

PLASTIC THINKING AND THE PLASTICITY OF THE MIND

In: Catalogue Nick Ervinck GNI-RI 2006

The idea that an artist is endowed with a divine power to create is not a new one. From the Renaissance through Romanticism and the twentieth century's avant-garde movements, artists have been ascribed the unusual gift (of being able) to create new worlds.¹ Therefore it shouldn't come as a surprise that a young and ambitious artist like Nick Ervinck embraces such idea. However, his inspiration doesn't stay confined to the limits of art history's official canon. Being a product of his time, he also draws on today's computer games culture. He acknowledges that the way code writers like Robyn Miller (*Myst*) have succeeded in creating completely new worlds is one of his sources of inspiration. What distinguishes Nick Ervinck from these 'games designers' – questions of artistic intentions aside – is his explicit ambition to also have an impact on our physical world and its diverse (social and cultural) spaces. By giving impulse to a new perception of our world, he wants to 'actually' intervene in that world. According to the artist himself, this can be achieved by presenting the viewer with *possible* worlds.

To create a new world some kind of technology is needed. Those who focus on the possible world of tomorrow and are willing to meet the increasing demand for performance, which even the contemporary artist cannot escape, had better run towards high technology.² For Nick Ervinck, this means that as an artist during the process of 'designing', he explores all the creative possibilities offered by his computer's hardware and software, and applies them as he sees fit. For Ervinck, cyberspace becomes 'action space'. I would like to expand on Jos de Mul's interpretation of this notion because I want to make clear that, although he is *object*-minded, to Ervinck, digital space is more than just a work space. Mindful of McLuhan's credo 'The Medium is the Message', the artist is fully aware that media cannot just be used without any consequences. By using them, they automatically have imput and therefore an impact on the way we think about, perceive and act in the world. In other words: Ervinck does not pretend to be above his tools; he does not believe he can just address his tools without being addressed himself by these tools. He acknowledges *and* values his computer as if it were a prosthetic device, for both his mental and physical achievements.

In practical terms, this means that Nick Ervinck is using his computer as a storage space for his collection of digital images, as an extension of his own memory. This visual archive consists of images of real, physical objects, images that remind us of objects that once were, and images of objects he has created himself. He says that with this archive he wants to map out the world, decode its cultural gnome, in order to gain a better insight into, and eventually to also get a grip on the complexities that are inherent to life and the world itself. By doing that, he is following in the footsteps of the inventors of the *Wunderkammer* and – perhaps even more obvious - the natural history museums that came later³. Another term the artist sometimes uses is 'alphabet'. With this he suggests that his database should be seen as a source, a stockpile of images that can resorted to while writing a new world, or, in his case, while creating digital images that can then be moulded into concrete objects: from collection to analysis, via digital manipulation and/or synthesis, to digital imagery, to two-dimensional prints, museum-ready three-dimensional sculptures, sculptures for public spaces and architecture.

You could ask why any visual artist would want to enter the digital realm. Or, to put it differently, and taking into consideration the artist's ambition: in what way does digital space differentiate itself from other design spaces like a piece of paper or a canvas, when it comes to creating *possible* worlds? A first characteristic of digital media is its multi-media nature.⁴ In general what is meant by this is digital media's capacity to combine text, sound and image. Nevertheless, what seems to be of more importance to an analysis of Nick Ervinck's oeuvre is the fact that the

digital designates one common code for all these other different media. By way of a binary system, text, image and sound are being re-written *and* translated into 'information': data that can then later be reanimated, regardless of the medium in which that would take place. That way, all the images the artist has stored in his database are brought to the same ontological level.⁵ Besides, contrary to their physical equivalents, digital images are manipulable by nature. As a consequence, the link between the sign in question and its referent within concrete reality is put under heavy pressure. The tension between 'reality' and 'appearance' is increased to such a degree that the theoretical distinction between these two, traditionally thought of as bipolar concepts, is in danger of collapsing. As a result, this basic opposition, no longer sustainable, has to be abandoned.

