

## **Nick Ervinck. Early Works**

You and I meet for the first time in 2004. You're just starting out as an artist and taking part in the exhibition *The Young Ones* in Kortrijk. You're 23 years old and have a few years of training behind you, firstly studying 3D Multimedia (1999-2001) at University College Ghent but then switching to Mixed Media (2001-2003) as you hadn't been completely satisfied with the course. In 2003, you wrote a number of texts that you will, in fact, need the rest of your life to manifest.<sup>1</sup>

You write about the creation of a new type of world, one in which you position yourself as an all-powerful god sitting on your Mount Olympus creating a reality based on your own rules and standards as an artist. In you, I see an artist who gives new meaning to the legendary words of the modernist Ezra Pound, "Make it new". This is demonstrated graphically in your first works, GNI-RI (2003) and ARCHISCULPT I-V (2004-2005): you're looking for a sort of free space that allows you to move nomadically between physical materials and virtual processing. This allows you to navigate time and space effortlessly while asking sharp ontological questions about alternative modes of thought.

You are certainly preoccupied with what the artist's position is in a world that remains largely unknowable and unfathomable. In 2008, in the wake of 9/11—which you experienced firsthand from close by the Twin Towers—you scan all the photographs that you've ever taken and use them for a deep dive into your autobiographical archive (GNIURKS). In concrete terms, this shows that within this hybrid sphere of thought and action, you are highly sensitive to the central notion of "reality". You question it repeatedly, accustomed as you are to designing your own cities and networks: first, as a passionate LEGO builder, then as an avid player of video games, such as Simcity and Warcraft. You, who as a young artist spent years obsessively working in an atmosphere of seclusion, now produce works typified by hybrid configurations: half nave, half church (IEBANULK, 2004; IENULKAR, 2004); or half animal-like being, half swarming rhizome (GNI-GNI, 2006).

I can see a syncretic practice emerging, one that connects all the materials together without subordination, instead a seamless flow of time elements passing through each other. Past, present and future intersect in one big archiving and activating odyssey. The materials, proportions, colours and volumes that pollinate each other—preferably in an act of free thinking and without a predetermined goal (GNIKOLBSTER, 2003)—or as an ode to minimalism (LEJ-UT, 2003)—are polymorphic, pliant and multidirectional.

Add to this the important questions that you ask yourself regarding identity and space, and it is clear that you are looking for the essence of both humans—in this case yourself—and sculpture. The objects that you make are beings that, like you, are looking for their place in the universe. For this reason, your sculptures are in a constant battle for their breathing space, for their unique survival. But the beauty that you experience on the way is not that of a fairy tale with a happy ending. No, for you life is a quest for artistic and existential meaning, which can make for a weary and heavy-hearted journey.

When your first versions of organic BLOBs threaten to escape from their rigid confines, you ask everyone whether this constitutes an escape or an embrace. SALB FURCHAK (2004-2006) is a playful reference to blast

furnaces, metallurgical furnaces that can melt even the hardest metals. This work raises deeper questions about the hardness of humans and how they can be transformed – either into a different material or into something softer and kinder.

During the period 2003-2013, you explore the boundaries between every possible form of old and new thinking. In your hands, the different elements become as though inseparable, both present and absent, in constant tension. You sense reality as something energetically fluid, endlessly metamorphosing and even dancing – like the houses you designed for the *Horizon 8300* exhibition in Knokke (EGATONK, 2009; VIUNAP, 2013). This is dancing worthy of Piranesi and Escher, with sea-monster-like houses evoking a virtual, absurd and impossible world.

You gradually come to prefer the colour yellow, and in particular RAL 1003 signal yellow. It's a fresh and yet enigmatic colour that distinguishes you from what you see as the colourless masses moving about like ants (video EIBNOZ, ca. 2000). Wildly chaotic or perfectly stylised forces—often originating from sublime yellow eggs and embedded in rigid geometries (ARCHISCULPT I-V, 2004), or even an unfolding house (SIUTOBS, 2005)—result in sculptures that perhaps develop into baffling video stills, perhaps into dynamic animations.

One reality no longer exists for you, instead many kinds co-exist. It is not even about one “real” reality contrasting with a virtual one, but simulacra alongside simulacra. As you write in the first lines of your 2003 graduation work, “I fell into a spider’s web. But I don’t want to crawl out of that web, rather, I want to crawl deeper and deeper into it”.<sup>2</sup>

The spider web is one of your favourite images, representing what you really see and experience; one of the many emotional worlds that haunt you, poised between the visible and invisible, the accessible and impenetrable. Are these strands those of a spider or returning dreams that you collect for your ever-expanding database and cabinets, obscure in their purpose and functionality? Your inquisitive eye can be everywhere at once, especially at the centre of the images themselves, constantly experiencing the type of contamination that its digital essentiality transfers to the material. In the indeterminate space in which all beings, including your sculptures, must find their place, you do indeed feel that looking is a form of contamination, of touching and being touched. The human gaze creates contact, after all, and so in that sense every sculpture that has architectural traits is also a step towards a more social world. The ARCHISCULPT series reflects this elemental tension, since these works exist solely as hybrids, wholly from the fusion of ARCHItecture and SCULPTure.

