

Creator of a complex parallel universe

An interview with Nick Ervinck

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"I often feel like one of the last of the Mohicans. Here I am with one foot in the old world, because I still make sculptures that stand on a pedestal, whereas I was actually born at just the right time to know how to use the computer as a tool. This disparity can give me a sense of dispossession. For a sculptor I'm too modern and for the younger generation of artists, I'm too classic," Nick Ervinck concludes. In 2010, he took up residence in a former Renault garage in Lichtervelde, a sleepy town in West Flanders. The car showroom became an artist's presentation space and forms the backdrop for a short history of Ervinck's work. Digital prints and animation films, intricate 3D prints and labour-intensive polyester sculptures provide visitors with a glimpse of the future of humanity, the world and sculpture. Art and architecture, mythology and science fiction, virtual fantasies and diverse episodes in art history are all simultaneously present in his imagery. As he speaks passionately, moving between the digital and the physical studio, he considers the creative process, among other things, a process that is driven by a constant interaction between play and control.

All these artworks seem to be the result of an intense game of construction and deconstruction, a search for balance. Take, for example, the sculpture ESAVOBOR from 2011-2012, a cross between a Roman vase and a Transformer robot. What role does play actually have in your creative process?

Nick Ervinck: Play has always been there in my life. When I was very young, I played and built things with Lego blocks. Later, this turned into the virtual building blocks of a whole series of God games; computer games such as SimCity, Settlers, Traffic Tycoon and Caesar. I'm sure that this is how my understanding of computers came about. As a gamer you construct something out of nothing and feel a sort of power over your creation. I experience a similar feeling now as an artist: you play God over the world that you've created yourself. You have complete control over the laws of nature. A few extra suns or trees raining out of the sky? Done. There are barely any limits and I find that fascinating. What I do as an artist, I do 24/7. It's my passion, it's the reason I get up in the morning. But if I should stop getting pleasure from it, I probably wouldn't be able to create successful pieces any more. The "playing" is, therefore, crucial to my creative process.

How did you get from computer games to the visual arts? These days, you conjure intriguing universes but in an earlier interview, I read, much to my amazement, that your original ambition was to be an accountant...

Yes, I wanted to be an accountant. What possessed me back then, I have no idea. Art was never a topic in our home. I never visited museums in my youth. I was often creative but making the leap into art was certainly not easy. I started off studying economics but, fortunately, this subject soon lost its appeal for me. Architecture has always fascinated me, so it was my first choice when I switched to art school. But the lessons on perspective theory didn't interest me and the scale models I made were not always feasible because I wanted to go beyond what was being offered to me on the course. In retrospect, I did develop spatial awareness through taking these boring classes. After a year, I switched to ceramics and graphic design. When I discovered software such as Photoshop, a whole new world opened up to me. I suddenly realised that you can do a lot more with a computer than just play games. When I was 18, therefore, I looked for an art course where everything was allowed. A utopian idea, of course, but in fact I ended up on a very multifaceted course. I studied 3D multimedia at Ghent Academy. There we studied subjects such as exhibition design, film and photography. My focus was primarily on performance and video art then, and I played around with computer effects. But I didn't really find my way in this and so I switched to the Mixed Media course. There, I gradually found my feet. I had a dynamic teacher, Danny Matthys, from whom I learned a lot. If a work was in progress, he would secretly move a piece of it so that he could see whether the student noticed that something had changed. Was the student really focused and did he or she see an improvement or had the work suffered? That was our slightly playful method of discussing form, boundaries and possibilities. Another important factor in this course was the interaction with the other students. Every Monday morning, we had a round table discussion in which the students evaluated each other's work and provided feedback. This greatly helped me to mature and taught me how to formulate my vision and how to defend it.

Did you combine handmade sculpture with digital art from the outset?

Yes, I've always absolutely refused to choose between them. When I look back on my student days, it's obvious to me that I experienced the virtual-physical duality as something utterly logical. This was the endless debate with my teachers: they tried to force me to choose between sculpture and computer science, between the physical and the virtual world. To them, the computer represented speed while sculpture required patience and craftsmanship. I've always been convinced that the strength and richness of my work lies in the fusion of both worlds. The more I work in the virtual world, the more I have the compulsion to manifest these designs in reality and experience them physically.

