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Books, Sculptures and Other Things

It is always fascinating to learn about the reading habits of sculptors: what novels or poetry they might have read or what books on other art and artists, as well as other subjects, they might have on their studio shelves. Such information can be tantalising and offer up speculative insights into artists' imaginations and into what ideas might be informing and inspiring them in the making of their work.¹

Many sculptors have collected books. In Britain, Henry Moore and Eduardo Paolozzi were particularly well known for this, amongst many others, and, more recently, there is Tony Cragg, whose passion for twentieth-century American poetry and its publications is well-known and noteworthy.² The modern sculptor-bibliophile tradition, however, is widespread and extends well beyond British examples. The Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, for example, left a library in his studio-home, or *maison-atelier*, at impasse Ronsin in Paris, that included about two hundred and fifty publications.³ Amongst the books on sculpture and exhibition catalogues of his own work, we find numerous collections of poetry, publications on other artists (such as Fragonard, Botticelli, Delacroix, Dürer and Donatello), four books of writings by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré (thought to be a present from Marcel Duchamp) and volumes on hypnotism, syphilis and perspective. Many were bought by Brancusi himself, and many were gifted by friends and supporters, coming with hand-written dedications. It was a kept and cherished collection, full of tantalising possibilities, but who really knows what the sculptor actually read, half read - or indeed how he actually read?

Such questions come to mind in the context of the fascinating 'Cabinet of Curiosities' display staged by Nick Ervinck at Bibliotheek Waregem (Library) in Belgium. Here, across a well-constructed complex of cabinets, drawers and vitrines, library visitors are presented with a combination of a sample of Ervinck's own books on the sculptor Henry Moore, examples of Ervinck's own sculptures, a selection of his own toys and also other objects, such as shells, skulls, pebbles, coral, fossils, crystals and other stone and mineral samples. Although diverse and multifarious, the display stands as a decisive act of artistic connection-making, serving as both a *homage* to the work and achievement of Henry Moore – Ervinck has about 230 books on the artist at the last count – and an object ensemble designed to point to sculptural associations between his own work and that of this famous British sculptor, in the company of a fascinating array of other material objects.⁴

Ervinck is a collector, as well as an artist, and many of these objects have had a direct impact on his sculptural imagination, much like his books on Moore. This, in turn, places them in a comparable place to those other stones and bones, flints and fossils that inspired Moore himself and that can still be seen today in his maquette studio at Perry Green, where he lived and worked, like Brancusi at impasse Ronsin, for over forty years. 'Cabinet of Curiosities' at Bibliotheek Waregem is thus a clever and compelling display concept that imaginatively triangulates the 'artist-object-book' topos between two distinct oeuvres, across time and space.

All of these objects are small-scale and so have hand-held and, in turn, tactile qualities, although all of different textures and surfaces. This puts them closely in dialogue with each other, as well as with the actual books - both those inside the vitrinous spaces of the cabinet and those shelved outside it within the larger library itself. Through this object comparison and calibration, the fascinating relationship between sculpture and books – and the idea of the book as a deeply sculptural object - are activated. Both can share similar

phenomenological properties: they can be held and turned in the hand, and they can be appreciated at leisure and in slow time. Such correspondences have a particular urgency and poignancy today as we read and look at books in the time of their digital reproduction. Books and sculptures have an analogical life, rooted in the physical world, however indebted to the virtual they might in fact be in their envisaging and production.

Ervinck's display thus stands, on one level, as a call to attend to the manual scale and to pay better attention to things close up and at hand. Sculptures, like books, take up space – space that is becoming increasingly precious and needed for other things – at the same time as they can be an extraordinary means of creating it in the minds of their viewers and readers. They can be weighty, obdurate and stubborn, as they aim to carry their messages long into the future, but standing in intimate relation to the bodies that surround them, they are also packed with possibilities and generative, imaginative potential.

Because of all this, a book makes particular sense, as a form and frame, to present the work of a sculptor. There is a fit and a meeting of modes since the book format is a personal and physical means of revealing an oeuvre which is itself object-physical and personal. Like so many sculptures, books are forms of enclosure and containment - vessels to carry and communicate ideas. This present book, like the books on Moore on Ervinck's shelves, is a way of documenting, interpreting and making physically accessible, and an invitation to get inside the mind of the artist.

This motivation ties closely into one of Ervinck's main ambitions as a sculptor, which, in his own words, is to explore “cross-pollinations between the digital and the physical” and to make work that resides in and emerges from the close spaces of productive tension between the made and grown, the organic and non-organic.⁵ Over the last ten to fifteen years, Ervinck has gradually established a reputation for himself as the maker of fantastical sculpture that has an ability to appeal directly to our sense of bodily constitution. Synthetic and often brightly coloured – regularly deploying his favourite and famously eye-catching RAL1003 Yellow – his sculpture stops you in your tracks, asking you to feel the blurred boundaries between things.

In doing so, they bring together the hard and the soft, rigidity and fluidity, resilience and vulnerability, with works that blend structure and surface, and that look at once carapace-like but also as if their insides were part of their outsides and outer armour. Ervinck's sculptures provoke intensely experienced reactions, as if we were coming face to face with something we have known and felt for a long, long time, but never met before. With so many of his works we are faced with sculptural, corporeal phantasmagoria that bring the *écorche* in contact with death metal decoration: a sculptural nervous system haunted by poltergeists and a gothic biomorphism in which sculptures appear materially suspended, caught simultaneously between the living and the dead, between bloom and bone.

