

**Hilde Van Canneyt:** Nel, you created an entire installation last summer in the garden of the Duivelsteen Castle in Ghent for Yart, an idea by the organisation Thief in the Night.

**Can you explain exactly how you created the installation?**

**Nel Bonte:** I wanted to make an installation that contrasted with the imposing surroundings of the Duivelsteen Castle. What lies beneath the building? That question gave me the idea of building an imaginary underground on the surface. I took the aerial plan of HILL60, 'the mines of Missines', as a starting point. The mine galleries, which date from the First World War, engage in dialogue with the architecture of the Duivelsteen. The craters were disconnected from their function, which meant that I could play with the open and closed, positive and negative shapes of the mines. I built the installation with wood, referring to the vaults and supporting props installed in the mines. I dug a crater in the ground – a dugout – as if it had always been there. The installation also included a stage and a pavilion. The two were connected by a tunnel, the mine gallery itself.

The installation had a functional aspect, but it was also an autonomous piece.

**HVC:** What was in the drinking water in Roeselare that made you move to the KASK art school in Ghent and to Antwerp when you grew up?

**NB:** As a child I went to school at Lenteland in Roeselare. One day a sculptor came to school and taught us to make little portraits out of clay. I turned out to be the best at it in the class, and I was hooked. I took lessons at SASK art school in Roeselare, where I now teach part-time, as it happens. It didn't take long to decide on my next step: I went to a secondary school for the arts, 'De Maricolen' in Bruges. I learned various artistic disciplines there, and I soon became fascinated with spatial forms and working with different materials such as clay, stone, wood and metal. Finally, I did a master's degree at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp.

**HVC:** You graduated in 2010. And that is the point when you have to venture outside the school gates and get started. Seven years later, a lot has happened. Like many aspiring artists, you did teacher training as a back-up. You have also worked for another artist and had a job in a gallery, but above all you had the luck to win a public competition right after graduation...

**NB:** I stayed living in Antwerp for a while and saw how difficult it was for other artists to make a living. I wondered how artists could earn their keep in the world of visual arts. So I started submitting applications to public competitions. One of them asked for a design for a work to be integrated into a home for the elderly in Hoogstraten. I was lucky enough to win straight away. The theme of the piece was 'volunteering'. I made an abstract portrait of a

volunteer that I blew up to an extremely large size: 15 metres high and 30 metres wide. There are LED lights incorporated into the metal. I wanted the residents of the home to forge a bond with my work. Often that is the last thing left to people: looking out the window from a bed or chair. The LED lights transmit messages.

That makes the art work functional and interactive. The two mirrored wings look like those of a butterfly, which is why I make a reference to the French word 'papillon' in my choice of a name for my sculpture, 2-PILLIO.

**H: Fortune has favoured you as an artist, because it wasn't much later that you won a second contest: this time for the fire, police and ambulance station in Ransst. How did RE-3 come about?**

**N:** It was for a training centre for the fire brigade, police and emergency medical teams. The piece is based on a DNA sequence. I wanted to emphasise the ways in which the three emergency services work together. When I went to look at the location, I saw a large, square entrance hall surrounded by high, concrete walls. I immediately imagined a structure that would grow along the concrete wall like a climbing plant, bringing the space to life. The red, blue and green colours are the colours of the symbols of the three emergency services. Some parts are in colour and the linear elements that join the shapes together are white.

**H: How do you tackle the creative process in your studio? Because you start from scratch, in a limited space. You live next door, so I imagine you heading out to your studio every morning in your slippers.**

**N:** You're right, I often work in my studio in my pyjamas, because I live just next door. The first thing I do in the morning when I wake up is feed my cat, Deepan. The thing is, you can never get away from your work, but I'm always close to it and sometimes it is only by walking into my studio in the evenings that I find new aspects that fascinate me. But my sources of inspiration don't come from my own studio. Sometimes they do come from my own work: I cut it to pieces and build something new. It's important to me to visit a lot of exhibitions and include residencies in my practice. That is actually how I start working. Photographing nature and culture is also important to me.