I endeavour to do research in the studio that is impossible in the virtual world and conversely to create works in the virtual world that are physically unfeasible. I realise that each world has to be allowed to retain its individuality, so I look for challenges. I play with their constraints and potentials and try to make the most of these. You could describe my work as a cross-fertilisation between the virtual and physical worlds. Digital images constantly contaminate the three-dimensional forms and vice versa.

Anyone who sees your work instantly notices that you're a perfectionist. Do you also keep a tight rein on your exhibitions in order to lead the spectators into your own personal universe?

It's true, I like to be a sort of director, both in my work and in my exhibitions. This has to do with the creative process: at the crossroads of the virtual and the real, new hybrid capabilities emerge, both sculptural and spatial. I can fully exploit these in new experimental spaces. The interplay between an independently created virtual world and the three-dimensional sculptural work opens up new experiential possibilities. So I want to create my own stage setting. Ideally I would like to design the entire space, sculpt it from top to bottom, prevail over it, for example by constructing black boxes to exhibit the work in. This makes the room disappear and even your sense of space because there are no reference points. You stop noticing the difference between virtual and physical art. In the darkness, the sculptures look as though they are floating in a virtual world. By creating a temporal dimension in an exhibition, I can reform and restructure the same work for different presentations over and over again.

What always surprises me is the extraordinary number of references and associations that are interwoven in one image. Is this deliberate or a natural result of the creative process?

My work is full of references to architecture and sculpture, including to the work of Hans Arp, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Moore was the first artist in the West to incorporate holes in his sculptures not for functional reasons but purely to create empty space. Today, with 3D print technology, which builds by means of layers, you can go further than you could before when all you had as tools were your hands and a chisel. This is very exciting to me. With the help of a computer, you can realise new, organic, experimental and negative spaces, so that sculptures are created within sculptures. I don't just use the technology of 3D printing but also look at how I can flirt with it, how I can transcend its limitations. To this end, I focus on the tension between "blobs" and "boxes", which manifests in the course of the digital design process. To put it simply, blobs are round shapes and boxes are angular shapes. This is primarily about the contrast between the virtual and the physical, the feminine and the masculine. If I force

the tension between these two poles, I perceive that as a fight and a hug simultaneously. Organic, geometric, liquid and solid: the completed forms demonstrate sculpture as a cross-over, as a visual hybrid.

There's a lot of poetry in your art. How do you reconcile poetry with the programmed nature of a computer?

I don't programme anything. I usually use the Autodesk 3ds Max software for designing but all my designs to date have been drawn manually, without programming anything or using algorithms. So for me, poetry is not in opposition to digital design. In fact, the computer makes this associative thinking possible. It does require a different attitude to digital design. A traditional sculptor or architect starts with a sketch, makes a scale model and then turns this into the finished sculpture or building. The computer allows for a different way of designing and, furthermore, is much faster.

I don't just sit around thinking up ideas that I then set down meticulously. If I had to only work that way, then there would be little challenge in it for me. I'm also fascinated by the way that the computer influences my designs. There's something human about it because of the unpredictability of the way the software metamorphoses my input and my humanity into forms. This input is not an order but more of an interaction. And this enables the work to grow and evolve, sometimes in a different direction from the one I originally planned. For SNIBURTAD (2011-2012), for example, the inspiration was Rubens. I used some silhouettes of voluptuous women from his paintings and played with these curves in the computer, searching for the right composition. I actually see the computer as an extension of my body: an external hard drive in which I save all my images in order to create extra space in my head.

Is designing a long process?

Sometimes I design, together with my assistants, two to three hundred versions of a sculpture to then choose two of them, amalgamate them and once again draw out something new. There can be armies of variants, complete with all sorts of options and potential roads to take, in the realisation of an idea. In a sense, I'm searching for the ultimate form - at least, a form that can't be improved at that stage in the evolution of my work. I can then make something else but the point is, nothing better in that specific form. IKRAUSIM is a perfect example of this personal design quest. For this piece, we made at least eight hundred preliminary studies before I found a design good enough to take further. So I'm not the type of artist who wakes up in the night with a brilliant concept that keeps me awake until I've put everything down in my notebook. The creative process isn't that romantic, at least not in my case. Design is always a process of trial and error.

Hundreds of designs for one sculpture, that's a huge amount. How do you decide when you've found the right composition?

That's a matter of gut feeling, but at the same time of thinking outside the box and having the nerve to not make obvious choices. There are a few rules that I've made for myself. I try to avoid 90 degree angles and cruciforms, as these seem to represent the rational and mathematical. For example, a flower never has right angles or cruciforms. I'm not a naturalist, but nature is still a great source of inspiration for me. I'm inspired by classic elements such as the wind and tree stumps and, just like the old masters, I look for the dynamics of the human form within them.