A second quality of digital space is interactivity. This notion refers to the possibility the user of a virtual reality has, to actively participate in the creation of the final 'text'. When applied to Nick Ervinck's oeuvre, we can say that by digitalising the world and its cultures, and by placing the cultural artifacts that these cultures have produced in the same ontological reality, the artist has created the possibility for himself – and for us, as we will see later – to weave his way through time and space in order to create images, and, in the end, pictures that defy any mechanical order. Perished buildings are reanimated, albeit in a mutated form; organisms that clearly are not from this planet develop spontaneously; proportions and relations are so flexible you are left wondering what kind of diabolical logic could be running the show. In short, past and future, top and bottom, front and behind, all turn out to be virtual. Memories and visions are realized and connect themselves in *and* as an in-between, in a way that can only be described as a parallel universe. By disconnecting reality and appearance, the autonomisation of the image and the (temporal) liberation of the concrete, the 'now' makes way for all that is possible: what *is* not yet, but what *can become*.

All this brings us to a third aspect of digital space: virtuality. On one hand this term refers to what is merely an appearance. On the other hand, it refers to a potential, a possibility that can materialise.⁶ For Nick Ervinck – what hopefully has become self-evident by now – one doesn't necessarily exclude the other. In effect, his entire artistic practice is based on precisely this movement from virtual to concrete. He collects the world – yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's – he virtualises that world, or, more accurately, (ac)know(ledge)s that world in its virtual state, and as such approaches it as a collection of ever re-employable (cultural-historical) fragments, scraps of information that can only be delineated against some noise. Moreover he is aware that these positions are always only temporal, and mutually exchangeable. *In essence*, objects and ideas have an equal and identical ontological status. As such, the ultimate goal is to use them as building blocks in his designs of new unities. These don't completely deny their former physical existence, but in their virtual form they are able to transcend their former physical existence. Nick Ervinck liberates the image of its symbolical value, of the veiling convention it is tied up to. This way, in order to release its potential, suffocated for a long time by an environment that could no longer provide the necessary breathing-space, into a new space to which it has to adapt before it can commit to new syntheses and develop new moments of complexity. Cyberspace is 'an ontological machine producing possible worlds'.⁷

You could argue that simply by producing objects, the artist transports us into a new reality – a reality that has been changed in its materiality and, at best, aesthetically improved. However, Nick Ervinck goes beyond that. He attempts to virtualise the mind and the eye, to liberate us from some of the conceptual and physical structures we have come to consider over time as natural; a de-territorialisation of the mind, away from the familiar and naturalised concepts. He seeks to deconstruct our traditional, mechanised conceptual framings and its coefficients of reality (Bachelard), followed by a different relation to concrete reality. Secondly, and perhaps this may sound like a contradiction to his first goal, he tries to realize an environment that requires a new way of thinking, one that is actually already active, present on the margins without being

recognised as such. As a consequence, the potentiality of this way of thinking is left partially untapped. In short, Nick Ervinck aspires to install a new conceptual space. Located somewhere in-between those two spaces is a so-called 'smooth space'.

How should we image this space? Well, as mentioned above, we saw how Nick Ervinck has created himself an action space: a database of (digital) images, linked to a virtual (work and conceptual) space enabling him to freely navigate through time and space and, almost incidentally, create images which, once materialised, seem to defy all linear logic. The fact that this action space allows him to do so is because, on one hand, all the images that he shapes and forms, having the same ontological status, are being placed *next to* each other. On the other hand, because there is no physical space limiting him in his actions, he can switch from one image to the other effortlessly. To use Lev Manovich's words: (in general) virtual spaces are not real spaces, but constellations of various, distinguishable objects. What is missing is space, in the sense of 'medium', an environment in which the objects are embedded together with the resulting affects the objects have on one another.⁸ Hence the isotropy that is so characteristic of virtual space: anthropological markers like horizontality (the horizon of our concrete world) and verticality (the human body) lose their meaning as orientation points. Gravity loses its metaphorical significance. However, is this also Nick Ervinck's point of view?

