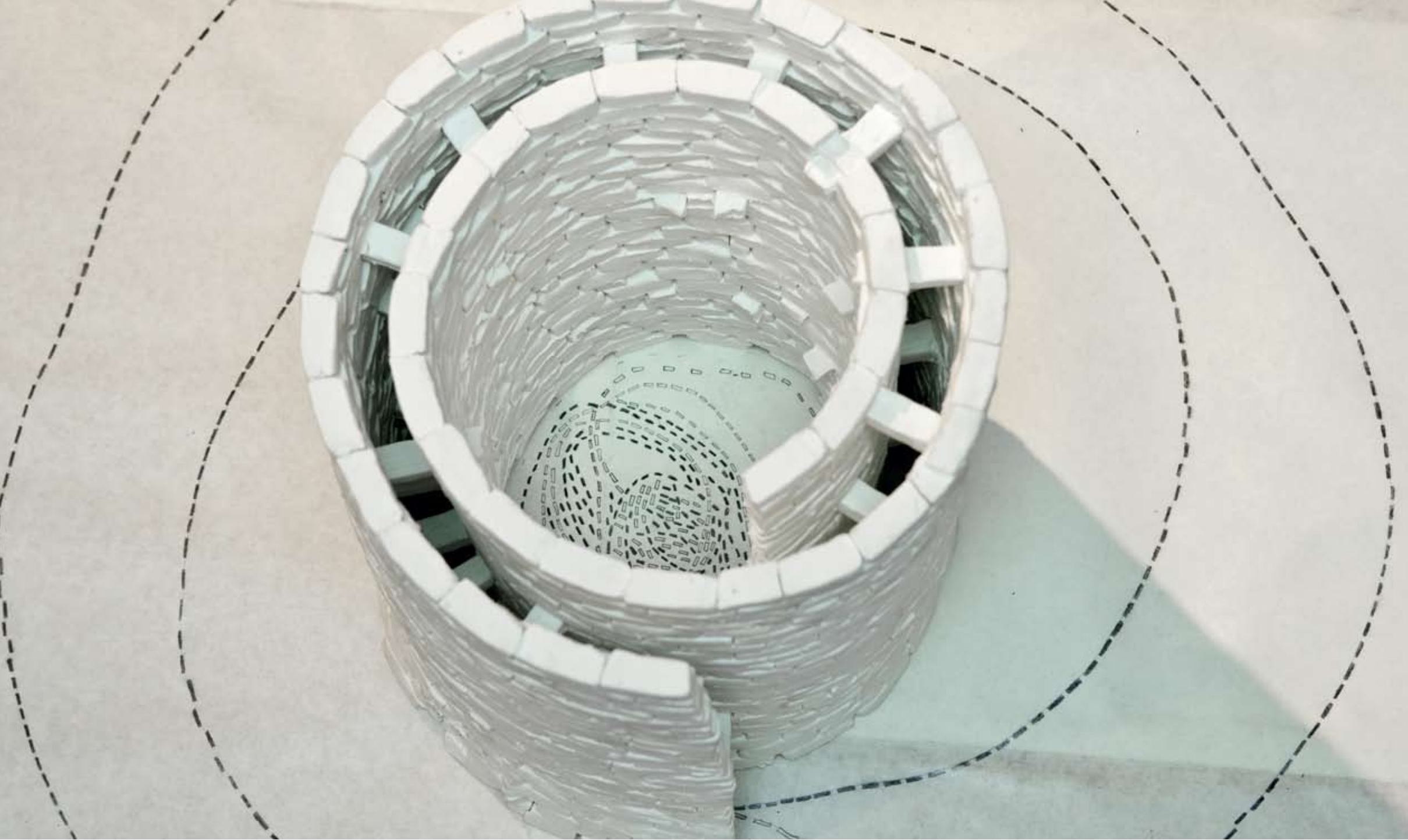


Touching the Earth and the Sky

Jan Boelen and Ronny Delrue

Cahiers van het IvOK n° 13

ACCO
Leuven – Den Haag
2009



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CCM, Center for Cloning
and Manipulation 2003-2008



Account of An Untold Narrative

21.12

It won't become any clearer than it is now.

