

Contention. Content. Contentment.
Discontent. Etcetera.

SARA WEYNS

Heaven and Earth, one of the works closing this volume, was created for the Middelheim Museum in the spring of 2018. As Adrien Tirtiaux describes himself in this publication, it was commissioned as part of *Experience Traps*, an exhibition based on the Baroque history of the city of Antwerp. To test the contemporary relevance of that heritage, Adrien created a monumental concrete, steel, and earth sculpture. A central ring pulls the gaze towards the sky in reference to baroque (dome) architecture; referring equally to the era's dawning realisation that Copernicus might have been on to something with his suggestion that the earth revolves around the sun.

Since the work has been here in the museum, a lot has been said about it by visitors, by the press, by museum staff, by the friends of the museum and by consulting experts. These conversations were often enthusiastic, sometimes hesitant, and on other occasions, heated. Some were hyper-rational, while others vented a simple gut feeling. Taking stock, we decided to search for a way to keep the work here after the exhibition's end. But upon making that decision, we found ourselves suddenly caught off-guard — staring at a blind spot. What had we been talking about for all these months? What was this work actually about? What did it consist of? And consequently, where should it be found by future generations of museum visitors?

The arising of these questions was not due to a lack of paying attention. They resulted from the work changing when its meaning in relation to time shifted from the context of 'the next few months' to that of 'future generations'. And so it needed to be re-examined, and re-assessed. On a personal note: my conclusion is that it is precisely the ability to raise these questions, and the ambiguity of their answers, that make this work especially relevant for the future of a collection that is here to test and demonstrate the resilience of sculpture. The work is much more than a reference to the past; it is a contemporary sculpture in and of itself, and it speaks about an ambivalent relationship to the object in the midst of a 70 year old collection of objects. It also speaks about sculpture as a four dimensional medium; adding time to width, depth and height. Conjointly, it holds an aspect more difficult to theorize: the relationships created in our individual and collective minds between the local terroir and undefined distances — between our bodies and the sky. Interlocking these aspects, *Heaven and Earth* holds a key to understanding not only the oeuvre of Adrien Tirtiaux, but also the dynamics and particularities of sculpture today.

When visiting solo shows by Adrien in the past, I found it difficult to disconnect individual pieces from the chain of works that form the oeuvre¹. The works he exhibits together are not only autonomous installations and sculptures, they also propose an organising principle for the space in which they find themselves. They act as indicators and turn signals for the movement of visitors, and the relationships created with other objects in the vicinity are as important to each individual work as they are to the whole. This is not done in the usual non-committal way (you know how sculptures or paintings within eyesight from each other are always described

¹ The same applies to the published series to which this book belongs.

as 'in dialogue'?), but reflects a highly assertive approach to the ordering of how and what you see; and when. In *Heaven and Earth*, conceived not for a solo show but for a group project, these considerations are pulled into the work itself. This becomes all the more clear by trying to imagine how it should be made available for the benefit of future generations.

The sculpture's material form has already started to decompose: heavy rain and insects have begun to erode the earth moulds from which the concrete parts were cast, blurring their crisp lines. As spring rolls in again, the trenches will be invaded and transfigured by weeds. There is no telling how the rabbits and moles will strike, but it is surely a matter of 'when' rather than 'if'. The instructions of the artist are to have minimal maintenance work done; should any structural issues occur the work should not be restored, but rather rebuilt according to a carefully documented and described building procedure. The sculpture can not be displaced, but it can be destroyed and built again. Thus, it exists both in realisation and potential — as a cycle or continuing process of creation and resulting object. This approach very much resonates with Stefaan Vervoort's description of the work as a project-based approach and therefore a 'conditional state'². The artist's preference for the temporary is offered up as a strategy for dealing with art versus the institution, and art versus public space.

But things are more complex than a mere resistance to institutionalisation. Adrien has said of his own practice that it acts both in critique of, and in affinity for the institution. He has rewritten administrative protocols and procedures, as in the case of *Mise à niveau*, 2013 (Bozar, Brussels); and made them explicit and physically unavoidable as in *The Great Cut*, 2012 (Stroom, The Hague). These