Artists need to get out of their studios, meet people, visit exhibitions and above all get around a lot to see new things.

Interesting people provide indirect inspiration and help you on your way.

Daring to step out of your comfort zone is important, I think. During my residency in Finland, I came up against my own limits a couple of times. With hindsight, that is really important: I think differently, mull things over more and my awareness of everything has grown.

**H: Artists really do need to withdraw every now and again. This summer you did a residency in Finland for a month, to work and recharge your batteries. What inspired you there?**

**N:** It was a back-to-basics programme.

The international residents met up there. You weren't allowed to use your computer or phone. You were given a studio, and there were presentation sessions. The first thing I did was go for a walk. It was the best thing I could have done, because I was enormously inspired by the architecture, the saunas and barbecues I saw in many people's garden.

The drawing PONGO shows the upper part of a sauna; the lower part comes from a barbecue and there's a chimney. So I've combined various elements in that sketch. Another drawing, LOSTINHELSINKI, is inspired by a hut in the countryside. I made nine sketches altogether, which I can build upon in my studio to create 3D sculptures.

**H: Is sketching as important as the final result for you?**

**N:** Yes. I make sketches every morning, which I see as studies. Some also end up as works in their own right. I have also been doing a lot of watercolours recently. Technical plans, scale models and prototypes really fascinate me. I don't always understand human interactions, and since I was a child I have been looking for a way to get to grips with them and give them shape. Signs, symbols, abstractions, calculations and formulae are fixed: they don't change. They provide something solid to go on, which is why they can be found in my work.

**H: Your work has to do with the love-hate relationship between people and things. That is also why you play with relationships of scale, material and space. You see a lot in details and fragments.**

**N:** That's right. I start with objects from daily life. I aim to give a new meaning and reason for existence to meaningless things that people overlook. I explore the form and material by playing with the scale. I aim to add extra layers of meaning to realistic relationships of scale, reduction and magnification. These aspects help to define the concept. In fact, you can see my sculptures as abstracted visual elements.

**H: Your work doesn't allow straightforward interpretations. The choice of material is also crucial. The most important thing is the space, because that is often your starting point. Your aesthetics are ambiguous. It's quite difficult to call your work attractive: it's more that it is interesting in terms of form and content.**

**N:** The concept is important to me, which sometimes results in a really ugly work. I work at many levels at once, and sometimes I spend a year working on one series: you keep searching until you get the colour and shape right, the composition, the space... I don't mind

if viewers don't think my work is attractive, as long as I sense that the viewer is fascinated: looking, going away, coming back. If they just glance at my work, I don't think they are provoked by what I have created.

**H: Is there social criticism in your work? Is there something you want it to prove?**

**N:** I did focus on that for a while in my **BOKSITI** series. Issues like housing, location and temporary accommodation were the starting points for that series. Those were subjects that really intrigued me at the time, partly because of my own experience and also due to a personal vision of a wider social context.

**H: All that remains of your piece **COUPE DE MER** is the print. We see plaster casts made in an ice lolly mould installed in the sand. So for you the actual work is the image that remains of it?**

**N:** Location is always a very important aspect of my sculptural work. That is why I like making lots of modules in my studio and recomposing them on site at a different location. Because elements from my childhood are also a great source of inspiration and I enjoy incorporating them into my work, I liked the idea of combining lollies and the beach. So I made casts of hundreds of ice lollies and coloured them red. I took them to the beach with me and created a linear shape. I was lucky enough to have an assistant helping me at the time, so we managed to create an installation a good thirty metres long in two hours. Once it was finished and we were satisfied with the composition, we took about three hundred photos. I selected three of them and printed them on aluminium panels. So in fact the reproduction is all that is left.

