

A mixture of presence and change. A conversation between Enrique Marty and Christophe Van Gerrewey

Published in Reasons for Walling a House. 51N4E. Ruby Press. 2012.

C.V.G.: What do you do as an artist? You paint and you make sculptures?

E.M.: I consider every project as a different project. It all depends on the space, the questions and the circumstances, so I make very different art works: installations, oil paintings, watercolours, sculptures, movies, or architectural adjustments to the exhibition space.

C.V.G.: You have no general or external approach; it all depends on the situation and the exhibition. What does come back from time to time, however, is the fabrication of small creatures, small sculptures, that resemble people that really exist.

E.M.: Yes, but I don't 'make' these sculptures. It's a different process that is closer to taxidermy than to sculpture. In general I take a cast from a body. The statues of Julie and Michel are not sculptures but puppets: their body parts can move. So I only took a cast from their heads and their hands, and they gave me their real hair and their real clothes. I made sculptures out of polyurethane foam and covered them with layers of latex. Afterwards I painted the skin, the eyes, the wrinkles and so forth. But the hair and the clothes are real, although the clothes are reduced in size and the hair is mixed with artificial hair.

C.V.G.: How should we define 'taxidermy'? It doesn't come down to stuffing a dead body or a corpse from an animal... You use living persons as models! We have a somewhat wrong idea of taxidermy: it is not simply a process of taking out the intestines, the bones, the muscles, the organs, and replacing them with a more durable material inside the skin. It is something else: the taxidermist receives a skin from an animal, let's say from a dead tiger. He makes a real-size sculpture of the tiger. Then he takes a cast of this sculpture and reproduces it in polyurethane foam. He glues the skin to the reproduction, and then uses crystal eyes. That's different from what I do: I don't use crystals, but paint everything on the latex, even the eyes. Apart from that, the process is quite similar.

C.V.G.: Next to taxidermy, voodoo could be used as another analogy: voodoo priests make small puppets from existing persons, out of clay. But they also use real elements from the human beings: nails, hairs, sometimes even a tooth. And then the sculpture is pierced with needles in order to punish or torture the real model.

E.M.: A lot of people find the use of real hair the most striking aspect of these works of mine. And indeed taxidermy has, in comparison to voodoo, a somewhat magical aspect. Think about it: why should the real hair, the real skin have to be so important? It goes back to ancient traditions of preserving the reality of someone, of reproducing and simulating his or her presence, although the real persons are absent – or dead. I don't really understand why people would want to have a reproduction of a dead animal inside of their house – be it an animal they have shot during the hunting season, or be it a pet they have loved for years. It is a phenomenon that keeps on intriguing me. I once knew a hunter who kept a room full of horns of the animals he shot, like a caveman. Why? I can't explain it, and the same goes for my work: I do not want to deliver answers, I want to put forward good questions.

C.V.G.: It seems quite difficult to make these sculptures. What strikes me is the actual resemblance to the real persons: these creatures have the same hair and the same clothes, yes, but they are really similar, they are 'doubles'. Do you think you have a talent for producing likeness? Is your art in this sense 'ancient' or old-fashioned too, because you are an artist that does something that other, 'normal' people, would not be able to do – the creation, the realistic reproduction of elements out of the real world?

E.M.: I only consider the technique important in order to be able to develop my ideas. But yes, it doesn't change the fact that everything you see in my works, is entirely made by me. I do not have a team of assistants at my disposal. The reason is that I am the only one who can understand what I want to do, and what kind of final look I want the objects to have. Others could be technically able to make the same things, but the ideas behind these things would be lacking.

C.V.G.: How important is the 'surprising effect' of the sculptures? We are seeing something 'unbelievable' – the work of a magician, almost, or at least of someone very talented.

E.M.: I take that as a compliment. An artist has at his disposal the elements to create a whole new world based on the old one. And when this 'magic' happens, there is an element of surprise: the unexpected occurs, and our viewpoint on reality changes.