² Stefaan Vervoort, *Notes on the Project in the Work of Adrien Tirtiaux*, chapter 2, in: *Adrien Tirtiaux Volume 2: Space is Time*, 2013

acts make the administrative underbelly of the hosting institution an integral part of the work and conversations that surround it. Tirtiaux's projects in public space frequently challenge the conditions under which access is granted or denied, sometimes by literally changing the locks, but usually through intricate and non-disruptive interventions, to name but a few: *Terre Brûlée*, 2011 (Terril des Piges, Charleroi), *Bruggen Bouwen*, 2013 (Coup de Ville, Sint-Niklaas) and of course *Boven de muur*, 2016 (Stadspark, Leuven). In the case of Middelheim Museum, he critiques *and* helps the museum by installing a work that states its value not primarily as material preciousness, nor as a magical concept of authenticity, but as a shared commitment to the existence of the work itself. And in that way, it holds a lens to the rest of the museum collection. Despite the sturdiness of materials such as bronze, steel or stone, none of those sculptures are immune to the omnipresent processes of decay and loss. The museum acts upon a socially constructed consensus on why and how these artworks should be safeguarded for future generations. In turn, it requires of the museum that the public value of the collection is *made* (constructed), over and over again.

Adrien's statement about offering the institution critical comment as well as help could also be connected to another description of his working method. Instead of imaginatively designing the work, he aims to take as few aesthetic decisions as possible towards the solution a space or situation might require. With this, his training as an architect and engineer becomes evident, and has become a much recognised and contextualised part of the oeuvre. Less commented on, however, are the sculptural approaches he brings to a situation or site. So let us turn back to *Heaven and Earth*, review it a second time, and examine this sculptural act.

'The artist engages his body' as Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously states in his essay *L'Œil et l'Esprit*³. No statement could be more true in describing Tirtiaux's working process. Between the writing of the protocol and its mechanical execution lies a rough process of digging, breaking, calculating, constructing, casting, balancing, folding, demolding and rigging. Tirtiaux makes. He turns sculpture as a medium in on itself: through modelling and carving, and through turning and twisting the concepts of volume and void, he performs a sculpture. And however ambivalent he remains towards it, he does it well. Moreover, he performs this sculptural act in such a way that the traces of that act — and so his hand as its sculptor — remain palpable in the residual object. Why doesn't he delegate this heavy-duty manual work?

For one, because there are social aspects of labour to be aware of — as apparent in his work *Plan de carrière*, 2015 (VDAB Competentiecentrum, Antwerp). In addition, the choice of concrete as the carrying material for the sculpture resonates with the artist's observations on the industrial economy and architecture espoused by modernity — this can be seen in works like *Le béton dans l'art*, 2015 (Fluide, Thuin) or *Elevador Social*, 2016 (Kunsthalle São Paulo). And finally, the artist's corporeal relation to the work will transfer into *our* bodily experience of it. When Tirtiaux, in his manipulation of the materials, allows himself to be led by their qualities and interactions with the conditions of their location, there is an understanding to be gained from *this* work in *this* location. It will direct our movements, make us watch our step, steer our gaze. It will connect the specific with the undetermined in a way impossible elsewhere, thus making his work (in the artist's own words) simultaneously its own site, subject and matter. The work, that at first sight mainly seemed to

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, 1964, Gallimard, dutch translation: *Oog en Geest*, 1996, p. 21

connect us with 16th century exaltation, can now be read as a gate to the next juncture in thinking about concept and form. Through his sculptural act, he engages our sensory perception beyond looking, and our interpretation beyond language. So, it is a non-verbal understanding, very different from the rational exchange that characterises architectural problem solving. Similar to puncturing institutional praxis to let in harsh daylight — something he has done before, consider works as *The Himmel Uber Wien*, 2009 (Wien Museum, Vienna) or *Ciel de Lille*, 2017 (Artconnexion, Lille) — *Heaven and Earth* is also a hole in our thinking.

Strangely, this augments the urgency of the object in itself. Its autonomy contradicts the relativity of the status the artist grants it, making the sense of loss real when it does decay. What we are left with is precisely this: the need to constantly re-evaluate our respective stances on content and form, leaving them again on behalf of a social construction, a negotiation; to be content for a while before dissatisfied again. We will have to continuously re-assess what we want from objects, how we want to live with them and how we value them.

SARA WEYNS (°1979, BE) has been working as a freelance publicist and curator since 2002. Over this time, she has organised and curated exhibitions at the Hessenhuis, the Middelheim Museum as well as public space in both local and international contexts. These exhibitions were accompanied by extensive collaborations with artists such as Chris Burden, Andrea Zittel, Peter Rogiers, Kader Attia, Monster Chetwynd, Richard Deacon and many others. In 2005, Sara joined the Middelheim team as a curator and exhibition maker; she would then go on to be appointed its director in 2014. Together with the team, she hopes to create a motivation to understand contemporary sculpture through the quality of its experience. Thus, support for the visual arts can be consolidated—allowing the public to share responsibility for it, and to encourage others to do the same.