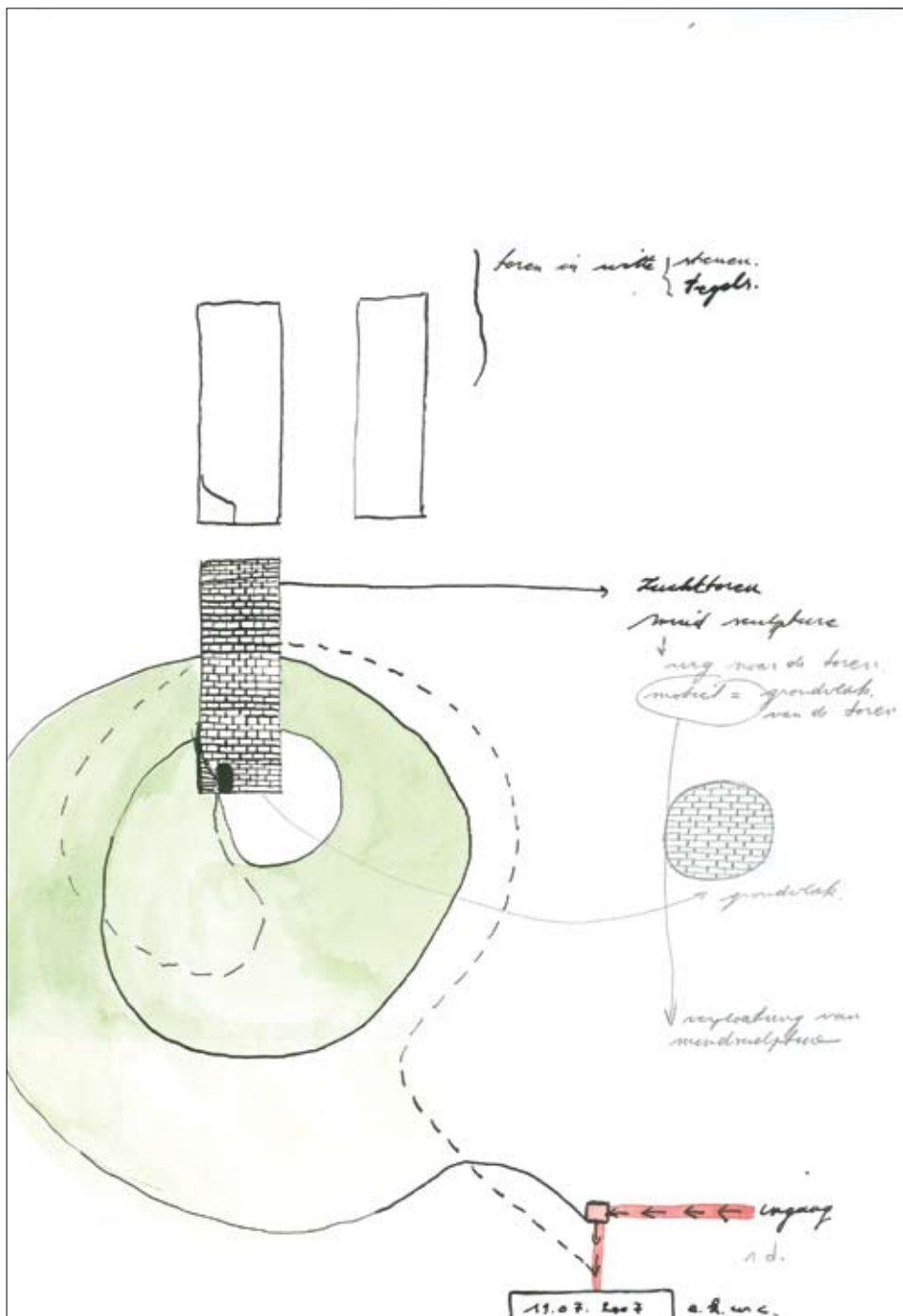
22.12

My story is simple. I met a woman. And I lost her. Then I became insane, because I looked back. Orpheus? Of course. I'm not stupid. But the outrageous thing is—it was she who looked back, broken, pale. And all those words with which I wanted to persuade her, they all disappeared into this instant she looked back and kept silent. I yelled, I screamed, I was beside myself. Only later, when I had restored the balance the world demands of us, when I became an ox that despises its slaughtering and not a loud pig, only then I understood that she had vanished precisely in my furious shouts.

I grew silent. A man who kept somewhat aloof. I kept talking a lot—it's my job to talk. But every word I spoke, seemed detached from myself. And though around me everything sparkled as before, the dash I cut with my words was nothing but a smokescreen that allowed me to disappear. I presume I abused language. Like an echo that tries to find its former silence. Like someone who in a frenzy craves for the shadow from which his words spring, the shadow that reflects him. In the end, I was no longer anyone—I had become a bag of empty words.

In Blanchot I read a phrase that particularly struck me: "le désastre ruïne tout en laissant tout en l'état."

Shortly afterwards I started writing. I wanted to remove all that was redundant, maybe wash things away with a hard jet of water. And I thought I could do that by reclaiming thing, by upgrading them. Literature, I thought: of all languages the most redundant, the most useless, mere pollution. What if I used this pure waste for the better? A stupid mistake. Literally, for that



matter. Because I had abused language, it now turned vehemently against me. No matter what I wrote, it remained without reality. But amidst this fiction, the only thing left to me was fiction. The fiction to become someone.

23.12

Anyway. I haven't got much time left. What I want to say, is this: for ten years I have tried to expose myself in a story by imprisoning myself within an image—a complete failure.

I wrote that I was imprisoned in a tower without entrance. I don't know how I had got inside and I saw no way of escape. Through a narrow window in a wall of white bricks, the unrelenting light of the sun entered, like a blinding dazzle on the steel blue azure. The sweltering heat drove me mad. My shadow was the only shelter—the only thing to cool me down.

Sometimes I remained for hours on end motionless in the middle of the small space. Thus, on the hot wall a cool patch was left, on which I flung myself in desperation, almost beside myself. Like someone who has been condemned to death and collapses with exhaustion or panic, a fraction of a second before being executed. I turned pale as death in the oppressive heat. The flush of death—but I knew I was dreaming.

I dreamt about a girl in a summery room. She was sitting on the bed, with her back turned to me. The deep scent, her vain lips. She seemed to turn around, but the back of her head was bleeding. When her soft gaze finally reached me, I saw how the light in it went out. With a jolt that paralysed me. When I woke up, my hands were covered with blood.

I used the blood to write on the floor, the ceiling and the walls of my cell in the tower. Not words—every day I wrote a date. Not the date of the present day, but of some day still to come—a diary for the future, a story to escape this deadlock. And as I cut my skin ever deeper, all the while I wrote texts, inside my head.

That explains about the situation. This was the image in which I wanted to imprison myself and expose myself for ten years. Like a cat, I lay on

the lookout in a modest garden. Around noon. the world was my prey. But the only thing I saw, was that my shadow grew larger. My arrogance hid mere aimlessness. For the thing I proudly called the world, the thing I referred to as a destination, was actually simply that which I never pronounced: Eurydice. A detour to still find her. When I discovered this, the days ceased. In that night, I ran like mad through the streets.

24.12

When things cleared up, I became calmness itself. Like someone who knows that the dessert must end, yet who is also satisfied with that knowledge and sits down in an utterly imaginary landscape.

I rented a room in a recently constructed block of flats on the umpteenth floor. I stopped working, without giving prior notice. I wasn't looking for work—the work was looking for me. By day I sat staring through the window, for hours on end, observing the movements of the people on the street below. Sometimes I followed the divine gait of a woman. But the glass protected my loneliness.

