

Taming the Waves

Hans Theys

Some words about Gauthier Oushoorn's work

Tuesday, 22 September 2015. Gauthier Oushoorn (1986) shows me a manhole he has dug with a friend, the artist Max Pinckers. We are standing in a garage which is part of an exhibition. The opening in the concrete floor is circular. The hole seems to have the shape of a cylinder, but actually has the shape of a truncated cone: the base is wider than the top. An optical illusion makes us believe that the bottom of the hole has the same diameter as the top, whereas its floor is 130 cm wide and its top 62 cm. The hole is 255 cm deep, which corresponds with the height of the ceiling of the garage. The opening at the top is as wide as a tire that was found in the garage. This means that the volume of the manhole is determined by measurements that were found on the spot and by the laws of perspective. The wall of the hole is smooth and carefully sculpted with a trowel. We meet an elegant momentary sculpture, for we feel time would make it implode.

Last year Oushoorn discovered the Islamic rule for artists to let themselves be guided by mathematical principles. Personally I read this rule as an invitation to leave your ego behind when you start making art (or make other decisions). Plants do the same. Their leaves turn around the stem like a spiral staircase, about three for every circle, but never above each other). All growing things obey chemical, physical and mechanical laws. Yet all living beings are unique. DNA dictates the basic building elements and outlines and the body cannot evolve beyond certain laws, but identical twins are already different when they are born because their brains have reacted differently to the same circumstances, improvising, singing itself into ever changing clusters of neuronal networks. The same goes for art. He or she who accepts necessity, is free. Works that relate to standards, reveal their specificity more clearly.

One hour later we find ourselves in a hangar that Oushoorn built himself on a spot where his ancestors used to fabricate veneer. Next to the hangar towers a 30 meter high brick chimney that was used to produce steam. The chimney has the same shape as the manhole we just saw. When I point this out, Oushoorn smiles.

Three years ago he exhibited for the first time a broken piece of oak in the shape of a ruler. After several unsatisfactory attempts to fabricate rulers with a nicely cut and glued

knee, he had just broken one, knowing that the long fibers of the oak would continue to assemble the two halves. For another sculpture, with twisted feet in the shape of rulers, he used wenge wood, because this has shorter (more horizontal than vertical), crossed fibers which allow for the wood to be twisted (but wouldn't allow for it to be broken without being broken completely at once).

It moves me to see that Oushoorn's acceptance of the Islamic rule to follow geometrical proportions when creating, actually corresponds to his earlier acting upon an intimate knowledge of wood, necessary to the trade of a cabinet maker. Such a 'humble' attitude doesn't prevent you from making personal work. Even if the color of ceramic tiles obeys the laws of the accessible baking techniques and pigments, and even if the artist follows mathematical principles, unique compositions remain possible.

Who, ever, presented a broken oak ruler as a work of art?

Later Oushoorn repeated this experiment with an oak pole with a diameter of 12 centimeters in the middle and 8 centimeter at both ends. (The pole was 12 centimeters longer than a metal pillar in an abandoned industrial building.) First he strapped the ends of the pole to the concrete floor of his hangar, then he protected the middle part of the pole with pillows and lifted it using a hydraulic crane until the pole broke. Curious as to the nature of the fracture, he had the pole scanned. Together with some other photographs, the 364 resulting CT-scans form the only traces of this sculpture. For after having the pole scanned, he brought it to the abandoned industrial site, crammed it next to the metal pillar mentioned before and pulled it into an upright position so that the ceiling was lifted and the metal pillar could be removed. "The lateral pressure of the settling fibers was so intense," Oushoorn told me, "that the pole completely snapped when it came into a totally upright position. It snapped, but it served well as a replacement for the metal pillar!"

During our first meeting in 2008 Oushoorn told me about a hopeless and poetic adventure he undertook all by himself (without a public, without friends). A village in the neighborhood of his hometown had been flooded for an extension of the harbor. Oushoorn owned a map that showed the outlines of the drowned houses. Using a rowing boat he tried to recreate these outlines on the surface of the water, first using branches, than a floating, wooden construction. A shamanistic ritual, for everybody and for no one.

During a residence in Turkey, earlier this year, Oushoorn realized two sculptural interventions. The first one was called *Space-Filling Patterns*. In the floor of an abandoned hospital the East-Turkish or Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, he drills holes at spots indicated with a primitive pair of compasses consisting of a steel pen, a piece of string and a pencil. The center of the pat-

tern consists of a circle which is transformed into a hexagon using its own radius. Subsequently the six angles and the same radius are used to determine the third angle of six equilateral triangles of which the base coincides with a side of the hexagon. The spaces between the triangles appear to be squares and new triangles and hexagons come into existence. Thus the patterns extends itself, as a flat tower of Babel, a two dimensional reaching for infinity.

