

Monumental Scalelessness

Nick Ervinck's sculpture WARSUBEC in Ghent

Nick Ervinck's artistic world is a strange place full of paradoxes, populated by organic and architectural forms. It's a world simultaneously reigned by movement and stagnancy, sterility and vitality, rationalism and absurdity, surrealism and hyperrealism. Inside this complex universe, three main families of shapes keep reappearing: coral-like organisms, representing the artist's fascination for natural, structuralist and infinite shapes, architectural prototypes, from generic brick houses to the cathedral of Cluny, and basic geometrical forms, such as ovals and spheres. What they all have in common is that they lose their scale in Ervinck's works. Depending on their context, they can grow and shrink like Alice in Wonderland, and by entering the artist's universe, we seem to have jumped down the rabbit hole with her.

One reason for the scalelessness of Ervinck's world is the simultaneity of media which he establishes. There's no hierarchy, no linear development from study to final work, from computer rendering to sculpture, from image to object. His works create a design for a different reality, situated somewhere in-between the virtual and the real. While the majority of objects exist in the virtual world, constituting Ervinck's huge archive with more than 40,000 digital images, some of them seem to undertake excursions into our world by becoming sculptures. Or is the opposite the case: does their presence turn real rooms into fictional spaces and transform a piece of our world into Ervinck's personal universe? That's a chicken-and-egg question which remains just as unanswered as questions about the priority of the various media in his work.

With WARSUBEC, the artist has realized his first work at an architectural scale, condensing several of these themes into a huge two-piece sculpture. On top of two buildings in Ghent, right and left of a passageway leading into a courtyard, sit two mirrored frameworks. They have a net-structure with rounded edges and a bright yellow, glossy finish. If one only saw this sculpture on photos, one might think that it was just another clever computer rendering. In fact, it bears a certain resemblance to several earlier computer images by Ervinck as well as to the coral-shape of his sculpture YAROTOBES (2007), which was just as yellow and glossy, but only measured 2 by 2 metres. WARSUBEC, in contrast, has the monumental measurements of 12 metres by 6 metres by 3,5 metres – in twofold, because it consists of two identical mirrored parts.

Characteristically, Ervinck never created a tangible model for WARSUBEC, but designed it entirely in the computer. Jumping from virtuality to reality and from abstraction to figuration, the next step was immediately the production of the life-sized work, which was fabricated together with a Dutch company that specializes in commercial sculptures for theme parks. The silhouette was made from multi-ply wood, then covered in polyurethane foam and polished by a machine, which Ervinck developed especially for this work. Next came three layers of polyester and a final layer of glass fibre, which was polished by hand – adding an element of craft to the high-tech design. Twelve workers worked for three months under the supervision of the artist, creating one of the biggest works of art in Belgium.

The building on which WARSUBEC sits is a housing complex called "De Cirk" ("the circle"). Just a few years ago, it was a derelict place in the grip of squatters and destined for demolition – although it once was a prototype: De Cirk was the first social housing complex in Ghent. It was built at the turn of the last century, when Ghent was known as "Manchester of the continent". Thanks to a booming cotton and metal processing industry, the city was experiencing a huge increase in population and an ensuing shortage of affordable housing, resulting in approximately 40,000 inhabitants living in abysmal conditions. In 1906, city architect Charles Van Rysselberghe was commissioned to design a housing complex on a plot of land that had formerly belonged to city zoo (hence the street name Zebrastraat), in order to create new homes for the workers of a nearby textile factory and their families. His design for a brick building had a footprint in the shape of the Greek letter omega, with an oval-shaped courtyard in the centre. To save space he stacked two layers of small apartments on top of each other, to which another storey was added in 1929.

Nobody really knows why the building deteriorated in the 1990s. But in 2002, the Liedts-Meesen Foundation, founded by Alain Liedts and his wife Françoise Meesen, bought it, saved it from demolition and renovated it. Now it houses 72 apartments for short-term renters, a wing with conference rooms and an exhibition centre. Nick Ervinck exhibited some of his work in this centre in 2008, in an exhibition accompanying a new media art contest, where he received the audience award. Afterwards, Alain Liedts asked him to create a roof sculpture for the terraces on both ends of the omega, the only requirement being that the terraces had to be able to carry its weight and that they should remain fully functional. In August 2009, the two-part sculpture was transported to Ghent and placed in its location.

