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The Wunderkammer that is, ultimately, US...

The 80s were part of a major change that took place beneath the phenomena that were both visible and invisible to us; a paradigm shift that, from a cultural-historical perspective, deeply affected the ontology that has always characterised the West. For centuries, western society had been embedded in a number of presuppositions that barely ever surfaced but that had substantially permeated all of its actions and thoughts. Ontology concerns our vision of reality, our imagined position with regard to each other, all other beings, and all things around us. The generalised western and biblical urge for expansion throughout the ages has given rise to a feeling of superiority that has developed into domination and objectification, i.e., transformed everything around us into an object at our disposal. Nature was declared subordinate to culture, or our vision of culture, and the western Self was proclaimed a hierarchically higher, sovereign power vis-à-vis all others.

The closure of museums as a result of the covid pandemic has brought about a change in traditional ideals of art, its uniqueness and what constitutes aesthetic value itself. Among many other initiatives, space is now being created for a “museum without walls”, a virtual meeting place, through the introduction of new interactive resources. In a sense, the artist has more space to make creative interventions in more varied cultural settings. This can be as an artist-in-residence; as the creator of a virtual exhibition; and as a sort of contemporary demiurge linking centres of art with the wilder slopes of art creation. The result is a new form of *Wunderkammer*, or Cabinet of Curiosities.

We westerners—in our supposed belief in a universalism that is, in fact, primarily in our own best interests—started creating museums and *Wunderkammers* during the Renaissance. Their function was to present exotic cultures but also to stage the abnormal, the unheard-of and the unseen. At the same time, this was an attempt to affirm our own identity and culture.

So Nick Ervinck's *Wunderkammer*—in the form of a virtual Mouseion—makes one dream of other worlds, of a different ontological attitude than that which permeates our world. In his virtual spaces, biblical dualism is banished, nature intersects with culture, and no attempt is made to tame and objectify the Other. What he conjures up in one fluid movement is an inclusive whole where pluriverse worlds are at home and where his fascination with an out-of-this-world energetic BLOB connects everything together. This is a *Wunderkammer* inhabited by a deep holistic spirit, where far distant continents are as inspiring as closer ones, and where nothing is gained at the expense of anything else.

Once we are aware of the pluriverses that surround and inhabit us, and therefore of who we really are, we can arrive at the *Wunderkammer* that is the human being. At a time when Gaia—and Pan following in her tracks—is being invoked once again by leading philosophers such as Bruno Latour and Michel Serres, we feel newly appreciative of thoughts and actions that connect the microscopic with the gigantic. Human beings are no longer the Vitruvian man, the measure of everything: instead we are finding our place within the new ecocentric ontology. This sounds very much like the artist, as Ervinck

embraced the principles of cultural transformation and acculturation early in his career - creating original worlds and sensations that thrive on the energetic presence of BLOBS.

This sense of a holistic presence fills me with deep joy and peace. As I wander at my own pace through the virtual spaces that Ervinck created, choosing my own routes and points of access, I find that everything can be connected. Here, the West enters into a non-hierarchical relationship with other cultures, each redolent of its own intuitions and basal experiences. Ervinck's masks do not conceal delusions of superiority. The cyborgs, plants and rocks do not contain "right" and "normal" stories. I am reminded, in this virtual world, of some of the preconceived ideas I still harbour when looking at art - but it also liberates me, makes me laugh at my conditioned thoughts, and evokes wonderful experiences of a plurality of worlds bursting with beauty.