to combine shapes and volumes and to sense it in a physical space. This is how I try to get a hold on what I see. A number of works are literal implementations of ideas, whereas others were created through spontaneous, intelligent acting. These latter two are much harder to control, but much more interesting. In a sense I try to find a method of working that

lies somewhere between the conscious and subconscious. I want to rise above traditional methods of thinking and observing. I must be able to work *sans histoire*, without a message that could justify or explain my actions. I must be able to forget a lot and dare and create again, led by the power of an unconscious action of a hand.

C.D. : can you somehow concretise this working with shapes?

N.E. : I love to study the same sculpture in different media. For example, I recently created a series of sculptures in which I placed a rough bric-a-brac version of the sculpture opposite the same shape with a smooth, clean shape language. The rough version is representative of our physical world and is also easier to create therein, whereas the clean version is characteristic of the digital, industrial world and easy to create therein, but harder to convert into reality. I think the area of tension between both worlds is interesting.

I am mainly fascinated by tension between the box and the blobs. I capture organic blob shapes in cages and place old angular architecture in symbiosis with new organic blob shapes – balanced combinations, tensions and fertilizations between old and new, the physical and the virtual. This includes sculptures such as Xobbekops, Elbatargscu, Siutobs and Salb Furchak.

C.D. : as an artist you do not exhibit a work without due consideration. Your biggest wish is to transform entire spaces and create gigantic installations through which people can stroll. Where does that passion come from?

N.E. : When I exhibited work for the first time, I was annoyed by the colour of the walls or the ceiling. Something was wrong with the lighting or certain flooring or walls were misplaced. In brief, I did not have full control of the space. Hence the idea and the need developed to build a personal, fully manageable space in which I have full control of the ceiling, the floor and the interior. In brief, a total space. The virtual world was perfect for this study. The sculpture Xobbekops, for instance, forms part of an initial study of such a space. It suspends between abstract and figurative at the same time. It is linked with architectural and sculptural theories. This way it can once again be placed in an extremely wide framework. I will realise that challenge step by step!

C.D. : I now understand that you want to build a personal world, with its own standards and laws, far away from reality. Just like those surrealists, ultimately Dali, Giacometti and Tanguy also disposed of personally built worlds that were a far cry from reality. The image of the artist as a creative genius is thus still very much part of this world?

N.E. : I do not believe so. But that is the enjoyable part of being an artist, that you can be so versatile in your approach and have a taster of so many different worlds. You can work together with surgeons, athletes, aircraft manufacturers or the local hobby club. My sculptures combine high and low tech, references to classical sculpture, as well as to futurism, science fiction and high technology. I want to bring these different references and interpretations together in an expressive thought. They are part building, part landscape, part furniture and part society. You can deem my work as an absurd provocation of our existing reality. The sculptures are subjected to a surreal interpretation, but due to their physical presence they partly return to our reality. Therefore, fully digitally generated, they seem to escape from any aesthetic categorisation and include society, geometry, liquidity and solidity. My sculptures demonstrate the work of art as visual crossbreeds, visual hybrid. As if world catastrophe and modernistic order crystallise into a fatal synthesis.