

MOUSEION

Designed in Nick Ervinck's imagination

This modern incarnation of the MOUSEION—the home of scholarly works in classical times, dedicated to the nine Muses—is the setting for a dialogue between traditional forms of art and architecture and me.

As daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, the Muses preserved ancient knowledge and inspired new ideas, forms and worldviews. Just like the original, this MOUSEION presents a unique assemblage of art and science. And just as the Temple of the Muses in Alexandria, with its famous library, sought to understand the contemporary world, the collection of artworks in my virtual MOUSEION call into question specific aspects of our own recent past.

Nick Ervinck in dialogue with Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Francis Bacon, Hans Arp, Lyn Chadwick, Auguste Rodin, Antoine Bourdelle, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Historical pieces from, among others, The Louvre - Paris, The Metropolitan Museum of Art - New York, The British Museum – London, Middelheim - Antwerp, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden - Washington D.C., Museo Nazionale Romano - Roma, Statens Museum for Kunst - Copenhagen, Das Naturhistorisches Museum – Vienna.

Complemented by African masks, rocks, shelves, bones, corals, fruit, toys and tree trunks.

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FRONT PORCH

Will we ever leave behind the Anthropocene, the first geological era to unequivocally show the impact of human activity on Earth's climate and cosmic atmosphere? Are we at a turning point in history or is that just an illusion? The world certainly seems to have reached its most heterogenous point so far, constantly in movement and endlessly surprising. This protean state of affairs certainly presents an exciting challenge for artists.

My MOUSEION preserves life forms in the process of mutating. Their paradoxical appearance raises questions about the role of sculpture in our rapidly changing times. Famous images from art history meet on the paths of a labyrinthine trail that takes you through ancient and modern explorations of human failings, a spiritual journey that culminates in the big question: what is the value or necessity of the human imagination? And does this journey potentially lead us to a synthesis of an historically significant moment that is showing signs of both decline and progress? In our quest to find ourselves—the children of Gaia wandering about on a planet from which we rose organically—first we seek connection. We take the food we eat from Mother Earth; we breathe the heavenly air in and out; and with every breath and every step we take, we redefine our cosmic relationships. As we do so, we are aware of every other being that lives alongside us and who is inextricably bound to us through emotions, whether deep or superficial.

This is a museum of hybridity, and as such, nearly everything you see is in flux. As an artist, I continually change materials and vary my use of perspectives and colours. The result is works that evoke contradictory feelings: from pleasure and delight to alienation and fear of the uncanny. This innovative formal language is unexpected and raises the inevitable question: what is this actually about?

Is it a call for a new kind of consciousness? A new way of seeing? A new human race? An exhortation to turn the old things inside out and endlessly find new forms to express our experience as we drift along on our existential journey?

My personal guide will be the BLOB, an explosive organic force field that is both a vortex and an unprecedented simulator of human geometry and genomics. It transforms figuration into abstraction only to then metamorphose back into a sort of figuration. It is thus a force of attraction, a message about the need to find unity in diversity, diversity in unity.

So how should we deal with the modernist legacy that used these same questions as a starting point to search for new ways to express the world around us?

Whatever the endpoint may be, my journey is intended as a tribute to such extraordinary predecessors as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Hans Arp, who, a century ago, set out to create a new and profound sculptural language.

1. BLOB

My work represents how I experience the world in all its chaotic beauty, limitless grandeur and poetic charm. In contrast to the BOX format that we generally see in architecture, with its horizontals, verticals and angular spaces, the BLOB is amorphous, round, playful and unpredictable. Unsurprisingly, the West has long rejected this so-called formlessness: does it not represent the antithesis of our culture's desire to control and rationalise our environment?

BLOB is indeed organic, revealing a process of infinite and relentless growth of the miniscule into the monumental. It is a splash, a gigantic raindrop, a cosmic egg: a pulse of energy that destabilises every dimension and provides new life.

To choose a world in a permanent BLOB is to choose a world of innovation, of boundless, provocative imaginings - unpredictable and unstoppable.

For me, BLOB is all about a freedom that flows outwards; admittedly a puzzling freedom, and that's what makes it so attractive to an artist. It represents the desire to be sucked into another world, explore other dimensions and therefore step outside of quotidian reality. In that sense it is driven by the power of attraction that is at once ancient and contemporary, active both on and outside this earth, in very concrete as well as symbolic terms.

My BLOBs spread out, reflecting my passion to bend the linear sensibilities of the old architectural order into more rounded and fluid forms: into a sort of rhizomatic swarming chaos. This is in line with my desire to contribute to the story of sculpture - and that includes a wish to reinvent its most elementary forms.

2. ROCKS

During a walk in the Yuyuan Garden in Shanghai, I encountered Gonshi rocks for the first time: naturally hollowed-out rocks, they evoke all sorts of associations and can even take on the shapes of landscapes, people, animals and mythical figures. The sculptures of the British artists Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth immediately came to mind. As their work evolved from figurative to abstract, they discovered the "hole" or "negative space" in sculpture, a decisive moment in the history of the artform. Moore used it to sculpt the landscapes that lay behind the sculptures.