C.V.G.: The resemblance that is established by the sculptures is on the one hand very important – but on the other hand, the statues are not 'photorealistic'. You present 'versions' of these actual persons – smaller versions, certainly not heroic, and in a sense unhappy, damaged or even pathetic versions.

E.M.: There are several reasons for this. I don't feel any interest in making copies. I am interested in the human mind and in the human body. When you create art, you create a language – a dramaturgical language. The viewer stands in front of a stage, and on this stage something extraordinary happens. I don't want to bore the viewer. I want to show something interesting. Most of the sculptures do not wear shoes; they wear socks, even when they are naked. There is a specific and personal reason for that: when I wear only socks, and no shoes, I feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. I would rather prefer standing on bare feet than just wearing socks. The same goes, I think, for the sculptures: they might look angry, but in fact they are very scared.

C.V.G.: You show a dark depiction of mankind and a bleak view on the human condition.

E.M.: Yes. Some people tell me I make freaks, and I only concentrate on the freaky part of life. But that is not true: this is not a part of life, this is life, everything is freaky. I see this everywhere, everything is very strange, life is strange, normality doesn't exist.

C.V.G.: This representation of extreme suffering has religious connotations – the most pure and famous example being the passion of Christ.

E.M.: Yes, it's perfect. I hate the word freak. In museums of ancient art, we only see monsters, blood, torture, decapitations... people are shouting, crying, suffering. Let's not forget: I am Spanish. I've been to the Prado many times, and I am very familiar with the tradition of the Spanish baroque painting. And think of the Flemish baroque tradition – Rubens is one of my most important references. I feel connected with the recent history of art – installations, sculptures, performance – but it is necessary to look at the ancient times as well.

C.V.G.: What does it mean: 'regarding the pain of others' by means of art? Does it keep us scared, does it exert control over us?

E.M.: Certainly. If you want to control someone, the best way to start is to make him scared by showing pain. Fear weakens and fear makes it much easier to control a person or a group of people. Fear is widely used as a tool. I see many similarities between a priest standing on a pulpit speaking about hell, and a politician predicting dire consequences when he will not be elected. In Spain, a country that is notoriously fanatic in many ways, this mechanism can be seen with absolute clarity.

C.V.G.: You are from Salamanca, a dark, medieval town in Spain.

E.M.: I still live in Salamanca. This city is full of strong, ancient symbols. It has been very important to me. I walked around as a child in the cathedrals, in the churches, it was a very mysterious city. I was amazed by the figures carved in wood, it was so gothic. But as I said, more in general: there is a baroque Spanish tradition that has been very important to me.

C.V.G.: There is a vitalist tradition in art that underscores the tragic sides to life, but that – exactly because of this – decides to pay attention to the healthy side of life, to the good things, to beauty. You want to show the terrible sides of human life. Do you want to show compassion, or create a form of mutual understanding?

E.M.: I want the viewer to do something. It might seem pretentious, but I want to make the viewer conscious. When Michaelangelo painted *The Last Judgement*, he wanted to terrify people, he did not simply wanted to show something beautiful. Be careful, he wanted to say, be conscious, this is something that I give to you, a warning, a compassionate advice.

C.V.G.: Warning people means making them scared... But why should people be more careful? You want the viewer to do something, but being scared can also result in doing less. What is it exactly that will no longer happen in the lives of Julie and Michel now they live together with these puppets – and, on the other hand, what will happen thanks to the sculptures and the fear or surprise they provoke?

E.M.: My intention is not to scare and control. What I want is to raise awareness that this is being done constantly in society. I want to talk about this, I want to make clear that this happens. I hope that my audience will react and reflect. Art is a laboratory for experimentation, a place where you can put issues on the table in a symbolic but multi-layered way. As for Julie and Michel: I don't know what will happen. My intention is to ask this question, and the solution, if there is one, has to come from them. You could say I want to cause a problem at their house, in their lives – but a problem is not negative, it is an event.

C.V.G.: What did Julie and Michel initially ask for?