It should be clear that we are dealing with a 'different space'. But it still is a space. If there was no space in hyperspace, there would be no *place* for a designer, however we imagine such a person (or Entity). Consequently, there would be no space for action. An empty space is an action-less space, a space that offers no room for mediation. Hence the question: how is Nick Ervinck's action space set in motion? We have already given the answer to this question: during his wanderings through space and time the artist constantly envisages our concrete world. The creations he produces within the virtual realm have to be able to be actualised one way or another; they have to be convertible into two- or three-dimensional artworks. This means that his virtual action space is penetrated, one way or the other, by our physical world. To this we may add that our physical world of today is the result of our physical world of yesterday. Having seen (a portion of) the images he stored in his database, the artist has taken this into account, too: snapshots of (historical) cultural artifacts that maybe have lost a part of their concrete existence, or images that have lost the *anchorage* that would have given them their signifying stability over time, but that are still haunting our culture as virtual entities, as premonitions and/or after-images, and are still playing a part in our quest for purpose and/or the production of meaning, however transient it may turn out to be.

In other words, Nick Ervinck animates and shapes a hybrid space, a space where virtuality and actuality are merged and change position indefinitely. A space where concepts like Essence and Identity are interpreted differently. Touching, or better, scanning and gripping have more in common than usually thought. While being is based on mutual disfigurement, on impression, where only the reciprocal host/parasite relationship is omnipresent and the absolute Marker appears to be nothing but a hyphen, a temporal and local *touch*.⁹ This way Nick Ervinck demonstrates a congeniality with the Deleuzian nomad in 'his' desert, the pre-eminent example of a 'smooth space' and the occupations it lends itself for.¹⁰

The 'striated space' is characterised by schemata and absolute values. It is so homogenous that it can be captured in coordinates and thus becomes 'captureable'. Consequently it allows for explicit utterings of opinion as well as routine. Conversely, smooth space is synonymous with wandering and drifting. The nomad is always on his way, between here and there. He is always present in several places at the same time; his existence takes place in an in-between zone, both mentally and physically. The nomad *is* his place, his existence being distributed through the regions he re-lives.¹¹ Where he comes from, and where he is going to, cannot be captured with numbers. Just like the traces he leaves in the sand, the point of departure and arrival, the blazing of a new trail, are erased by the perennial movement of the sand. Under such

circumstances, a lifetime laid down in advance, the production process humans subject themselves to turn out to be a Fata Morgana. An enforced, ever renewing and renewable orientation becomes even more necessary. A tent needs a nomad, DIY and torches. And of course anchors, markers and signs. But not temples or sanctuaries that, through their place and position, their physical orientation and guiding mission are anchored in an universal and timeless linearity and logic. In other words, for the nomad the image is of vital importance as well. But it isn't of any use to him if it is not surrounded by other images. It is meaningless if it isn't placed *next to other* images, not in the least the nomad's self-image with which it forms a synthesis. It is also useless if there is no space for movement between the images, no space for diagonal movements. After all, images only lead to other images, they have no final destination: in an atmosphere of vectors, the image of the nomad leads to the nomadic image, and vice versa. Can one surf on sand dunes? And if so, where to? The question is answered by being asked... Welcome to the desert that is Nick Ervinck's reality.

So, where does all this lead us to? We have seen how the artist has virtualised the world. We have also acquainted ourselves with his drift through time and space, and have established how the impressions he gathers during his wanderings inform a reception of his work in terms of memory and predictions. We have also come to a somewhat better understanding of how past and future get entangled within an intermediate present. And how, through the image of a nomad, images touch one another 'incidentally'. But what about the actualisation of the virtual? Remember: in Nick Ervinck's case, digital space is an 'action space' that has to enable him to create objects for our physical space. That's why we imagined this space as hybrid. Certainly in his case, this means that we cannot consider the theoretical distinction between smooth and striated spaces as absolute. Apart from that, to claim the opposite would lead to internal contradictions. Nick Ervinck seems to be aware of this too. His virtual and actual spaces, and the images or pictures they contain and evoke, entertain a host/parasite relationship. They feed off each other while – differently from a symbiotic relation – they interact in a dynamic way. This creates the appropriate conditions for a moment of complexity to develop, and whereby the encounter between two (or more) open systems can set in motion the *feedback-* and *feedforward-*processes, resulting in a collective, non-linear synthetic evolution.¹²

