

## Nick Ervinck Talks About Cabinet

**Sam Cornish:** Can you explain how the project came about, and the thinking behind it?

**Nick Ervinck:** After I made a public sculpture for the city of Waregem, Patrick Ronse, the director of the contemporary art platform Be-Part, invited me to do a project in Waregem. I wanted to do something more than a small exhibition of my work, and Patrick is someone who wants to make things happen for artists. He visited me in my studio and very soon we had the idea of doing something with my passion for books and book collecting, which became the project we have today. From the beginning, the plan was to display my sculptures in dialogue with my collection of Henry Moore books, as well as shells, pebbles, African masks – things that were an inspiration for Moore, and are for me today. I added many other objects: tests of 3D prints and ceramic glazes, toys from my childhood, and a Transformer from the movie. And I borrowed three small sculptures by Moore from a collector who grew up in my home town.

I wanted to make a cabinet. It was designed modularly, with eight modules, but it could also be expanded. I bought a lot of extra pebbles and other things. I've been obsessed with African masks for ten years – I have a collection of books on them – but this project was a good excuse to buy one. When I told the story of the cabinet to my teacher – Danny Matthys – he gave me a small box of Australian pine cones and pebbles. There is a tea cup given to me by my Japanese gallerist, and lots of stones I collected with my daughter. Now, the cabinet is too small, there are a lot more objects I would like to put in it. I have part of a dinosaur leg, and there is a lot of cool stuff that I didn't have space to show. The project is something that is growing. There are a lot more things you could do. You could include a screen; you could hang things on the wall at the side of the cabinet; you could make it more sculptural...

**SC:** When did you first become aware of Henry Moore?

**NE:** I don't know exactly when I became aware of Moore – I think at about the age of nineteen or twenty. I've always been interested in organic art works, abstract art works. In 2009, I started making work with Moore in the back of my mind. In Shanghai – in the Yuyuan Garden – I was really inspired by the whimsical structures of the rocks eroded by water. They reminded me of Moore and I became obsessed with the fact that Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were the first sculptors to work with negative space, with holes. Or at least we think of them as the first. It is so strange that an idea which is so familiar and so logical to us today is actually not even a hundred years old. I think this will be one of the obsessions I have for the rest of my life.

My sculpture IKRAUSIM 2009 came out of my experience in Shanghai. It is a contemporary rock sculpture, inspired by both East and West, using the latest 3D printing techniques. IKRAUSIM exists as a 2D print in a light box, as a 3D print, as a digital animation and as stills from the animation. Each is a new perspective on a seemingly infinite form. Moore subtracted – chopping and carving – but I work the other way round, with a digital designing process: the virtual form isn't set free from the physical matter, but is a productive and generative principle.

**SC:** Recently you visited England, and Henry Moore's home and studios at Perry Green, north of London. Can you tell me about this trip?

**NE:** I travelled to Manchester, Leeds, Wakefield and Hull: Barbara Hepworth in Wakefield, the Henry Moore Institute, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. In the park, I saw several sculptures by Henry Moore together in an outdoor space for the first time in my life. I have been aware of Perry Green for a long time, but it was only because of this project that I made the decision to go. I knew everything from pictures, but to visit his home and to really see the masks and all the pebbles was a revelation. I could almost say that I'm not the same person as I was before my visit to Perry Green. And this experience will probably affect my work and my path as an artist. His house was almost like a cabinet. He had Picassos and art works by his fellow artists, but his house was very modest. I learned about his daily routine. I discovered there was a curiosity cabinet in the entrance, and that he would play a little game with his visitors. Henry Moore the entertainer would ask all his visitors: 'which are my sculptures and which are ancient sculptures?' Because sometimes you can't see the difference between a sculpture a thousand years old, a rock, and a Henry Moore.

