

Mnemosyne in motion - Nick Ervinck's archiving of the mind

“Quand j'étais jeune, j'ai visité les musées du monde entier. De toutes sortes, allant du national, énorme, dont trois jours de visite ne viennent pas à bout, au cabanon bricolé par un vieillard obstiné à seule fin de rassembler des outils agricoles. Mais je n'ai été satisfaite d'aucun. Ce ne sont que des débarras. Ils ne révèlent aucune trace de la passion qui mène à faire une offrande aux déesses de la sagesse. Ce que je vise, c'est un musée qui transcende l'existence humaine. »

Yoko Ogawa, *Le musée du silence*

From 1924 to 1929, the year of his death, Aby Warburg worked on an atlas which would be the connections between the synthesis of a life-long dedication to research aimed at establishing images from all origins and times, with the aid of a subtle and well thought-out *montage*; « D'un coup se révélait une forme qui n'était pas seulement à ses yeux, un 'résumé en images' mais une pensée par images. Pas seulement un 'aide-mémoire', mais une mémoire au travail. »¹ The atlas, never finalised, was to be called *Mnemosyne*, in homage to the Greek goddess representing memory.

When confronted with Nick Ervinck's works of art, our first reaction is to find similar images of objects, spaces, movements, combinations of the same materials, which would belong to our own memory and would make their strangeness appear safe. But, despite our efforts, we quickly have to admit, and surrender, to their uniqueness and to the fact that Ervinck's work is attempting the extreme or the impossible: the building of a brand new memory of a world – its own *Mnemosyne*. The cryptic names of the sculptures, prints and installations confirm this feeling of a new and self-sufficient world with its own logical schemes and rules. The comparison of the young artist with an all-powerful and commanding figure is tempting, almost immediate and spontaneous. It becomes even more obvious if we take into consideration the fact that Ervinck spent a part of his youth constructing worlds with Lego cubes, and later on, shut off from immediate reality in an obsessive state, playing so-called 'god-like' video games as Simcity, Settlers, Warcraft, 'acting as an almighty creator'² The duality between real-life and virtual constructions is already present in these early age games where the omniscient power of organising life is clear; it will remain, develop and structure the artist's way of creating his *own* world, no longer dependent on previous data.

One element of Ervinck's uniqueness seems to come from an apparently natural ability to understand, assimilate and use the specificity of each means, of both digital and 'real life' creation; hybridity, or even more appropriately, 'syncretism', comes naturally as it does in other artistic forms, and Ervinck combines impossible shapes of wood or clay sculpture and digital rendering in coherent compositions (for instance, the amazing *ARCHISCULPT V 2004-2006* or *XOBBEKOPS 2004-2006*). In this syncretic process, no means is considered or

perceived by the viewer as inferior to the other. If the vision of a coherent and assimilated world is here engendered, it does not undermine the specificity of all the different media that co-exist in magical 'organic' oeuvres. Each medium remains autonomous, but, paradoxically, also works together with the other mediums and with the other works of art, in order to disclose new configurations, made of alliances and hostilities, but also, at the end, a complex and meaningful ensemble. It is moreover plainly obvious that Ervinck creates with the same importance each piece of his world, whatever they are made of (video, digital prints, drawings, painted plaster or polyester sculptures), whether virtual or handmade. Indeed, what also matters is the global configuration of the world itself (whether in prints or in real-life settings of galleries), in which each piece has a part in its interaction with the others and with the space itself; autonomous objects exist (like the series of small sculptures, *OSTOR*, 2002 to *GARFINOTAY*, 2003-2005) but many of the items created participate in group compositions (like in computerprints *GNI_D_GH_44B_DEC2003*, 2003 or *GNI_D_GH_73_DEC2003*, 2003 or the installation for the exhibition *Sugar-free* in Aalst, 2005). Ervinck plays with the idea of the archive, but also of the museum or of the universe itself in which each thing has to find a particular, defining and significant place.