Remembering my very first meeting with Oushoorn, I realize that this sculptural intervention resembles Oushoorn's first sculptural adventure, floating on the new waters next to his hometown, as a probably unconscious attempt to avert the dangers of the so-called progress. For if you drive to Oushoorn's parental home, you are struck by the apparent omnipresence and almost crushing presence of the harbor, the ships, the containers, but also the wood storages. If you are aware that the harbor can also swallow entire villages when anonymous powers consider this necessary, and if you contemplate the remnants of the old veneer shop, you realize how circumstances can nourish one's work, even if this is very minimal. (Whatever he contended, Warhol was no machine. His works are not indifferent. They are sensual. They breathe. They are poetic. They take a political stance.)

For his second sculptural intervention in Turkey, Oushoorn cut an orthogonal pattern in the floor of an abandoned mosque. Towards the center of the pattern the grooves became deeper. Removing horizontal slates of the floor, using a hammer and a chisel, gradually deeper when approaching the center of the pattern, Oushoorn created a negative dome. The transition of a square to a circle (as in a dome on a square base) constituted a spiritual theme in Islamic architecture. (We encounter this image as well in the ancient Chinese cong, never accounted for, but which we can consider to be a combination of a rectangular and a circular shape, and in the bi-discs of the Zhou dynasty, decorated with hexagonal patterns.) In this case a rectangular pattern is used to carve a curved volume. We meet a dark looking glass. Perhaps also a potential body of water that simultaneously shows the sky and the underlying pattern. An astronomic measuring instrument. A curved ruler.

So we find ourselves in Oushoorn's hangar. Around us we see the scattered parts of a tree: oak planks, two inches thick, cut out of the same tree. Three or four planks contain the core of the tree. Because of the difference in density between their borders and the center, they will tend to bend. For this reason, they are cut in the middle, one half is turned upside down and the two halves are reassembled. On some planks we see the outlines of steps that are to be cut out. Oushoorn is building a wooden spiral staircase of nine and a half meters high. A steel core resting in a concrete pedestal with a circular surface is covered with an angular wooden casing to which the steps will be attached. This casing consists of three

piled up parts which shorten according to the golden ratio. The bottom part has fifteen sides, the middle part has seven and the top part has four. The steps have the same shape as the part of the central casing they are attached to.

The construction of the staircase refers to the self-supporting wooden staircases of early minarets (furnished with mud walls) that could have several geometrical shapes: the base would often be pentagonal or hexagonal, they would be cylindrical and the balcony's floor would have a square shape. Again Oushoorn adopts existing laws and shapes to obtain an original sculpture.

We'll find a variation of this piling up of different shapes in a sculptural installation with six Perspex showcases of which the basal areas have an augmenting number of corners: four, five, seven, nine, eleven and thirteen. Each of these showcases was cut in half just above the center in an angle of 45 degrees. Subsequently the upper part was turned slightly to the right and replaced on top of the bottom part. The resulting sculptures show a painful scission and an unpredictable opening.

In 2013, to show the beauty of moving water, Oushoorn places a metal grate in a wheelbarrow filled with water. If you move the wheelbarrow around, the water moves differently in each case of the grate. At the same time he develops the idea to build a monumental metal grate (with a closed, hollow base) that could float at the surface of the sea. To demonstrate the principle in a handy way, he builds a miniature grate that rests in a glass of water.

During his stay in Turkey Oushoorn swims around the rectangular, concrete pillar of a huge bridge. The concrete block reminded him of the Ka'ba, the circular movement refers to the pivoting walk of the pilgrims. (Now that I'm looking at an aerial view of this ritual, I'm reminded of the raked circles in Japanese gardens.) The water is freezing and tries to pull him downwards. He is followed by a small boat carrying a cameraman who shoots some hopeless images.

Both works (the metal grate and the swimming) remind me of the young Oushoorn who, according to my romantic interpretation, tried to tame the water around his hometown. Would it be possible that we always do the same things without realizing? And wouldn't it be possible that such an almost unconscious repetition of well intended actions sometimes amounts to sanctity?

All romanticism put aside, we find ourselves confronted with beautiful, minimal sculptures that, despite their being true to the materials and their borrowed dimensions and proportions, are witnesses of the personality and the attitude of an exceptional man.

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