When you browse through a book, you can study, you can look in a limited way, but to actually see the sculptures, to feel them, almost to breathe them, to feel the environment of an artist, that makes an impact. It's not only my passion for Henry Moore's art, it's also learning to look again, and learning to think again: what is the position of the artist? What is an artist? What do you want to do? What is the power of sculpture? Is a sculpture more finished in polished wood or if it has this kind of poetry, small imperfections and mistakes? Visiting his world – and that is what Perry Green is –, where he got his inspiration, where he was surrounded by his maquettes, his pebbles, his bones, you get a completely different feeling from the sculpture. You appreciate it much more, I think. I think everyone has to visit Perry Green to appreciate Moore's sculpture.

**SC:** Which of the studios at Perry Green excited you most?

**NE:** The maquette studio. It is just a small chair and a small table surrounded by scale models, and pebbles, and plasters; it is also like a cabinet on its own. You could see his basic shapes, the basic shapes that he always came back to. In my opinion, the plaster sculptures are much nicer than the bronzes, because they have the light. The light on a white surface is much more intense and deeper than the light on a black or a dark brown sculpture. If you take a picture of a black sculpture on a black environment, then it has a very dark connotation; but if you see white plaster on a dark background, the sculpture is much more alive, it has far greater black and white values, far more depth. In a book, the plasters are sometimes more helpful in showing the three-dimensional aspect of a sculpture than the bronzes.

**SC:** Can you expand on the differences between your approach to sculpture and Moore's?

**NE:** My process is different. I am able to draw immediately on the computer, to design immediately in three dimensions. But I can also draw manually or carve directly into foam, so I don't only work with a computer, but it is a big part of my world. Yet, we have these new tools, these new ways, new paths. There is no point in just doing the same thing as Henry Moore – you have to work it out for your own time. One of my pieces – AGRIEBORZ 2009-2010 – is too complicated to imagine as

an artist, our brain is too limited. It is only by using a computer, by drawing and saving again and again, that you can create something so complex. 3D-printing companies were saying it was impossible to make. It took me two years to design – 2,000 hours of drawing – and I printed it one year later. With this, at the risk of sounding pretentious, I think I can say I did something in the history of sculpture! With 3D printers we can print much more complex forms. Henry Moore was limited to where his hand or chisel could reach. But I'm well aware that the computer is still a tool. And complexity does not guarantee better work. As an artist you depend on the choices you make.

I'm a child of my time. I grew up with Lego, cartoons, computer games, sci-fi. I work with new technology – 3D printing, robot sculpting, 3D scanning, 3D modelling. But I'm still very classic. I look to art history – I make sculptures on pedestals. I believe some of the younger generation thinks of my work as classic art, while the older generation thinks of me as very innovative. Standing with one foot in an old world and one foot in a new world gives me a unique but complex position.

**SC:** What does carving directly into foam give you that 3D printing doesn't? Can you imagine 3D printing advancing to the extent that you no longer want to carve directly into foam?

**NE:** If you design first on the computer, the main reason for carving into foam is that it is not yet possible – or affordable – to 3D print at a large size. You can also change and adapt as you go, which is not really possible with a 3D printer. Carving directly in foam without having a design in advance is really something different. It's a way of thinking in 3D – searching for the sculpture in the foam. This physical approach is very different than using computer tools. I'm sure the future will change, with new techniques – maybe working digitally with clay in a virtual reality environment. But 3D printing will never be able to replace the direct hand carving and thinking in foam. But 3D printing definitely gives artists the chance to think further, to imagine differently than in the past. Now lots of artists use it – because it is so quick. But not many people are doing something really new or unique with it. I think that is strange.

**SC:** What is the core of your work?

**NE:** My work always starts with the contradictions between nature and culture, old and new. I take a vanguard position in the field of digital technology – such as 3D technology and computational design methods – but I also work with traditional methods, such as sculpting, ceramics and so on. On the one hand, I work with new technologies and digital techniques, while on the other, I still paint the sculptures by hand and sculpt my works in polyester. 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. I use copy-paste techniques in a 3D software environment; I derive images, shapes and textures from different sources.