I make holes to explore the interior of sculptures, to create movement and to trigger a sort of subcutaneous experience. I want the blob form that I discovered in these rock gardens to suck the viewer into a world of wondrous shapes and rapidly expanding holes.

There are hundreds of possibilities for beauty and sensuality as you wander within the tantalising hollows. What I find exciting is the potential for deep exploration of negative space—and the testing of its limits—afforded by the technology at my disposal.

3. PLANTS

The perforated Gonshi rocks, asymmetrical and wildly chaotic as they are, are not that far removed from the still lifes painted on the Meissen vases I discovered in a London museum. For these sculptures, I effaced the natural colours from leaves, stems and fruit - as though a scientist playing God in a virtual future, subjecting them to radiation and genetic manipulation in a bid for ultimate control over humanity and nature.

The still lifes were no longer so innocent: yellow strawberries hanging heavy from a strange plant encased in a white exoskeleton, are covered by sickly blue petals. Is this regression to the vegetal and animal hybrid confined to plants and trees or can we as humans expect a similar regression in the near future?

Whatever the answers may be, my *Plant Mutation Project* poses the sort of bewildering questions that we generally like to avoid. Our preconceptions are challenged when the natural landscapes that we have always perceived as our familiar habitat are—much to our consternation—shown here in all their unnaturalness.

The “garden of the future”, complemented by experiments with genetically manipulated products, merges visual poetry with ethical questions. The validity of my surreal strawberry and coral sculptures in the real world may also strike the viewer as worrying, to say the least.

4. MASKS

The vibrant energy radiating from the *Mask Mutation Project* pieces can have an unsettling impact on the viewer. The colours employed may be partly responsible as they reference the rich hues of African patterns and motifs from the Maya and Inca cultures of Central and South America.

The masks are nourished by an alien energy that—as it is unnatural to us—calls into question what function or purpose a human interpretation could have.

Somewhere in or around these masks, classical representation explodes, and this makes the world behind the mask at least as interesting as what is in front of it.

Considering that the human species is undergoing a period of unprecedented evolutionary development, I ask myself how human faces will change, turn into humanoid masks, into new inter-faces that integrate our capabilities of upgrading cognition and expanding existential opportunities.

As an artist, I am aware of both the promise inherent in a new technological era and the age-old philosophical and existential problem of just being human, just being an inchoate and even unwanted child of Gaia. However, a transhumanist dream haunts me: how can I remodel the most iconic elements of a human, in particular the head, in line with the latest paradigms of evolutionary science?

The resulting sculptures resemble primary life forms, such as insects and crustaceans, as well as aliens in science-fiction movies. They remind us that we are nothing more than mutants in a world in constant flux. Perhaps the masks tell us that we are ourselves hybrid beings, somewhere between human and animal, with different types of brains formed by evolution and constantly in conflict with each other.

5. ARCHAEOLOGY

The present and future are continuously affected by traces of the past. The convergence of these three time dimensions raises critical questions about the significance of the past and the potential of what is still to come. Surviving relics are testimony to both randomness and the workings of power, to the at times confusing interplay between high and low culture, between idealised imperial busts and the more Mickey Mouse type of heritage.

My use of 3D computer graphics, prints, drawings and sculptures is aimed at an audience who are yet to be born but who will be directly affected by what we do and think today in our rapidly changing society.

The middle path that I construct between virtual and physical worlds unshackles the imagination, recycles the historical space and poses pithy questions about the use and abuse of the past.

Freed from their old certainties, viewers are thus provoked into imagining alternative worlds that could have existed or are to come, as well as parallel worlds for which there is no archaeology as yet but which still possess an *arche*, a basic principle of our thinking and the ultimate starting point for exploration.

6. HUMANS

As though a novel form of BLOB sculpture, human organs, bones and muscles seem to be the perfect objects for giving primary form to a new alphabet for drawing the human beings of the future.

The collaboration of art, technology and science has proved particularly useful when it comes to depicting the human body. Human anatomy remains the paradigm for those who seek an imaginative response to incisive questions about our prejudices and our position as a species, both from the standpoint of our cosmic magnificence and at the cellular level.

By using BLOB sculptures both as endoskeleton and exoskeleton, this human appeared to me to be an extremely problematic being, inhabiting an intermediate zone between outside and inside, human and animal, physical form and mythical tale.

Allowing the imagination to meddle with larynx and brain did bring a transhumanist belief one step closer, but mutations on these border regions of being human do indicate that the artist would like a patent on this new anthropogenesis.

7. CYBORGS

The many cyborg warriors that I've designed hail from a variety of favourite inspirations, from science fiction and modern manga to the work of H.R. Giger. Robots, aliens and monsters inhabit my interior world and command a particular respect due to their unknowable and ambiguous nature.