E.M.: It was a general question. They showed me their house, they showed the intervention by 51N4E – a remarkable design, very extreme, although it actually amounts to almost nothing. They asked for a work of art, but I was free to do whatever I wanted.

C.V.G.: I talked to them about how it felt to live in that kind of house, and I saw how they were constantly moving from one place to another, in the presence of the building team, during the construction process, that took quite a long time. It was as if they were enacting a little performance in their own house: they lived some weeks in the kitchen while the living room was furnished; then they moved to somewhere else while the kitchen was painted, and so on. That is how the initial idea developed, to make puppets that can be moved inside of a house.

E.M.: I should talk about another important event from my childhood, that has been influential to my work in general, and to this project in particular. Three brothers of my mother decided to buy a plot of land in Spain, and to build three houses on it. I was still a little child when I first visited these houses. Because of some strange construction errors and misunderstandings, because of a misreading of the plan, one of the houses on the plot of land was extremely small. I remember seeing the front door and thinking: that's the entrance for the cat. But it was the actual front door, and inside the ceiling was very low as well, but nobody seemed to mind. For the same reasons, the scale difference was present in the other houses as well. It was a completely surrealist situation – but I learned how important the difference of size can be, the 're-scaling' of only one small part of the world. Together with the 'displacement' of the puppets,

the movements of Julie and Michel, that was the starting point for this work.

C.V.G.: Did you ask their permission to make these sculptures?

E.M.: I proposed it, and they agreed.

C.V.G.: It seems like a strange situation (although you could say it is rather ancient as well): you do not make 'autonomous' art for the museum or the gallery, but you are asked for art by a specific customer or Maecenas.

E.M.: It's true. But the real difference lies not in the way the work was made or commissioned. The real difference is that the work gets a second life after I have finished it. Since the puppets have moved in, Julie and Michel are constantly taking pictures of how the four of them are living together. In this sense, they are enacting a performance with the puppets as attributes – but this performance is part of their daily life.

C.V.G.: Would you go at it differently if they wanted to have an artwork in a private gallery rather than in a house?

E.M.: In the summer of 2011, Filip Luyckx organized an exhibition on 'family life' at the Elaine Levy Gallery in Brussels. He asked me to show the two sculptures. I realized that showing them as autonomous artworks might seem contradictory, but it immediately came to my mind that Julie and Michel frequently visit art exhibitions. So the sculptures were not installed as artworks but as 'visitors' to the exhibition. It was an interesting experiment, that probably answers your question.

C.V.G.: In relation to the sculptures, it is impossible not to think of Freud's term 'das Unheimliche', the uncanny: what is known and foreign, familiar and strange at the same time. In this sense, the sculptures are truly uncanny: when Julie and Michel look at these creatures, they know and recognize them, but they are different – smaller, with different characteristics, and so on. In the context of the house, this effect becomes reinforced. Inside a house, you know – or you think you know – everything you need to know, everything is homely and familiar. Since you made your artwork, the house of Julie and Michel has become 'unheimlich'. To put it bluntly: do you think you have made their lives more difficult?

E.M.: That's what I want to figure out. I told them so: you have to live together, the four of you, and then you have to tell me what happens – not the other way around. But it is indeed a realisation of the 'uncanny': the unexpected, the unknown manifests itself in your own daily life, in your own house, exactly in the place where you thought you had everything under control. It is very important, it is very frightening, and it might make life more difficult – but at the same time, as Freud said: it is cathartic. An improvement takes place; when you go through it, after the experience, your life is better.

The presence of art in the house has always a somewhat bourgeois character: I sit in my house, I look at my paintings, I feel comfortable, rich and successful. One is reminded of the opening phrase of Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia*: 'to understand and internalize fear is the main aim of bourgeois art'. But in this case, the opposite happens. The inhabitants of the house ask for art, but you give them a version of themselves – and because this version is so similar, it will never entirely take the fear away. The inhabitants see themselves, but they will never feel comfortable with their own presence: change will always be necessary.