A good example of how I work is LAPIRSURB. With this sculpture, I was inspired by robots, aliens, monsters and mysterious creatures that were created by artists like H. R. Giger. But I also looked to traditional helmets, jewellery and images from ancient sculptures, such as the masks and sculptures from the Inca and Mayan cultures. Multiple fragmentary pieces and hundreds of hours of manual computer-aided drawings were needed to make the sculpture. These sculptures can only be spatially realized through 3D modelling and printing – they directly challenge classical

sculpture. Yet these 3D prints are also the result of meticulous craftsmanship. They are painted by hand, a process that requires patience and precision.

**SC:** The project showcases a part of your impressive and extensive art library. Can you tell me something about this and how it developed?

**NE:** In my parent's house, we didn't have any books. Until I was fifteen, the only books I knew were school books and maybe one cook book and some fairy-tales, there were no other books in my home. The moment I started to study art, I loved the stories about artists, I loved learning about art history, so you start to buy books to learn more. Now I have about 1,700 monographs. Apart from Moore, I have lots of books on Barbara Hepworth, Tony Cragg, Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon, Antony Gormley, Wim Delvoye. Artists that I respect and that are an inspiration. You understand so much more of the work by having – and by reading – all these books.

I had maybe 200 books on Moore when I started the project. Now I have 280. I guess it could be the biggest private collection of Henry Moore books in the world, I have no idea. According to the Henry Moore Foundation, there are more than 10,000 books on Moore, different editions, different languages, so it is actually only a very small fraction. A lot of people say that my books on Moore must all be the same. No! One is about the ideas, another is about the helmet sculptures; there are all the catalogue raisonnés, which are really important; the facsimiles of the sketchbooks; one book on Moore's inspirations. Of course the man is so important there have been so many books about him, and on almost every topic. Each one has its own voice, some are more commercial or random, but others are really jewels. But I own a small seascape by Moore, a lithograph, and in all the 280 books there is not one seascape!

What we are doing with this project is something completely new. I think this is the first really personal project by an artist making a sort of homage to Moore.

**SC:** Is your book collection an obsession or is it something functional?

**NE:** It is only in the last three or four years that I have collected books, rather than buying them to learn something – and, of course, the project has pushed it to a higher level. I was lucky enough to inherit part of the book collection of a collector I know who is moving to a smaller house. And I've found people who will exchange books for a small sculpture, which is a good way to expand your collection. But now, space is becoming an issue. You have to think, do I need that book, will I use that book? I'm starting a collection of New Media books and another of African mask books at the moment. So it is collecting, but collecting as a learning tool – collecting from the point of view of my vision as an artist, to get feeling and energy from it. The books last – an exhibition is something that disappears.

**SC:** In the cabinet are toys from your childhood and rocks collected with your daughter. Can you tell me more about this connection to childhood?

**NE:** This project is also about revisiting my childhood. A lot of kids have collections, but they don't become an artist, they don't do anything with it. Now I can actually do something with my childhood passion. Back then, I didn't know what I was doing but now I have a much better idea. I had the opportunity to travel more with my oldest daughter and we visited a lot of museums together. I'm teaching her to collect rocks. A lot of the shells are ones I found in flea-markets with her. I collected fifty per cent of

the stones and pebbles on walks in the forest with my daughter – so the connection with my children is very important.

I am someone who is always going into overdrive. When I have something, I want to have the most or the biggest. I had the collections that lots of children have: stamps, coins, postcards, pins, Flippos, bicycle licence plates, teeth, Magic playing cards, Lego, dinosaur toys, car toys, Kinder Surprise toys, travel souvenirs, stones, boxes, Duracell Bunnies, empty bottles, empty glass jars, water pistols, keys. I had my toys displayed in a closet in my bedroom like in a museum - before I even knew museums existed, or before I knew the word cabinet, or the word collection.