**H: **MODEL AH CON 23** is an installation – it looks a bit like a group of spiders – that you presented on a football pitch.**

**N:** It's a piece from 2012, so it's a bit older. Back then I still worked quite mathematically, in a calculated way. I made about twenty different scale models for MODEL AH CON 23: prototypes made using kebab sticks. Because the models were so small, it was easy to assemble shapes, combine them and take them apart again until I arrived at the scale model for MODEL AH CON 23.

The installation stood on a football pitch. I've got a thing for the industrial lines on pitches and car parks. I notice that I'm always inclined to look for that kind of location. In fact, this piece was designed for an art trail. The day I was supposed to go and set it up, it turned out I couldn't have the place I'd reserved. I stormed off and went to look for a new location for my work right away.

Why not the football field, I thought, and it was a great success! (She smiles).

MODEL AH CON 23 is an installation composed of constructive modules made of bamboo, wood and textiles.

**H: What gave you the idea for *GORST*? We can see that these are the outer shells used in *SETTING*, but now they are in a car park. Once again, you took a photo 'as evidence'. Then you reinstalled the work elsewhere. Did that give it yet another layer of meaning?**

**N:** I spend a lot of time in my car, out on the road. Because I always stop for a toilet break on the motorway, I often find myself in roadside restaurants with public toilets.

I always noticed the toilet roll dispensers: they are an interesting shape and familiar, sweet little things. Many people tend to get angry with the dispenser because the paper often gets stuck or doesn't tear off properly. After a while I started taking photos of all sorts of dispensers, and developed three of them into sculptures. They are large, brownish-black, solid shapes, although they are made of layers of toilet paper soaked in a transparent pigment. I like playing with relationships of material and scale.

You're right that I did photograph one of the three dispensers, *GORST*, in an empty car park outside the Spar supermarket. The location reinforces the content and concept. The industrial lines affect the composition, and the symmetry lends a sense of calm to the photo. I see it as a kind of still, quiet creature.

**H: We also see *GORST* displayed in your studio and in another setting with other sculptures. What is the main thing you are exploring there?**

**N:** If I put the sculpture in a different place, I have to search for the right way to present it each time. Whether the work comes across to visitors in the right way.

I often use scenography for that. Sometimes the viewer only gets to see a reproduction of the work, printed on a panel.

I often build 'white cubes' in my studio to imitate a small, clean space like a gallery. It is a kind of playground for me, where I can experiment with my work: how I arrange it – on a plinth, on the wall, sometimes it even works to display it upside down – and how I combine different pieces with each other, how they engage in dialogue with each other and the space.

Sometimes I invite people to see the work: the interaction with the viewers in the physical space is extremely important.

**H: And how about your piece *MUZZI*? You placed a cardboard box in an orange steel holder in an underground car park, and once again you took a photo of it.**

**N:** I was invited to build the sculpture *MUZZI* by the organiser and curator of the exhibition 'Interruptingthecity' at the Stadsfeestzaal in Antwerp. I was making the BOKSITI series during

that period. It is a series consisting of seven sculptures, all made of similar boxes on reddish-orange wooden and metal carriers.

The boxes refer to moving house, where packing is more important than unpacking. The geometric reddish-orange carriers refer to the inability to settle: the colour is a reference to the colour of an Ibis hotel where I sometimes used to spend the night.

I initially did several performances with MUZZI, including one on the lowest storey of Antwerp Central Station. The security guards soon turned up to see what was going on. (She laughs.) Obviously that was an interaction I was deliberately trying to provoke. (She winks.)

Then I moved further along the Meir towards the Stadsfeestzaal.

The exhibition was held on the top floor. Afterwards I took my work on another trek down to the underground car park. It was there that my sculpture really came into its own.

Now I never exhibit the sculpture MUZZI as a sculpture in its own right, only as a photographic print on an aluminium panel. Space and sculpture have combined to become a totality, and I don't want to change that.