While your sculptures are organically grown hybrids, they always look extremely precise and balanced. Does this betray a great need to have everything under control?

Yes, I'm a real control freak. This has a lot to do with the nature of computers and programming languages. It comes down to a structured way of thinking. But control is also necessary if I'm to keep a grip on my digital studio: an expanding archive of over one hundred thousand photographs, shapes and designs that add up to more than five hundred thousand files in total. The archives contain loads of sketches that I want to experiment with, photographs of studio plans, exhibitions, sculptures and virtual preliminary sketches. Along with the massive amount of images that I've collected over the course of time, this archive serves as an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

From what you say, I gather that your digital archive is a place to leave your sculptures to mature. It gives you a mental playroom. What about your physical studio?

For me, it isn't enough to conceive work that can't actually be realised. My happiest moments are when I think up something that I can then execute. That physical space is absolutely essential because only there can the tension between the digital and the real be brought to a head. I want to make increasingly challenging things. Everything I do is about the freedom that I need to preserve in order to be able to create. So it was a conscious decision to set up a studio. The large projects would be impossible without my team and my studio. As an artist, you live and work in isolation but on the other hand, a lot of projects would take a different direction if it wasn't for my team acting as a sounding board and engine.

What drives you to create a parallel universe?

I continually question what I see, hear and read and what my own interpretation of this is. Just looking is only the start. Not all civilisations represent space in the same way, for the

simple reason that they don't have the same manner of perceiving it. The mainspring of creation is the need to know, the urge to understand the world. What better way of trying to grasp meaning than to create your own complex world, that in turn can open up other worlds? Another explanation for my desire to create and explore parallel worlds is more psychological. I'm more of a doom and gloom merchant than an artist full of *joie de vivre*, so I can suffer from a troubled spirit. I look for ways to restore balance through my work, although probably unconsciously much of the time.

You often make use of other knowledge areas and disciplines, of oriental culture, history and art history. What do these encounters and exchanges mean to you?

I'm completely obsessed with technology, history, evolution, mutation and what the future may bring. The nice thing about being an artist is that you can dabble in all the different worlds. One good example of this is my NOITATUM project, which is in its late development phase. Recently, I met Dr A.P.M. Ton den Nijs from the Plant Breeding Department of Wageningen University. Through him, I became fascinated by the potential of food manipulation, including through the use of 3D print technology. The sculptures that result from this collaboration have the working title "Plant Mutations". A garden full of mutations is like an archive of the future. I really believe that as an artist, one can be a harbinger of the future.

My past collaborations with surgeons, biologists, archaeologists and ICT consultants were already groundbreaking in this sense. New opportunities arise from such exchanges. AGRIEBORZ, for example, is the result of the productive dialogue between art and science. SINURTAB combines the expertise of old masters with the new technology. IKRAUSIM emerged from the interface of elements of Asian and Western cultures. Each time, I seek to consolidate all these diverse references into one image.

Is it important to you that the viewer is capable of identifying all these points of reference?

It isn't necessary. Everyone can make their own interpretation. The main thing for me is that a work affects people. I don't expect everyone to know or like the story behind a piece. After Jan Hoet had spent an hour presenting my work in a rest and care home in Diksmuide, a spirited lady of 92 years old approached me. 'I don't understand the sculpture at all', she said, 'but it does make me feel happy'. If an artwork says everything upfront, then it's boring because viewers can't project anything of themselves into the work. All good art has to have a touch of the inexplicable.

Personally, of course I find it exciting to play with different meanings. The technical, associative and narrative layers are really important to me. As an artist, you're going to carry some intellectual baggage and cultural heritage with you. So it's inevitable that this baggage will seep into your work: it's impossible to disconnect it from the creative

process. For me, my sculptures have to keep evading any form of categorisation. They need to remain suspended between the virtual and physical, high-tech and low-tech, art and kitsch, history and the future, traditional sculpture and futuristic imagery. The seemingly paradoxical foundations of my art need to continue to surprise and fascinate myself as well.

This text includes excerpts from a previously published interview: "A Director of hybrid Worlds. Interview with Nick Ervinck by Philippe Van Cauteren", from: *Nick Ervinck GNI-RI 2006*, Koraalberg, Antwerp, 2006.