But what makes Ervinck's almost autistic work even more interesting is its continuous evolution. Ervinck's work evolution resonates like a human being's linguistic development. At first, it was self-assured and protected in its completely subjective language, made of works that were self-explanatory and autonomous without referring to any known reality (Arhcisculpt or Xobbekops again). It evolved in a very subtle way, subjected to the external symbolic urge, integrating known shapes and objects but never losing sight of its own peculiar and unique identity. Hence the creation of *IEBANULK* 2004-2006, combining the known forms of a boat and that of a church but in an altogether unique and surprising composition, or *IENULKAR* 2004-2006, an impressive wooden church/boat sculpture. The hybrid material nature of his previous works is here displaced or extended in the objects confronted, and in the final known/unknown objects confrontation. New objects, like new words, appear and extend the world set in place, like in a Darwinian evolution pattern. Even the meta-dimension is integrated in the process; the visual deconstruction of some pieces into schemas, numbers, scales and environment proposals allows the necessary distance from a metadiscourse on the works themselves (like in C-print *GNI_S_WT_10_JUL2005*, 2005 or *GNI_S_WT_09_MAR2005*, 2005).

The combination of known objects in strange and new propositions is not the only sign of linguistic development and Darwinian evolution; the new handling of movement brings an altogether new dimension to the whole project. Other artists have already played on images of technologically transformed organisms, like Dieter Huber, William Latham or Karl Sims; their digitally elaborated worlds had many familiar traits with our own realm of objects and shapes, which is not the case with Ervinck's imaginary forms. The fixed objects of previously shaped sculptures or petrified representations in prints find a life principle in their animated forms; we are witnesses to their actual birth and metamorphosis, revealed to us by the images in motion. When brought to life, uniqueness no longer belongs to the unknown but to the always evolving changes of the matter, a relentless and fast-growing, de-multiplying, fragmented and expanding matter, appearing and disappearing in front of our eyes. Fascination grows from this perpetual movement, this 'mouvement protensif' which, as Roland Barthes wrote,³ denies the melancholic quality of the fixed photography or, in this case, prints and sculptures; but fascination grows also from the literal breathing of the forms

which, even if they remain yet unknown to our collective minds, acquire very human characteristics.

The confrontation of the virtual sculptures set in motion and the actual hand-made works also brings us back to well-known filmic narratives like *The Matrix* trilogy, Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon*, Tarsem Singh's *The Cell* or even, at a more complex level, David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*, in which a 'real' world co-exists and interacts with one or even several virtual universes creating multiple kinds of interactions. What we discover in those films, as in Ervinck's work, is that the two worlds do not live autonomously but are defined and delimited by their perpetual confrontation with each other. But, unlike those films, Ervinck's dual world is not confronting a 'real world' [based on our own reality] to a 'virtual one' [an imaginary one]. By creating syncretic sculptures, prints or installations, Ervinck perfectly illustrates Jean Baudrillard's conception of simulacra and simulation, 'La simulation n'est plus celle d'un territoire, d'un être référentiel, d'une substance. Elle est la génération par des modèles d'un réel sans origine ni réalité; hyperréel. Le territoire ne précède plus la carte, ni ne lui survit.'⁴ The absence of the referent here is obvious; Ervinck's world finds its own ways of emerging and existing, any connection with our own world being strangely remote or most of the times clearly avoided.

The passage by the image in motion is essential because it also echoes the impression of the dynamic quality of his work, either sculpture, print or animation, which captivates the viewer immediately; Ervinck's strange world, even if practically deprived of human presence, only half implies the fossilised nature of the *Mnemosyne*, or a post-apocalyptic feeling. Its materially hybrid nature (wood, polyester, paper, plastic, moving images, etc.) denotes the world's active confrontation principle. It becomes alive to our contact and our vision, watching us – as George Didi-Huberman – from its own perspective, with its own (and invisible to us) eyes. One wonders of course what will be the evolutionary curve of this universe since Ervinck explains himself that combination of shapes, material, space 'are all elementary parts of the story, all carefully considered. Even the smallest shift makes one question everything again'⁵.

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¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image-survivante – Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2002, p.452.

² from the text "lebanulk" by Christophe De Jaeger, Ghent, april 2006

³ Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire – Note sur la photographie*, Paris, Gallimard, Le Seuil, 1980, p.140.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, Paris, Galilée, 1981, p.10.

⁵ - from the text "Nick Ervinck 2003-2005" by Nick Ervinck, Kortemark, april 2003 - 2005