I knew I needed this loneliness, like a bankrupt man needs his debtor—in an absolute manner so to speak. So I waited anxiously, though the fear did not touch me. I forgot about posing, I broke down in myself into the child I was. I returned through my memories, like through a gallery with early sketches. And I think it is precisely where I couldn't go any further, that I she met me.

I remember a Christmas night. I was a child, in the back of the car. I looked through the rear window, up to the moon. I clearly saw a figure move along the firmament. A woman of colours. The moon was her halo, the night her miracle. It was incredible. Dumbfounded I didn't know what I saw. I remained speechless, without witness. Never did I dare to look once more.

Never. Till tonight, when she appeared to me. Not in a dream, but as his reality. You are the one, I said. She said she couldn't care less. Why can you only keep things by killing them?



Touching the Earth
and the Sky 2008

Why do you kill that which you love? Because you know you can't keep it? What nameless heaviness. And while her truth slowly rises to my head, I decide that presently I will leave this room with the body of language with which I have confused myself. I will blow up myself at the market—a blown up image. The rest I will leave behind.

My silence was made of white porcelain. But my existence was a cloud of ink that wanted to break through. I think we can survive in literature. Provided one does not stop writing.

Tom Van Imschoot, 20 december 2008

Touching the Earth and the Sky,

Chiaroscuro

Ronny Delrue's paintings, drawings and sketches explore how humans relate to three-dimensional space and/or the landscape. His figures are present from head to toe and thank their existence to that which goes on inside the cerebral cortex. They represent portraits of the artist, but they are interchangeable with any human being. The spectator recognizes himself or herself in what he sees. Delrue's world exists by virtue of contrast. Everything happens between heaven and earth, between black and white. The disparity between the elastic density of the Japanese paper and the sandy grain of ceramics is greatly emphasised. Without lapsing into three-dimensionality, everything in this work is about texture. From this point of view, too, Delrue is a perfectionist with regard to the element of handicraft. The vacuum clouds are cut to human measure and being moulded to turn into a fragment of the artist's poetical vision. In a relaxed manner, he thus challenges the human species: what do people need heads or hands for under our skies? Delrue's art invites us to explore the border area of being, of knowing, of aesthetics. His work is never noncommittal, but seizes the public by the throat, mercilessly yet also in a poetical manner. This is the sort of tension that is typical of the artist. The *chiaroscuro* paradigm is not only formally omnipresent, but also with regard to content.

Giving and taking

The exhibition in the Hasselt art centre Z33 took the public to the deepest caverns of the artist's imagination. Only few exhibitions report on the genesis of the works of art on view. This particular one originated precisely from the dynamism of its genesis. Even the artist's studio, where most of the works were conceived, has been recon-

structured as “a place for thinking” at this exhibition. Numerous drawing record with frugal lines Delrue’s first ideas. Within the framework of his PhD in the arts, the artist currently studies controlled uncontrolledness. He explores how the *inventio* suddenly imposes itself on the imagination of the artist and unexpectedly steers his hand. He starts to draw thanks to this abrupt explosion of artistic insight, at the same using all expertise he has. The *inventio* is a sort of “revelation” that is tested by the artist as he creates the work. Thus uncontrolledness and control amalgamate in the concrete drawing. The artist does not know what happens to him, but he is convinced that it can only happen to him, while at the same time he is aware that what happens to him can only result in a particular shape because of his intervention. The stage of uncontrolledness belongs to him, just like the control can only be guided by him.

Segno di Dio

Already some five hundred years ago, in the context of Italian mannerism, a dispute arose concerning this area of tension. The term *disegno*, still recognisable in our contemporary word *design*, was ascribed a peculiar etymology. According to Federico Zuccaro, the drawing revealed the *segno di Dio*: “the divine sign/the spark” in us. God presents a theme, which is then turned into a shape by the artist through his skills (*sprezzatura*). Thus, the artist becomes the chosen one: he is capable of doing something others can’t—he metamorphoses the *disegno interno* into a *disegno esterno*. Drawing simply means embodying the idea God has poured into the artist’s imagination. In the seventeenth-century art theoretical discourse we find the same idea, independent of people’s view of God. Each work of art that is of great value belongs to a certain aesthetical category. It is therefore possible to motivate why a work of art is a great work of art. At the same time, an eminent aesthete such as André Félibien proposes that a fine work of art possesses a dimension that eludes any model of artistic evaluation. The art object convinces its

contemplator because it comprises an indefinite element, “un je ne sais quoi.” There is a unique margin that is strictly individual and pure and which, in the end, will define the magic of the image. Or as Vladimir Jankélévitch put it in *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (1957): “Beaucoup de noms ont pu être donnés à cet innommé innommable, beaucoup de définitions proposées pour ce ‘quelque chose d’autre’ qui n’est précisément pas comme les autres parce que en général il n’est ni une chose ni quelque chose.”

“Mind” & Matter

Ronny Delrue’s drawings in Z33 embody this quest in an unusual manner. Like the mannerist artists, Delrue seeks to find a dimension that escapes control. The meticulous documentation he provides about the development of the shapes, visualizes the various stages that turn the imagination into a material shape. Each drawing is autonomous and at the same time it is a visual link in the creative mental process. What fascinates in Delrue’s oeuvre has to do with this shifting artistic fascination, which causes the shape to move, as well as matter on occasion. The two-dimensional drawing turns into a three-dimensional sculpture. The line splits into ceramic volumes that move about through space, the fired earth plays with the immateriality of the clouds. And because of the way the exhibition track is organised in Z33, not only the artist, but also the public experiences this process. It is as if for the public a corner of the veil that covers the Parnassus is lifted—the mountain from which the divine sparks of inspiration are fired. Delrue is not afraid to show the public his culinary secrets. On the occasion of this unique exhibition, he has put all his cards on the table. The drawings and sculptures are like sheets in a diary that record the creative mental process. Thus, he opens a gallery of “Mind Sculptures”. He is a true master of the spiritual and subtle shades of meaning.