Are these cyborgs in their multi-coloured mechanical skeletons the gatekeepers of a new consciousness, the new (false) gods of an anthropocene future, or do they recall the rituals of primitive ancestors?

Making these equivalents of classical busts is quite a challenge: they require thousands of hours of computer assisted work as well as protracted, highly refined craftsmanship.

It could be said that my cyborgs hold up a mirror to us, perhaps as the prototypes of future humans, upgraded with implants and algorithms. Once again, they testify to my desire to portray hybridity and mutation, to interface perfect symmetry with the wild and chaotic side of life.

Their thorny skin conjures up the animal hides worn by the first inhabitants of Earth. Future technology could produce a thicker, more protective, polyfunctional skin as a sort of armour capable of absorbing the impacts of drastic climate change.

8. ANIMALS

Animals seem to be subject to the same profound mutations as the hollowed-out rocks in Shanghai that symbolise the energetic coherence of evolution.

The whole of the natural world is evoked in a state of becoming and degeneration: not a single physical element is spared this profound process of change.

Animals going about their daily lives are torn away, stripped of their natural physique and transformed beyond recognition. Their limbs are combined with vestiges of what might be plants or humans to create at times terrifying, at others seductive, compositions.

Rampaging nature has caused them to take on the composite appearance of Greek monsters, such as the Chimera, the Hydra and the Harpies. Was it an apocalyptic disaster, the arrival of UFOs or our own shoddy handling of the environment that led to this grotesque outcome?

However, there is one further step—in this dispersal of the state of being an animal—when only Rorschach blots remain, denuded of all animal or human presence, beautiful in their perfect symmetry. These remnants are among the mysteries of the cosmos.

9. SKIN

What started out as static surfaces were eventually covered with skin, hide or shell. The smooth exteriors of the polished BLOB sculptures were disguised under a corrupt material. The bellies and breasts appear to be moving, breathing, chaotic beneath their alien substance.

Cosmic spiderwebs stretch out in every direction as they possess space. Fragile yet impregnable, flowing yet bone-hard, they span both microscopically small and monumentally huge planes.

The viewer may be reminded of the fleshy textures of Francis Bacon, or recognise a tribute to Eadward James Muybridge, who pioneered moving images with his zoopraxiscope.

These mutations of skin and hide, man-made fossils—from within or outside of known evolutionary processes, whether intentional or the fruits of blind chance—demonstrate their viability in an array of universes. Unabashedly radiating garish colours, they ask about the purpose of their functioning: are they, as they seem, part of a dystopian landscape, taking first breaths in the silence following a cosmic storm? Or are they the pulpy beginnings of a new technological era? Soon we'll all be wearing our new smart skins, vital to our survival, a fantastic fusion of Gaia and Techno.

BACK PORCH

The sculptures that are included in my MOUSEION no longer belong to the reality we think we know. During the interbellum and following the war, modernists such as Moore, Hepworth and Arp challenged conventional perceptions of the function and purpose of art to such an extent that they had to be revised. Like these sculptors, I was looking for a completely different form of art, one that made the world feel other, as though a universe with an alien formal language, a landscape that inspires a sense of wonder.

Is this wonder the result of exposing that which has been there all along but hidden in the subconscious, buried by our culture? And did my years of fevered exploration of negative space only serve to circle the black holes within ourselves? What does the interior of the sculpture with which my BLOBs are obsessed mean? A descent into the microbiological core of our humanity? Or an invitation to include interstellar spaces in our worldview?

This very different universe, held together by its numerous references to art history, its forays into the contemporary art scene from high to low, its futuristic ideas and models, and its influences from the deepest past, is my response.

Confronted with these sculptures, the classical model explodes. For this reason, the world inside the BLOB is at least as interesting as that outside of it. This is a rabbit hole for my imagination, taking it ever further into 3D technology where I can manipulate primary life forms at will.

I am thus, as an artist, hacking Darwin, remodelling DNA, seeking to regenerate plants, corals and animals after yet another mass extinction or deadly radioactive fallout. At the same time, I am constantly amazed at the intangible magnetism we

possess, how it preserves our libido, love and lust, and how it would seem that our *élan vital* will never be quite snuffed out.

So, within the context of recent developments in evolutionary science, I explore what kind of meaningful life can result from complementing organic lifeforms with human-made technological extensions.

Is this union of genetic and artistic engineering experiments a wake-up call for a society that is developing heterogenous lifeforms—thereby embracing transhumanism as never before—while allowing itself to be lulled to sleep ideologically?

After the heirs of Alexander the Great had collected all the knowledge in the world in the great library of the MOUSEION in Alexandria, this knowledge was also used as a weapon to eliminate enemies. Fear of societal change can lead to violence, which is why artists in today's world need to be more vigilant than ever.