**H: Is there also a link between your work **UP** and MUZZI? We see cardboard boxes – in a stack now – on a similar orange iron holder.**

**N:** The sculpture UP is a piece from the BOKSITI series. UP has been exhibited at BOZAR in Brussels and De Paardenstallen in Kortrijk. It was surprising to see how the viewers walked around the piece. I had made a small opening in one of the boxes, like a peep-hole. The visitors were curious to see whether there was anything inside or anything to see.

The work UP was a reference to a larger construction: an apartment block.

**H: **WOLIBO** is an amoeba-like shape on a support. Was that the intention, right from the start? I can't tell what material it is made of either.**

**N:** For WOLIBO, I started out with small elements taken from daily life that I ordered into certain patterns. A kind of grid.

I researched different ways of altering these geometric shapes. I was astonished by the physical changes that the fixed patterns underwent.

These new, carcinoma-like forms that emerged provided the starting point in turn for tests with different materials. This was a process whose starting point was clearly defined, clean geometric plans, but it evolved into an amorphous geometric volume that is almost ugly. It is a physical (or chemical) process that I am still freewheeling with.

WOLIBO is an exploration I began years ago. Following a short residency and presentation opportunity with the first try-outs of these WOLIBO sculptures, I won the 'Prix Godecharle'. The resulting grant allowed me to go abroad to further develop my research. I came up with a system to sculpt these shapes. It was only after years of experimentation with materials, casts and colour studies that I achieved the results I wanted.

**H: P.I.N. is a large, white sculpture that reminds me of a figure. The shape seems to be held together with elastic bands.**

**N:** The P.I.N. installation was inspired by the historic hose used by fire fighters. In an initial phase of research, I carefully analysed the nozzle of the hose. The relationship between micro and macroscopy is the key to it. The installation consists of five different parts that fit together with a click system. All the pieces are wrapped in fabric and pulled taut with sewing thread. The perishable textiles contrast here with the hard, metal surface of the original lance.

The fact that it is 'wrapped' refers on the one hand to the history of the hose that needs to be preserved and packaged. On the other hand, the fragile textiles refer to the bandages used for burns.

The idea is to do various creative interventions with the installation P.I.N. at various locations. A new gesture and dialogue emerges each time, in which the space, sculpture and viewer interact with each other. The P.I.N. installation can be presented in different ways: it can be installed 'as a whole' or with the different modules presented separately as an installation.

**H: Your sculpture SEASONS.IN.THE.SUN is the new kid on the block...**

**N:** Over the past year, I have begun making more and more assemblages and collages, juxtaposing different shapes and colours in a search for different forms and compositions. I play with the relationships of scale, materials, shapes, colours and textures. I see it as staging an installation. I exhibited SEASONS.IN.THE.SUN in the autumn of 2018 at WARP in Sint-Niklaas. Visitors could not physically walk into the space. So viewers had to look at the installation from the front, from a sort of worm's-eye view. It is an interesting situation to work with, because I usually assume that people will be walking around my installation.

**H: Another recent assemblage is SNIFFER.**

**N:** The starting point here was various assemblages of small scale models. My sources of inspiration are fragments from the industrial world, specifically parts of a crane – the base – and a caterpillar truck – the top. I am still developing this sculpture. I submitted the small model to a competition for an integrated work in the Netherlands, but unfortunately I wasn't selected. I made the sculpture anyway, and now it's nearly ready to be shown in an exhibition space. Or I might do what I do with my other work, and look for a specific space in which to photograph my sculpture. But things like that, looking for locations and so on, are always coincidental and very spontaneous.

**H: If you could dream really big, which space would you like to use?**

**N:** A massive space, of course, with room for all my large installations. And preferably somewhere that people would visit, of course! (She laughs.) And like all artists, I obviously dream of being able to make a living from my art. That's why I think it's important to make both large and small-scale works.

One big dream I have is to exhibit my work internationally. A biennial or a gallery to promote me, so I wouldn't need a day job anymore and could concentrate entirely on my own work.

**H: Well then, Nel, that's something for us to work on!**