Ronny Delrue interviewed by Jan Boelen and Mieke Mels

Between 2003 and 2008, Ronny Delrue took part in four workshops; each lasting a few months, in the European Ceramic Work Centre (.ekwc) in 's-Hertogenbosch (the Netherlands). During his stays, the artist focused on working with fired and unfired earth. The artistic creations and ideas that surfaced during the workshops were brought together in the research project From Line to Stone. The project ended with the symposium From Line to Stone: the Interaction between Free and Applied, which took place in October 2008 in Leuven. Furthermore, there was also the exhibition Touching the Earth and the Sky, which opened in November 2008 in Z33. Central in the exhibition was the artist's research, but it went beyond that, as it also featured the video Touching the Earth and the Sky, which was realised in co-operation with the FLACC in 2008. Colouring outside the lines, gradually the exhibition itself became part of the research project. Controlled uncontrolled-ness was the leitmotif of the exhibition...

A conversation between Ronny Delrue (R.D.), Jan Boelen (J.B.) and Mieke Mels (M.M.) on the research project *From Line to Stone* and the exhibition *Touching the Earth and the Sky*

J.B. – Once you told me that every year you empty your studio, clean it out and repaint it white. When you went to the .ekwc in 2003, you found a white studio there. The exhibition rooms in Z33, too, were virgin white when you started working on your exhibition. In short, the white, pure space, which will turn into a “signifier”—as if it were a sheet of paper... is a method of proceeding that seems to recur time and again in your work?
R.D. – Actually, it does. Before I started working in Z33, I had one of the exhibition rooms made into a studio: a white space with just a table



and a chair, that was all I needed. There was one more thing I asked for: a window. Natural light can't enter the exhibition spaces in Z33, but after all, it was the intention to work intensely there for several months. I needed this contact with the outside world. Once the right conditions had been created, I set out with a white sheet of paper and pencil. I was very focused and I drew what the exhibition could come to look like, how I wanted to arrange each room. With every drawing I made, my ideas changed. Every drawing contained an "option": Maybe I could do things in such or such a way? If I had put my work directly in the exhibition space to look for the best set-up, it would have taken me too much time. The drawings were tremendously helpful to think about things. For me, drawing means thinking.

J.B. – What strikes me is the unreasoned aspect of your drawings. Looking back at the various workshops you participated in and at how you set out for an exhibition, I notice time and again that new projects emerge from this uncontrolled way of drawing. That is, I think, what constitutes the *leitmotif* of your work. The studio as a white sheet is the point of departure. In that sense, it is a matter of course that the studio you had installed is central at the exhibition?

R.D. – First, I would like to qualify the terms "unreasoned" and "uncontrolled" to some extent. I don't just draw randomly—rather, I create a framework within which I then move about. I draw quickly—but that is a feature that is inherent to the medium—and because of this speed, more oxygen enters and things are ventilated more easily. When I start drawing, I scatter the floor around me with my drawings. Throwing those drawings on the floor literally and metaphorically creates a certain freedom of movement to explore ideas of all kinds. At the end of the day, I select a number of drawings I then hang on the walls. My drawings grow rank on the floor and develop on the walls. My selection is mainly a compilation of drawings that with regard to "content" are similar. This method has actually little to do with *écriture automatique*. I work in a relatively controlled manner, but precisely because of this "controlledness", things emerge that are particularly uncontrolled.

J.B. – You started work on the exhibition on 1 August 2008. The studio was what it should be and you started drawing. Had you devised some plan?

R.D. – I wanted to show how things had evolved from my first stay in the .ekwc in 2003 till the exhibition in 2008—I started on this itinerary with a line and gradually I came to work with fired and unfired earth.

J.B. – With "line", you mean the line on the sheet of paper, the drawing?

R.D. – The line is the drawing—pencil on paper, but also on fabric—and the stone is the sculpture in fired and unfired earth. When in March 2008 I submitted a proposal to the IvOK, I specifically wanted to explore this itinerary "from line to stone" in depth.

First stay at the .ekwc – Summer 2003

J.B. – So, it started in 2003 with your first stay at the .ekwc in 's-Hertogenbosch. You arrived there as a draughtsman/painter, which is I think rather unusual. What made you take this step?

R.D. – I first heard about the .ekwc in 1994 when I visited an exhibition of Mark Manders in the MuHKA (Antwerp). I discovered that some of the sculptures on view had been made in the European Ceramic Work Centre. In 1998 I made my first trip to Den Bosch, to meet Trees De Mits, a fellow teacher at Sint-Lucas Visual Arts in Ghent. I saw very interesting things, but at the time it didn't particularly look suited for me. It was only years later that I realized that the content of my work could be deepened and acquire an extra dimension by working with fired and unfired earth. I believed that some of my ideas would be shown to advantage if I realized them with this medium. I quite deliberately avoid the term "ceramics", because I was mainly fascinated by clay, the firing process, stone, dust... A piece of clay that is baked at a temperature of 1,200°C goes through a transformation. There is a sort of "petrification process", but conversely, dried clay becomes workable again if you sprinkle it with water. These processes fascinate me and there's also a link with my own work. The blocking or "petrification" of the mind, the

element of pollution... Pollution results in petrification and petrification leads to a sort of pulverising, crushing effect that causes things to vanish. In short, I saw a lot of potential in working with fired and unfired earth.

J.B. – You submitted a first application for a stay in the .ekwc. What is it you wanted to explore in those three months? What concrete project did you have in mind?

R.D. – I wanted to create life-size figures I could look into. At the top—where the head should be—there’s a black hole. You could see it as an attempt to understand humans, even if that is impossible because you stare down a black hole and you don’t see anything.

M.M. – I imagine that as a draughtsman it’s not really evident to start making sculptures without prior knowledge?

R.D. – I had no prior knowledge, indeed, yet I managed to grasp the essence—the creation of sculptures—quite quickly, because there’s tremendous know-how at the centre to support the participants. The clocks ticks along, of course—three months pass quickly. But I hadn’t explored the subject before I set off to the .ekwc. For me, there was a challenge in overcoming my fear of the new medium and the white studio. Initially, I sat down at the table with a drawing block, just drawing. The first few days, I didn’t even come near any clay.