**SC:** What were your childhood experiences of art?

**NE:** I don't come from a cultured background. My mother worked in the office of a supermarket. My father was a mechanic. First, I thought I wanted to be an accountant, but I switched to art school. A new world opened for me then. After studying architecture, I switched to ceramics and graphic design. When I discovered software such as Photoshop, I suddenly realized that you can do a lot more with a computer than just play games. In the end 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. He was a mentor for me, teaching me to think outside the box. He taught me to communicate with shapes, to think about quality, about good and bad. To learn to believe in myself. To learn to think and to communicate. The longer I live, the more I understand the importance of passionately making your stand in the world.

**SC:** You have spoken warmly about your teacher Danny Matthys. Is Moore also in some way like a mentor to you?

**NE:** I would say that Moore is like my second teacher. I never met him, but he is always teaching me. Moore helps me to look again at the world, to look differently - and this shows me what may happen in the future. Competing with Moore is impossible, he's from a different era, he has a huge reputation. But at the same time, you are looking at how he made his work, how he made his choices, and thinking about what choices you will make. You can almost imagine how he would deal with it. But what is difficult with Danny Matthys and with Moore is that their answer is always coming from their time, and you have to translate it into your time.

Every person I have ever met, every decision I have ever made has shaped my artistic practice. For the realization of AGRIEBORZ, for example, I immersed myself in drawings from medical textbooks and in discussions with Dr Delaere, an ENT doctor and face and neck surgeon. In 2013, I met Dr 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 commercial strawberry we eat today was invented in a laboratory in the Netherlands – they have a patent on it. So I started to design my own strawberry pieces with the title PLANT MUTATIONS. They are strawberries, in nice colours, but always with something dark, monstrous about them. For another project, I used my fascination with eighteenth-century Messian porcelain, with this craftsmanship that has vanished.

**SC:** Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

**NE:** As a person, I am dark, I complain a lot, and neglect myself – but I am optimistic about the future, I am not pessimistic about that. I think I need this kind of optimistic work to deal with my own personality.

**SC:** Can you tell me about the importance of the hybrid, which seems fundamental to your art? It seems to be at the centre of the thinking behind the cabinet and your work in general.

**NE:** I have a great fascination for history but also for the future. The past and old things, but sci-fi, new ideas, new technologies, as well. I have come to the conclusion that the hybrid is part of my life. There has always been a strong dialogue between the virtual and the physical in my life. First Lego – physical – and then computer games – virtual. And later, at art school in Bruges and Ghent, working with my hands but also escaping into making movies or using computers. After I graduated, I didn't have studio space so I worked with a computer, but now that I have my own studio, I can work with my hands. Virtual, then physical, then virtual – this battle has become so logical. It is the same also with design and architecture; with art and the medical world; with art and design; with art and kitsch.

For example, my work EDHOLP (2012) is a hybrid. Is it a remnant of the past, an alien skull, a result of an experiment or a mutant? We cannot grasp the image. It is simultaneously in a virtual world, in a potential world, in a sci-fi world. THILAP (2012-19) is also a hybrid. It takes the form of a Roman triumphal column, but also refers to totem poles and the ornamentation of nomadic tribes in the early Middle Ages. A design is composed from eclectic historical and formal elements. I find new possibilities and develop my own visual language.

The dialogue of the hybrid energises my mind. The cabinet includes a test from the most innovative 3D printer in the world today, and a bone – it is like electricity putting these two things together. The joy of the cabinet is that you understand the dialogue between the books and the pebbles and my work – but also the dialogue is between two different sculptors, two different generations – there is so much content and so many different things happening. Putting that thing and that thing next to each other creates a completely different story. And the experiences and fantasies of the public will create new interfaces. Patrick Ronse wants to give artists projects that change them, and this is something I feel will change me. I don't know as yet what that will involve, how it will change me as a person or artist but I definitely feel this is not a typical art piece or project. It will trigger things, and that is already happening.