The two-dimensional prints are the first results of the movement started by the artist and lead him to move outside the digital realm without completely abandoning it. They can be divided into two categories. Closest to his digitally-conceived images are the prints that show us a world unto itself: amorphous organisms and *blobs* that are not easily identifiable thrive in combination with geometrical structures: constructions which at times can be associated with concrete architecture, but just as well with logical structures in general and conceptual architectures specifically. All this takes place within an environment that in itself is impossible to locate. Relational patterns appear to be flexible; structures are preyed upon and seem to be on the verge of breaking down. We are placed *opposite to a* (relatively) smooth space in which the viewer, in his or her physical capacity and as a creature of logic, has but little meaning. In this category of works, there exists a huge gap between object and subject, the artwork and its beholder. The virtual quality of the work remains high and the image surpasses the picture (for the time being). If we want to enter these spaces, we will have to leave an important part of our physical being, and thus of this world, behind. Our reflection shows us the artwork as *either* an image *or* an object (carrier of the image); our self-reflection shows ourselves as *either* an image *or* as an object (carrier of the subject that we also are). However, the second category of prints gives us a little bit more to go by. We see similar shapes as in the first category, but this time we are given clues as to their measurements and the materials they are made of, even as to possible concrete spaces in which they could flourish as full-grown pictures. The identification process becomes somewhat easier, the space between the object and its beholder somewhat less smooth, the relation between the two becomes a bit more 'coordinated'.

At this moment, however, an isomorphous relation between virtual and physical space doesn't exist yet. This can only be put to the test when a third dimension is introduced. The next stage in the development of the relation, the synthesis between virtual and physical space, does indeed manifest itself in the sculptural elaboration of some of the creations that have already been introduced in the prints. We encounter the same structures and organisms, *boxes* and *blobs*, but now they are situated within the actuality of the here and now: not only can we see them, we can also *feel*, touch and grip them. At least, it *looks as if* they are located on this side of the world. At the same time they make their otherness palpable; with one leg they are still in the action space they originated from; they seem to be aware of it too. We see images, mutated memories and divinisations that have yet to become, images that project 'intermezzo' as their adage, that hold our experience in suspense, a postponement of our efforts to locate the images and at the same time ourselves, in a striated space, then and there. Ultimately the consequence is a negation of stable identities and essences. The relations between the artwork and the viewer, and their relational positions with each other are set in motion and evaporate. But not at the cost of our existence: we are still around, here and there, everywhere... The artwork has entered our space, and we have entered the art work's world: our daily occupied world turns out to be one of the options. *Just one...*

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1 MUL, Jos de, *Cyberspace Odyssee*, Kampen, Klement, 2005, p. 187.

2 McKENZIE, Jon, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London/New York, Routledge, 2001.

3 Within this context, an eloquent term could be 'database complex', please see: MANOVICH, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 2001, p. 274.

4 For a synopsis and further discussion on the defining characteristics of digital media, and also of inspiration to this essay, see MUL, Jos de, *Cyberspace Odyssee*, Kampen, Klement, 2005, pp. 113-124.

5 For a conceptual explanation and analysis of the difference between picture and image, see MITCHELL, W.J.T., *What Do Pictures Want. The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

6 MUL, Jos de, *Cyberspace Odyssee*, Kampen, Klement, 2005, p. 122.

7 MUL, Jos de, *Cyberspace Odyssee*, Kampen, Klement, 2005, p. 47.

8 MANOVICH, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 2001, p. 248 and p. 253.

9 In this context, please compare to the conceptualization of the 'touch' in: Henry Focillon, *The Life of Forms of Art*, New York: Zone Books, 1992.

10 For an abbreviated review of the Deleuzian 'nomad' and his 'smooth space' and 'striated space', see Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 302-308.

11 In this context, please compare to Marc Augé, *Non-Places. An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London/New York: Verso, 1995.

12 With regards to the theory of complexity see: TAYLOR, Mark C., *The Moment of Complexity. Emerging Network Culture*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001.