

BETWEEN THE DIGITAL AND THE SCULPTURAL, AN UNSEEN DIALECTIC.

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One day Nick Ervinck wants to create a scale model of the basilica of Koekelberg, which will be 14 metres long. This modular sculpture will be composed of metal pipes, connected to one another by a system of screws. The construction envisioned by Ervinck will require the design and creation of a hundred different connecting pieces. A many-sided tent will then be hung inside this meccano-skeleton, which will serve as a video room. We can imagine that the artist will present one or more animated films inside this tent, including a virtual tour of the colossal tent as it would be if it was stretched out in the basilica itself. The tour will be so lifelike, shining like a hyper-realistic *trompe l'oeil*, that the viewers will have the momentary illusion of witnessing a filmed representation of the actual construction instead of imaginary, digitally construed images.

When asked about his motivation to reproduce Koekelberg, the artist answers that it represents a white elephant. The basilica, set apart from the capital's urban fabric atop a small island, is a special case, which was already outdated before its realisation was even begun. The clear delineation of geometrical volumes, typical of Art Deco, were also more suitable for Ervinck's enterprise than the nervous rhythms of Gothic vaults. Moreover, the interior is of no importance here; only the exterior was copied to scale. Ervinck started from an exact replica, after which the proportions were occasionally adapted. After Koekelberg, Ervinck will execute a similar operation, based on the Capitol in Washington, DC.

In expectation of this fourteen metre specimen, Nick Ervinck realised a (ten times) smaller scale model. In this case, however, it is not a modular construction. Its realisation started with two differently executed 3D prints in polyamide, which were then printed and composed in about forty separate pieces. The cage was also given a rust-imitation. After it had been carefully and repeatedly sanded and varnished, the tent was placed inside the skeleton.

The oeuvre of Nick Ervinck has one foot firmly planted in the digital world. This means that he does not only use the computer as an instrument, but that the digital logic largely determines his artistic thought and method as well. Using *copy paste*, and depending on the actual task and its context, he applies images, shapes and textures of extremely diverse origins: basilicas, corals, dinosaurs, cottages, Rorschach inkblots, Chinese rocks and trees, Henry Moore and Hans Arp, manga, twelfth-century floral wallpaper, the anatomy of the human larynx, and so on. These elements are then digitally reproduced, mirrored, distorted and assembled. During this process, Ervinck works with procedures and patterns, although intuitive sculptural craftsmanship maintains a crucial role throughout the creative process. He thereby strives towards a balance in the final image between structure and complexity, figuration and abstraction, fancy and symmetry.

Of equal importance in Ervinck's oeuvre is that other extreme, which contradicts the digital image on more than one level: the concrete, tangible matter. Whereas the digital age is still very young, the art of sculpture boasts a tradition of several millennia. Contrasting with the

suppleness of the binary image is the inherent inflexibility of sculpture, especially when it aspires towards monumental proportions and longs to weather the elements.

Whenever physical or financial obstacles will not (yet) allow him to realise a sculpture, Ervinck is content to represent the image in two dimensions, in a most detailed and convincing manner. In this case, he even pays attention to the reflections of varnished skin in the sculpture he represents, i.e. the reflections of the inexistent, virtual space surrounding it. This is one of the most subtle ways to connect both the actual space inhabited by the viewer and the virtual space of the image, as Jan Van Eyck did in his Arnolfini portrait, six centuries earlier. Conversely, Ervinck sometimes strives to make the final presentation of a sculpture as elusive as a virtual image, e.g. thanks to the smooth, seamless finish of the yellow surface and the clever placement and lighting of the work inside a black box.

The essence of Ervinck's art lies in the swing of the pendulum between digital image and sculpture, between virtual and actual space and vice versa – a strong dynamic from which new procedures, materials, techniques and unseen shapes arise. Although he acknowledges a similar dynamic in contemporary architecture, he believes that it is less present in sculpture. According to the American architect Greg Lynn, both classical and modern aesthetics are based on the combination of classical Greek geometry and the organic unity of the human body. In many classical facades or sculptures, any kind of addition or omission would quickly destroy the harmonic unity and purity. This is what shapes any given facade or sculpture into a static whole. In his practice and theory (see, for instance, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs*, Paris, 1998) Lynn has systematically attacked the universal and absolute claims of classical monumentality. For him, the Statue of Liberty provides an excellent counter-example. Not only did its colossal proportions only require a design that could not rely on the laws of classical monumentality, but it also called for a dialectic between Eiffel's internal steel architecture and Bartoldi's sculpted exterior. In order to produce the statue, these two elements had to mutually infect and transform each other, both diverting from their initial logic. Such a process is unpredictable, nonlinear and complex because it cannot be reduced to its components. This heterogeneous and multiple dynamic is also the axle of Nick Ervinck's artistic activity. See, for example, how the tent attaches itself to the classical volumes of Koekelberg like a parasite, and how, on the other side, the artist does not hesitate to adapt the basilica's proportions in function of the tent. I wonder whether the artist will ever succeed in creating a *trompe l'oeil* on an actual 1:1 scale - Ervinck-yellow tentacles inside a white elephant.

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