M.M. – What about your first experience with clay?

R.D. – When I started making sculptures, I came to realise that working with clay is a very slow process. I made figures with sausages of clay I piled on top of each other. I could only make a few centimetres at the time, lest the sculpture would collapse. The slowness of the process annoyed me. It wasn’t what I was used to: drawing or painting works very quickly! Without giving it much thought, I started making drawings in between. My head was filled with ideas, which I could realise in addition to the sculptures. Ideas grew rank on my drawings. As my stay drew to a close, I realised that the ideas in my drawings were more interesting than the sculptures I had made. In the margin of my work, the CCM, the Centre for Cloning and Manipulation, had emerged.

M.M. – What does CCM stand for?

R.D. – The term grew from my fascination with the pollution of the mind. I was interested in how people—like clay—can be manipulated. Humans are particularly “mouldable”. By analogy with the scientific developments in the field of cloning and the ethical issues involved, I wanted to create a centre where people can be cloned, taking into account specific requirements concerning formal aspects, mental development...

J.B. – The laboratory was named CCM. Had that something to do with the techniques you were using at the time? You were working with mouldable—manipulable—material. Ceramics for that matter is the medium *par excellence* that uses moulds for “reproduction”.

R.D. – Indeed, I was particularly interested in the processual properties of clay. It requires a lot of technique and insight to create a great sculpture. Is there a difference between baking at a temperature of 1,100°C and 1,200°C? I noticed that, depending on the temperature, the colours become less intense or different types of black originate. Clay can also twist or even break during the firing process. To prevent that sort of thing from happening, you have to construct a tent above the clay, to stop it from drying too fast. I made fascinating discoveries by experimenting. I experimented for example with ink, which I injected in the clay. In a later stage, I slowly infused ink in the clay with a drip. In first instance I noticed that I could create something with fired or unfired earth I couldn’t with a drawing or a painting. For example, I had the idea to create *Bomb Children*, a hundred sculptures of children whose head has turned into a bomb. A three-dimensional image—in the whitest porcelain or the blackest black, presented under a glass bell jar—is much stronger than an image that is merely drawn or painted.

J.B. – You developed the laboratory in the .ekwc. It was hidden behind mat transparent plastic, and it was constructed like one normally constructs a painting, i.e. layer by layer.

R.D. – There was a large shelf in my studio which I had covered with plastic. I hung drips between the sculptures to carry out the experiment

with clay and ink. The further I hung the drip from the plastic, the more diffuse the image became. The closer I hung the drip, the more the result resembled a black stain. I put the feed tube from the drip through the plastic, which created an image with lines... For me, the things I did in the studio were really experimental—they were not finished. There was only the beginning of something—the CCM existed mainly on paper. Everything I had tried out in the studio I cleaned up and threw away afterwards. Only the photographs still bear witness to what happened there. What remained was an idea that was never finished.

Second stay at the .ekwc – Winter 2004-2005

M.M. – One year later, you once more submitted an application for a stay at the .ekwc. Was it your specific intention to further develop the CCM?

R.D. – Indeed, it was. When I started work during my second stay, I quite deliberately made another large black sculpture. I knew then that composing this sculpture would vex me, because of the slowness of the medium. To compensate for the slowness, I drew in between, because I knew that this would lead to various new ideas that otherwise would not come up. It became a “method” I could rely on. In a series of twenty drawings, there’s always one that helps you along. That’s how the *Mind Sculpture* originated. The idea had been lurking in my mind for some time, but now it spontaneously resurfaced. I noticed that I continuously drew the same things: the head as a house, towers as an oven, humans as a landscape, the landscape as a human being... In short, time and again these aspects recurred in my drawings.

M.M. – Your method led you astray from the CCM—you explored new grounds. Did you leave the CCM for what it was?

R.D. – At that moment, yes I did. I sensed I had to make choices because time was short. But I certainly didn’t abandon the idea altogether, it was a matter of delay. Four years later I found the appropriate location to construct the lab at Z33 when I started to work on the exhibition.



CCM, Center for Cloning
and Manipulation 2003-2008

But back then, during my second stay at the .ekwc, I was completely occupied by the *Mind Sculptures*, because I sensed there was a tremendous potential in them I had to explore. For example, I thought of creating a *Mind Sculpture* as a “head building”—a construction which one could literally and metaphorically walk around. But my second stay at the .ekwc was about to end, so I couldn’t elaborate the idea. A third application was unlikely to succeed. The centre had already made an exception by allowing me to stay twice within a brief span of time. Normally, there should be two years between the artists’ stays. However, director Koos de Jong proposed that I submit another application, under the heading “combined residency”. In this formula, the artist works together with an

architect. I proposed the idea to Stéphane Beel and Wim Goes. Together we submitted an application, in which we elaborated on how we could realise a “head building”.

M.M. – Why did you choose Beel and Goes to work with?

R.D. – I greatly appreciate their work. I also found it important that both could find themselves in my idea, because in first instance, it was about the realisation of a dream. I considered the “combined residency” the ideal context in which ideas about the main building could develop and mature.

Third stay at the .ekwc – Summer 2007

J.B. – When Ronny proposed to work together with Stéphane Beel and Wim Goes, it seemed important to me to create a framework that allowed this “thought experiment” to take place. More than artists, architects need constraints, from which they create possibilities. I think it’s important that, talking about architecture, one keeps a certain context in mind. Will the main building be realised in an urban or a rural context? How will it be proportioned with regard to the surroundings? To lose as little time as possible (during the short residential stay), I focused on two situations that did not preclude a possible “realisation” of the work. The gravel pits in the Maas valley provided a first real context. The area is prone to flooding and the gravel extraction has strongly violated the landscape. Both these wounds and the landscape itself seemed interesting elements that fit in with Ronny’s work. As a second possibility, I thought of a work of art in a public place, without for that matter linking it to a specific place—the site becomes exchangeable. Usually, I’m rather sceptical with regard to works of art that have not been designed for a specific site, but this seemed a fascinating thought experiment. It involves a way of thinking that is particularly well tuned to the functioning of an art centre like Z33. We do not merely work in, and departing from the site of the beguinage: we also develop activities in the region.