Ervinck's recent, well-illustrated book, published in 2014, demonstrated many of these qualities, whilst also highlighting his work's connection to other sculptors.⁶ Amongst these, we find artists from Art Nouveau and Belgian symbolism such as Fernand Khnopff, but we also find later modern sculptors such as Jean Arp, Barbara Hepworth, Bernard Meadows and, most notably for our purposes, Henry Moore.⁷ In placing his work in dialogue with Moore's, Ervinck is joining a cast of talented sculptors who have done the same, both directly and indirectly, over the last seventy-five years. Many of these artists engage in Moore's oeuvre, developing and extending the formal language of figurative sculpture and finding new possibilities in and through them. Such work is often made by those, like Ervinck, who call themselves “sculptors” and what they do as “sculpture”, and who see their own work as indirectly continuing his skills and interests, whilst sharing the same

epistemological terrain as Moore's work. Their interest tends to focus on the experience of figuration, the internal formal and emotional dynamics of the work. This is directly in keeping with Ervinck's own interest in Moore, but Ervinck is looking to push things still further in this area.

One of the interesting things about Ervinck's engagement is that it makes a contribution from outside Britain rather than from within it. The idea of a "family" of British Sculpture, as a national, cultural trope, has emerged with a vengeance across art's institutions and programmes since 1945 and has fostered, until quite recently, the idea of generational successions: of artistic grandparents, parents and children, and ultimately, of heirs and successors. Being the next successful British sculptor has often been seen as being potentially the 'next Moore' and as part of a male and "Oedipal" battle.⁸ Writers have acknowledged this in the context of the "New Generation Sculptors" of the 1960s, the "New British Sculptors" of the 1980s and the "Young British Artists" of the 1990s, and it is striking to see how the generational inheritance issue features less in the views and writings of female sculptors than in those of their male counterparts.⁹ As well as contests, this national sculpture family makes for some imaginary genealogies and sibling rivalries. The fact that the subject matter of much of Moore's work was the family – mothers and children and family groups – and charged by notions of natural, organic growth, brought this idea full circle, making a quasi-sociological, art historical notion a material and formal one. Many contemporary artists are still deeply aware of the metaphorical idea of Moore as an artistic father figure. It comes across in a variety of subtle ways, since, as Susan Hiller stated in relation to Moore's legacies: 'Thinking about a father figure and about a relation to a father figure, isn't easy. Maybe that accounts for the absence of sculptors in the conversations about Moore's influence.'¹⁰

Ervinck's engagement is thus interesting and timely, as the international life and imaginative possibilities of Moore's work are being revisited and reconsidered in the early twenty-first century. Working in and through books on Moore and the reproductions they contain, as much as the actual sculptures, means that Ervinck, like many artists thinking about Moore, is often dealing with a two-dimensional image of Moore's work, however large or monumental the reference work might be in real life. This small scale also enables an interesting and more controlled grasp of the work – seeing a large sculpture as if it were the size of the shell – and in doing so, echoing much of Moore's own expressed ability to think between sizes and easily recalibrate the scale of objects between the palm of his hand and the room.

Thinking about such matters takes us very much back into Ervinck's 'Cabinet of Curiosities' at Bibliothek Warem. It is a display that not only asks us again to think about the scaled relationships between objects and their potentialities, but that also turns sculptures into specimens: objects to be carefully considered, dissected even, and, like books, to be opened up and read.

¹ For an interesting project that considered the reading lists and bookshelves of artists and art writers, see: Simon Morris and Helen Sacoar, *Bibliomania 1998-1999*, Information as Material, 1999. Contributors included: Julie Ault, Victor Burgin, Neil Cummings, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Matthew Higgs, Daniel Jackson, Joseph Kosuth, Marysia Lewndowska, Jeremy Millar, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Cindy Smith, Haim Steinbach and Greville Worthington.

² For a book on Cragg's sculpture that addresses his interest in poetry, see: *Tony Cragg: It is, It isn't*, Köln: Walther Koenig in partnership with Tucco Russo (Torino), 2011.

³ For a complete list of these books, see: *L'atelier Brancusi*, La Collection, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997, pp. 232-49

⁴ Ervinck studio confirmed 226 books on Moore on 24 June 2019.

⁵ Nickervinck.com

⁶ *Nick Ervinck: GNI_RI_2014*, Studio Nick Ervinck, 2014.

⁷ See: Julia Kelly, 'Pushing the Boundaries: The Sculpture of Nick Ervinck', *Nick Ervinck: GNI_RI_2014*, Studio Nick Ervinck, 2014, pp. 209-13.

⁸ This has been addressed in a number of texts, including: Keith Patrick, 'Six Generations of British Sculpture 1945-1995', in *Contemporary British Sculpture: From Henry Moore to the 90s*, exhib. Cat. Auditorio de Galicia, Santiago de Compostela, 1995, pp. 17-93; Anthony Hudek, 'The Break-Up of the New British Sculpture', HMI Essay Series, Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2004.

⁹ The question of female sculptors' views on the idea of a British Sculpture family was addressed by Sarah Staton and Jane Simpson in two recent exhibitions and exhibition catalogues: *Daddy Pop: The Search for Art Parents*, London: Anne Faggionato, 2004, and '*kissing cousins*', Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2007.

¹⁰ Susan Hiller, 'Truth' and 'Truth to material': Reflecting on the sculptural legacy of Henry Moore', in Jane Beckett and Fiona Russell (eds.), *Henry Moore: Critical Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, p. 67