So, your early works do not exist in isolation but are playing pieces in a larger phenomenological field. You play with their spatial manifestation as you are the all-powerful Zeus who as such creates the space itself. Your artworks drip from the ceiling, pop out of the floor and emerge from walls that you put up and take down. But the art space itself is not allowed to escape the searching eye as the viewer becomes involved in the inside/outside optical game. Thus, your scale model of the Koekelberg basilica, a preparatory model for a larger version, reveals its supporting structure: a sort of Meccano skeleton within which a tent is hung from several points, or a static framework that contains a nomadic architecture (YARONULK, 2009).

For you, both the spaces and the sculptures themselves must be fundamentally flexible since the same playing pieces will be used to create other arrangements. A plinth is straight, tilted or sliding, and the constituent parts move on to become new compositions. As you proceed in your search for your own order of things, you need to be able to rearrange them because this is the guiding principle in your art: a constant urge to start over. Many of your early works are subject to this continual process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. The successive routes of their creation are even shown in their earliest forms: firstly, as a video, then in the full presence of the sculptures themselves, and finally as animations with links to future works. This is the freedom to see the world as a space with everything in it configured – but with the potential for sudden drastic change.

You have known from the start that chaos always invokes and needs order. So that you can, in a sense, make the incomprehensible understandable, you design your own classification system, basically an archive that is first constructed in your head and then stored in your computer. Then you can manage what you see. It seems to be necessary for you to create order in the world, as this is the only way you can combat disorder and arbitrariness, and not only in your environment but in your own body and mind. To this end, you start to design your own language for your early works, your own code, giving your pieces the most intriguing titles in the art world. I am thinking about the logic used in titles such as IE, IEBANULK and IENULKAR, strange names that the viewer senses have reason behind them but also that we don't possess the key to it. Your personal artistic world design therefore remains safely stowed away.

The substantial toolset of your own alphabet turns out to be highly dynamic, because some ten oppositions dominate your artistic playing field. They are not strictly oppositional – they flow into each other, form odd coalitions. I am thinking of the sliding transitions between such opposing forces as open/closed, fluid/solid, dynamic/static, light/dark, hybrid/homogeneous, inner/outer, public/intimate, endoskeleton/exoskeleton, classic/futuristic, rational/sensual, etc. They appear to me to be continuous transformations of the world, the cyclical distillation processes aspired to by ancient alchemists, the result of endless refinement of raw, primary matter. The contrast between outside and inside plays an especially important role here, because it is precisely this that determines what should be seen and what remain hidden, in other words, what should be dressed or exposed. In an early video performance (KASAM, 2000), you robe and disrobe while dancing, as if you want to discard all clothes and masks, an attempt to transcend imposed social order. You have always been intrigued by packaging of all kinds—boxes, hollow forms and Styrofoam—even the covering nature of skin means something fundamental to you.

And so, there is the longing for connection in much of your work, being in the outside world longing and reaching for an inner world, and vice versa, hoping for contact with the Other, with people, with the world. Your work has been given a home in many public institutions and spaces. Branches, protrusions, tentacles and spinal cords along with expanding BLOBs express this groping for a distant dimension that will somehow generate connection. Already in 2003, you wrote about “the presence of the absent: the objects and images are like husks, they demand something unspeakable. The awareness of an unattainable omniscience”<sup>3</sup>.

Today, nearly twenty years later, I note that the art principles you formulated back then are still a source of inspiration for you. What's more, you still challenge viewers to question their notions of reality. You still call on them to forget that they once thought and felt within proscribed boxes, and you take them on a journey through other possible worlds and dimensions. That's why I appreciate you, Nick, not only as a great friend and artist but as a companion, a philosopher-scientist, who wants to experience and express everything in this world – not only the incomprehensibly grotesque but also the unattainably wondrous.

Good luck on your futuristic voyage of the Argonauts!

<sup>1</sup> Nick Ervinck, 'Much is clear but not yet realised. Much is realised, but not yet clear.

Selected writings 2003 – 'Utvlokte securp'', from: *Proces GNI*, Graduation work, University College Ghent, 2003, [www.nickervinck.com/src/Frontend/Files/Texts/files/1448015480.pdf](http://www.nickervinck.com/src/Frontend/Files/Texts/files/1448015480.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 11.