M.M. – For Z33, this was an opportunity to get involved?

J.B. – Ronny and I had had the idea to do something together for a long time, but when this proposal came up, I was convinced right away. The project fits in very well with the vision of Z33: it explores border regions where contemporary and applied art meet. And I was very confident about the collaboration with the architects. Their oeuvre is quite different, but as an architect, in first instance they are also gifted with a feeling for the visual arts. They often work together with artists for that matter. Both of them had been involved in similar projects, which in the end had not been realised. Precisely because of their open-mindedness, I wanted to get involved in the project.

M.M. – How did the collaboration work out?

R.D. – First, we went to have a look at the Maas valley. In the area where the gravel is extracted, you can view the entire site from a height, which right away inspired some interesting ideas. Stéphane proposed to construct the building at a lower level. Because of the occasional flooding of the site, the building, too, would be flooded at times. There are therefore two ways to visit the building. When the site is dry, you simply walk into the building and you look upwards. When the site is flooded, you have to take a boat and row. Then you look down at a building that is filled with water. You see yourself reflected, almost like Narcissus, who admired himself in the water. Stéphane also suggested using red bricks for the building’s basis, which thus becomes a red stain, a wound in the landscape.

M.M. – What ideas turned up for the second option, the work of art in a (changing) public space?

R.D. – Essentially, two ideas turned up. On the one hand, we thought of a movable building, but on the other hand, we were also seriously thinking of building a tower within the walls of the beguinage in Has-selt. I thought it would be interesting to see how the tower—an exotic element—would rise above the walls. As you visit Z33, a road twists through the garden towards the tower. Either you walk in a straight line to the museum, or you choose the twisting road towards the tower... It’s a matter of surrendering control and giving oneself over to the “uncontrollable”. The straight road is not always the most interesting... Before



Mind Sculpture 2003

entering the museum, the visitor undergoes a sort of “cleansing ritual” in the tower. Once you are inside the tower, you are confronted with yourself. Wim noted that in the history of architecture the tower is a symbol of “power”. A tower is a closed stronghold that is hard to take; inside the tower you look down on things beneath. But the way I viewed the tower, it became a portrait. You don’t stand at the top of it, but below, as if you were inside a deep pit. You look up from below, and the only things you can see are the clouds. You enter the main building and you are guided from the dark towards a single spot of light—like in the Pantheon. Darkness as a metaphor for the dead weight we constantly carry along, light as a metaphor for the “essence”, for leaving behind this dead weight. You look up and you just see the clouds and how they

inevitably pass. That represents the transience, the relativity of things, but also time—all aspects that are woven into my work.

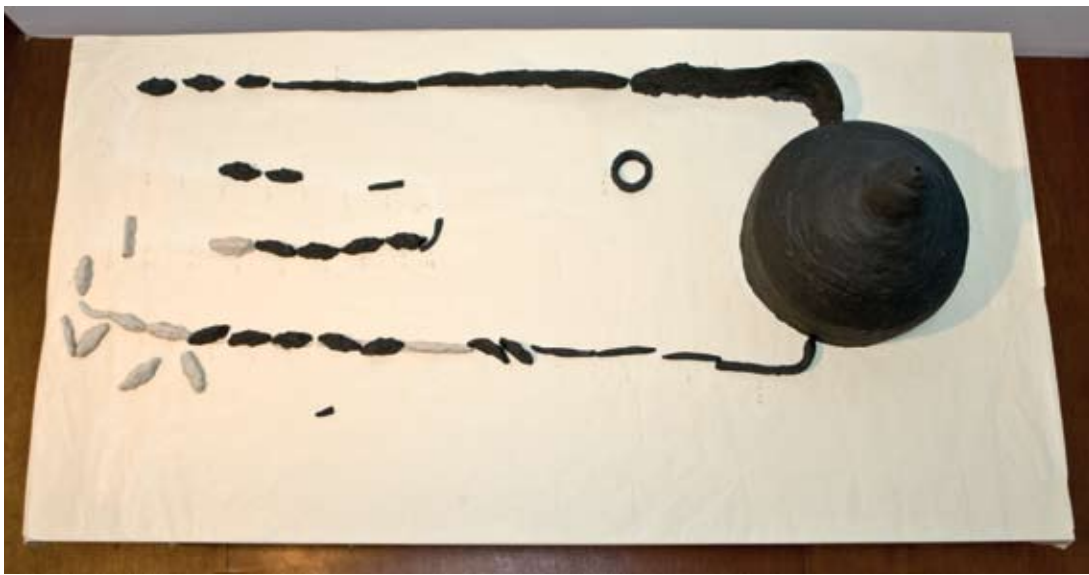
M.M. – After talking to Wim and Stéphane, you went to the .ekwc and set about on the main building. To what extent did the interventions of the architects influence the process?

R.D. – I noticed that at first I made a lot of models of the tower in Z33. But I soon realised that I didn’t want to make models. With the exhibition in the back of my mind, I wanted to make autonomous works of art, *Mind Sculptures*. But there’s an ambiguity involved. Considering the fact that the main buildings could actually be constructed (in a later stage), Stéphane’s and Wim’s influence would of course increase. But at the time, that was a step too far—in first instance, I wanted to create autonomous works of art. The architects joined me; they thought about the various possibilities within the given spatial context. We talked and discussed, but then I returned to my studio all alone. Their architectural ideas doubtlessly influenced my sculptures, just like the sculptures will be the point of departure for the architecture in a next stage. At the exhibition, there is for example a small porcelain tower in a corner. Around the tower, I built a red brick wall. The work is displayed at eye level—at my eye level. From an architectural point of view, it is a very poor wall—some stones are loose, some are twisted—but for me it’s poetry. For this work also has something to tell about the mentality of people who all want their own small garden, wall, tower... It refers to the universal human aspiration for a private fragment of sky.