Upon entering the courtyard, the work isn't visible at once, but its yellow reflection immediately appears in the windows opposite the passageway. Thanks to its bright finishing in Ervinck's favourite colour and its

perforated structure, the sculpture is monumental, but also has a light and cheerful appearance. It has a certain pop-art appeal, which is probably due to its nearly unrealistic smoothness and glossiness. When accessing one of the terraces, its spatial effect becomes palpable: with its round-edged mesh, WARSUBEC creates a sheltered, private and at the same time open space with interesting shadow effects, reminiscent of a pergola. Depending on the season, time of day and the weather, the atmosphere produced by the framework changes, resulting in a constant dialogue between the artwork and the sky. At the same time, there's a certain tension between the two parts of the sculpture, which seem to attract one another, pulling the two sides of the passageway together. Ervinck likes to point out that while they were identical as virtual models, they're not exactly identical now, due to tiny imperfections resulting from the manufacturing process. This observation falls in line with his statement that "all my works are studies" – which leaves open whether that's a conscious choice or not.

Like with many of Ervinck's creations, it's difficult to find a concise description for WARSUBEC, because it has so many connotations. It's obviously a net- or mesh-structure, but it also bears a certain resemblance to the artist's earlier coral studies. Corals are something that Ervinck is fascinated by because of their complex, potentially infinite shapes, which can only be recreated with the help of the computer. At the same time, however, WARSUBEC might also be an abstract high-tech descendant of similarly smooth, round-edged sculptures by Henry Moore or Hans Arp. In a less art historical way, one might also recognize a similarity to bone- or even cell-structures, turning the objects into virus-like growths on top of the old building. "My virtual images constantly infect the real world and vice versa", Ervinck once said, and here a bright yellow parasite seems to have infected the old housing complex.

The parasitic quality of WARSUBEC points to the artist's search for the borders between art and architecture. After all, parasitic structures have been a subject in architectural research for quite a few years, ranging from artistic interventions like Lebbeus Woods' *Hermitage* (1999) to visionary designs for entire roof-borne cities. At the same time, the sculpture also plays with the architectural notion of the skin, as Sam Steverlynck pointed out in a text accompanying an exhibition of Ervinck's work at SMAK in Ghent. But WARSUBEC goes even further than this by also relating to the currently very trendy discourse about ornament in architecture. After nearly a century of despise following Adolf Loos' pamphlet about "Ornament and Crime", architects like Herzog & de Meuron, OMA, Jürgen Mayer H. and Toyo Ito have rehabilitated the ornament in their works. The makeability of ornaments in the digital age and the possibility of integrating them into the industrial building process has finally freed them from the stigma of anachronistic craft and mere decoration. Ever since then, branch-, net- and cell-structures have been appearing in façades worldwide, with the bubbly outside of the *Watercube National Aquatics Centre* in Beijing by PTW Architects (2008) as the most obvious parallel to Ervinck's work.

Like the Watercube, WARSUBEC oscillates between the antagonistic architectural worlds of box and blob. It can be read as a blob on top of a box, but can also be seen as a box itself, containing a multitude of blobby voids. In this sense, it fits perfectly into Ervinck's constantly evolving fluid universe, which is best illustrated by his film installations. These short animated sequences reveal that images as well as sculptures are nothing but snapshots from the artist's universe, in which the fictional objects are constantly morphing and transforming. This restless motion is one of the reasons why Ervinck's installations, however functional they may be, can never fully belong to the realm of architecture or design. Another fact that safely anchors WARSUBEC in the world of art is that in contrast to most architecture which is created with the help of computers, its shape wasn't generated by a programming language. Instead, Ervinck hand-shaped the framework and its blobby voids, only letting a programme smoothen the round edges. WARSUBEC is in every sense a hybrid: sculpture and structure, blob and box, function and form, fiction and reality.

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