You should talk with Julie and Michel about this. But Julie, for instance, is a person that is constantly evolving, thinking up questions, travelling, changing. I do not know whether my art works are responsible for this, but I certainly aim at confrontation, questioning, uncertainty... the making of the puppets should have consequences, indeed as in the case of voodoo, but the consequences are different.

C.V.G.: How long can this search for confrontation go on? Maybe the real 'work' of a house is that everything in the end is 'domesticated': the puppets can be 'special' but for how long? Do they really keep their power?

E.M.: If they lose their power, this loss will be another part of the process, so it would be valid. But I don't think this will happen easily. I think variations and 'magic things' will keep on happening.

Magic in the daily routine... There are quite a lot of similarities between what you have done, and what the architects of 51N4E have done. 'The adventure in their work,' Geert Bekaert wrote, 'does not lie outside of the boundaries of the ordinary – it is right in the middle of it.' In Eloois-Vijver, the existing house is enlarged; it looks the same as before, but it certainly isn't the same; in your work, a scaled-down version of what already exists is presented.

The new house as it is altered by 51N4E is the same as the old one, but in a simple and extreme way. I took me quite some time to define this house as open or closed, but it's the same, I mean: it's both. It presents views to the surroundings, both from inside and outside, it provides shelter; but the wall does not offer security or extreme safety. At first sight, the design is quite shocking and disturbing, especially seen from the outside. But from inside, the feeling is quite the opposite. It is warm and welcoming. This was important when I was working on my project: I wanted to play with this duality.

C.V.G.: The architects were prepared to work within the existing situation. They do not consider the old house – a 'classic' Belgian villa, a *femette* – as a taboo, but they almost leave it like it is and try to reinforce what is at hand. That is not as common as it might seem: many architects still consider 'modern' architecture as totalitarian: it cannot consist of a hybrid of 'building styles'. It has to create its own new site. Not so for 51N4E: the site is a mixture of presence and of change. This too resembles your artistic strategy: no autonomous, total installation, but a very literal acceptance and manipulation of what is already there.

E.M.: Yes, that's true. I totally agree.

C.V.G.: In this regard, it strikes me that your work has no title, or does it?

E.M.: No, it does not have a title. It's obvious: this is an open project, I consider everything surrounding the puppets as part of the work.

C.V.G.: Maybe the puppets can only be named when the performance is over.

E.M.: It is peculiar kind of performance: just like marriage it is laden with symbols, contractual agreements, rules, problems and happiness.

C.V.G.: 'Till death do them part...'

E.M.: I recently heard the sculpture of Michel has a broken leg. Julie broke it when she tried to place it in chair. I am thinking of making a plaster for the leg. It's an accident, but accidents can happen. They are part of the process, of life and of work. This only proves that the work, just like the architecture and the idea of home in general, is a mental situation. It is about thinking, posing questions, feeling.

C.V.G.: There is a famous advertisement for a brand of Belgian beer. It says: 'My home is where my Stella is'; everywhere I have a glass of beer in front me, I feel at home. In the case of Julie and Michel: could you say they are at home wherever the puppets, their alter egos, are? Modern people need a home, but it should not be perfect. We need elements of strangeness, of suffering even, in order to feel at home. This is what architecture and art can provide.

E.M.: When I first saw the house of Julie and Michel and the intervention by 51N4E, I have to admit I thought of a bunker. But once you enter, everything changes. A menacing wall actually opens the house: there is much light, much warmth, and no closure at all. There is totally no isolation. And maybe the same goes for an encounter with the puppets. At first, you can think this is hell, this is too frightening, too weird. But that is actually why it engenders questions, and starts to make new things possible.

C.V.G.: The presence of the dolls does not make living in the house impossible – maybe we need this confrontation in order to live inside of a house...

E.M.: We probably cannot live in a place where everything is 'normal'. In ancient times, a Roman general who had won the war had a slave at his disposal to remind him of the precariousness of his victory: 'Memento mori'... In courts dwarves were the only ones who could disrespect the king... And at fairs mirrors distort our own image and that of the others... From time to time, we need to be confronted with the familiar that suddenly becomes dangerously unknown.