Also in the exhibition, there’s a black *Mind Sculpture* on a large sheet of paper, with some small red bricks on the floor. I never would have put those bricks there without the conversations with Stéphane. Somehow the two architects have both inspired me to make works, which I otherwise never would have done.

M.M. – You just played with the idea that this “dream” could become reality. Do you have any concrete plans in this respect?

R.D. – It would be particularly fascinating to take the step from autonomous works of art to architecture. In that stage we would have to think



Mind Sculpture 2003

entirely different about the subject. How can we actually realise these *Mind Sculptures* as architectural constructions? How high will the tower be? What material will we use? Could the tower be built with porcelain bricks? Wim had the idea that it would be interesting to construct the porcelain tower in the garden of Z33 and to change only the ground area, i.e. the winding path. The ground area can be transferred to any other site, as long as there's a reference to the "mother tower" in Hasselt... That would turn it into a spiritual sculpture.

J.B. – In Osaka (Japan) Tadao Ando has designed a church, which inspires a similar experience. To reach the entrance, you must first walk down a narrow path. Once you are inside, the eye is guided towards the rear of the choir, where light enters through a large cruciform opening in the concrete wall. The path towards the church is really long; this way, the outside world is gradually cut off and the entry to the church is perceived as something monumental. I think the site of the beguinage in Hasselt can cope well with this sort of intervention.

R.D. – That's something we have to elaborate in a later stage. For the time being, it's something I don't want to go into more deeply. In first instance, it's about a dream that generates certain images.

From stone to film

J.B. – At the exhibition the film *Touching the Earth and the Sky* is screened, which is based on these dream images. What made you take this step towards yet another medium?

R.D. – In my studio in 's-Hertogenbosch a beautiful light enters. It was really wonderful how the sun shone on these porcelain towers. That gave me the idea to make photographs of them. I waited for the right moment—bright sunlight—to photograph the sky from the base of the tower. That's where the image for the exhibition poster came from. I got very beautiful images this way, but it seemed even more interesting to have moving images, so that you could really see the clouds pass. A film would come closer than photographs to the experience of watching the clouds from a head building. It would also add a symbolic dimension. If you let yourself float along with the clouds, if you dare to dream, new images originate that will never appear if you do not open yourself to this movement. If you try to cling to things, nothing new emerges.

M.M. – The final result is an 18-minute film in which the camera slowly skims the architecture of a tower. It's all filmed from very close. Finally the camera focuses on the clouds and all we see is an image of a blue sky with white clouds. How did the realisation of the film come about?

R.D. – I submitted an application with the FLACC (workshop for visual artists) in Genk. Then I went for a fourth stay at the .ekwc to make various versions of the porcelain tower I would use in the film. The filming and editing itself I did in the summer of 2008 in Genk.

J.B. – We mentioned earlier that you're a painter/draughtsman. I notice painterly installations with fired and unfired earth, such as the CCM, which is almost organised like a painting. I notice drawings on the floor, landscapes that guide us towards a tower... But then, I also notice photo-

graphs and videos. It's not your first, big step with these media, yet somehow in this context they are new. Why was a new medium necessary?

R.D. – Personally, I like an “excursion”. I don't like taking things too easy. The first time I went to the .ekwc I had the intention to intensify the content of my work by using this new, unknown medium. When I returned to my own studio afterwards, I sensed that my painting and drawing had been enriched by the encounter with this new medium. Photography and film, too, have influenced my work—and the reflection on my work. To visualize this influence at the exhibition, I have quite deliberately introduced two paintings. The first painting stands on the floor; it is presented with a sheet of paper, also on the floor, a black *Mind Sculpture*, a slat of wood and three small red bricks. The painting has been incorporated in an installation and as such, it loses its status as an autonomous work of art. The second painting hangs in the studio at the exhibition. It is an autonomous work, but formally, it obviously looks like a *Mind Sculpture*.

I'm really curious what the various stays at the .ekwc will produce in the “long run” with regard to my activities as a painter. On the other hand, my work with fired and unfired earth has also been influenced by the fact that in first instance, I'm a painter/draughtsman. I have presented the *Bomb Children* and the CCM in a particularly painterly manner. You can see that in the way I have presented one image behind the other and in the lamp, which creates light and shadow. They're paintings that have not been made with paint, but with porcelain and light.

M.M. – You already mentioned a few times how your working method is characterized by a “controlled uncontrolledness”. This method is first of all expressed in your drawings because of the speed with which drawings can record your thoughts. Ceramics, by contrast, is an almost frustratingly slow medium. Obviously you have no firm grasp on photography and video as a medium. Is it true that this “uncontrolledness” is only possible if you “control” a medium?

R.D. – No, not really. When I started working with fired and unfired earth, I was confronted very strongly with this uncontrolledness. That

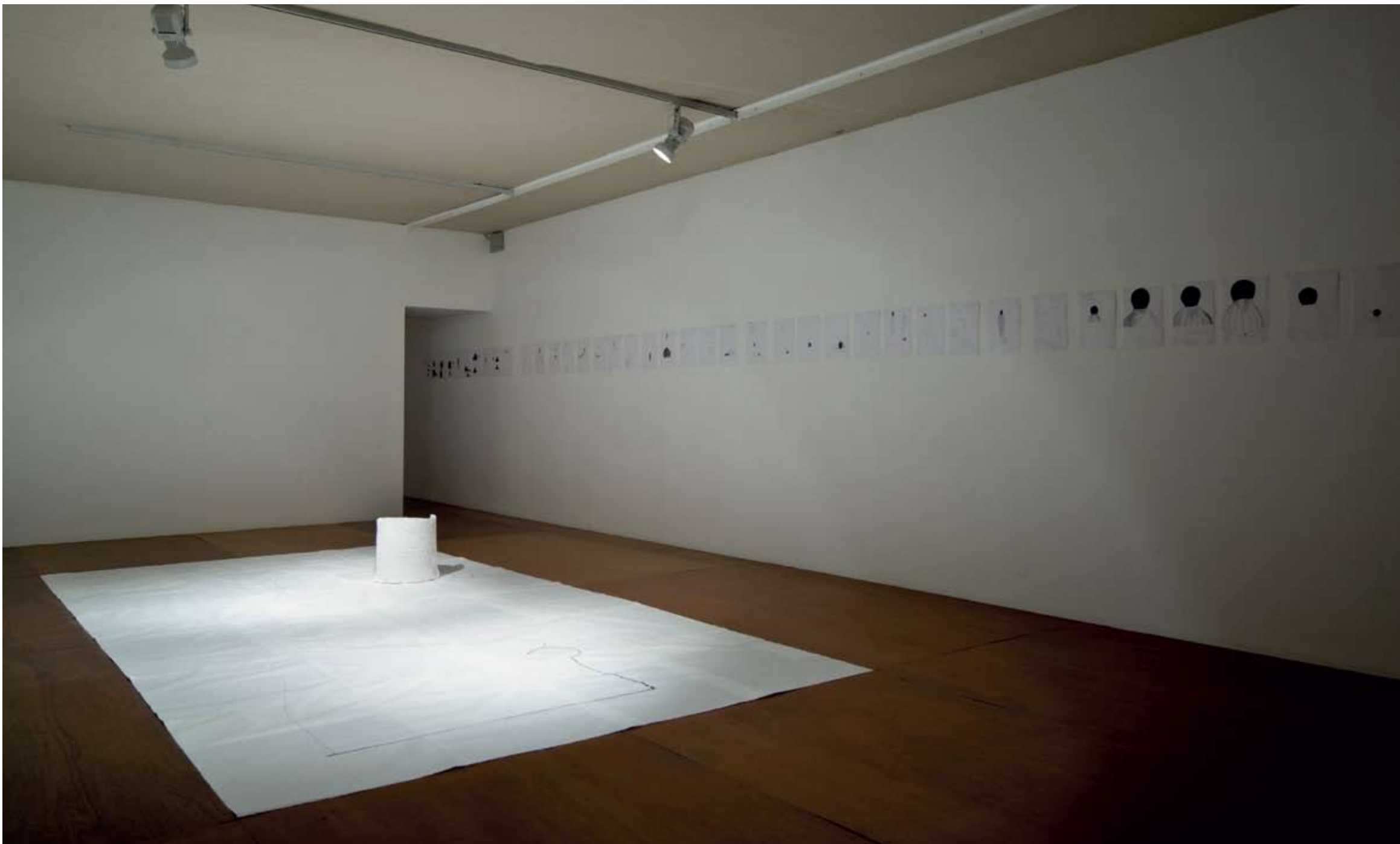
was precisely why I wanted to work with this material. There were real surprises. When I paint, everything happens quickly. There is action and reaction, and that is directly visible on the canvas. But when you put a sculpture in the kiln, you never know how it will come out. Porcelain for example shrinks 17 % when it is fired. That's quite something! The element of surprise resides precisely in the uncontrolledness, which inevitable creeps into your work. Making a film was equally challenging for me because I let someone else handle the camera. I had to let go—I could only give some instructions. Even making a photo print has an element of uncontrolledness for me, because the result is never what I had in mind. Sometimes the photograph is better, sometimes it's worse, but that's something I can live with.

Exhibition Z33 (25.10.2008 – 08.02.2009)

M.M. – You started working on the exhibition on 1 August 2008 and on 25 October 2008 *Touching the Earth and the Sky* opened. In fact, this period of three months are like a fifth “working visit” that follows the four preceding stays at the .ekwc.

R.D. – Usually you don't get that much time to work on an exhibition and you have to decide quickly what works should be hung where. In the course of the years, I have become quite good at hanging works and I can see how certain works can function in an exhibition space. As in this instance I had three months time, this became part of the research project. I got a key at Z33 so I could enter whenever I wanted. When I wanted to work during weekends, I simply did. I had the time to try out things and to discard them if I found them wanting. Like this, the exhibition could develop into an overall concept.

J.B. – I find it very special how you managed to present it like that. The exhibition architecture is very specific, with a series of small spaces that are linked and constitute a coherent whole. How reasoned or “un-reasoned” did the exhibition come about within the particular spatial context?



R.D. – It was particularly well-reasoned. I knew from the start that I wanted to create a studio where I could work and I knew in which room the studio would be housed. In the course of these three months, I also incorporated a strict control mechanism. For each room I had set a date when the hanging had to be finished. I always had the dates in the back of my mind. Like that, I knew the exhibition would be ready three days before the opening. There was of course also an element of well-reasonedness in the framework *From Line to Stone*: five years during which I made objects in fired and unfired earth. But how I would show this material in the available rooms, I didn't know in advance. This is where the "uncontrolledness" comes in. There was the difficult exhibition space without windows and with a very prominent floor, which obliged me to let the exhibition develop from the specificity of each room.

M.M. – In the first room the film *Touching the Earth and the Sky* (2008) is screened. When did you know that the original aim—the creation of *From Line to Stone*—would be extended from line to film?

R.D. – It was only after I had submitted my application to the IvOK that I decided to make the film. In my first application, I didn't mention anything about making a film. When in August I started working on the exhibition, I was also working in the FLACC. I had no idea whether the film would work out, but yet I thought about how it could be integrated and what alternatives there were if the film went wrong.

J.B. – One of the alternatives was closing this door...

R.D. – Yes, but I wanted the public to be able to partake of the "experience" all the same, either through a film or through a slide show that imparted the suggestion of moving clouds. I thought it was precisely fascinating that by showing the film, I imposed a perspective on the public that compelled them to look upwards from below. In the second room, I wanted to turn this perspective around, so that you would look down from above, as if it were from a plane. In this room there is a porcelain tower in a landscape that is made with large sheets of Japanese paper—the size of a floor tile. The sheets partially cover each other, like a patchwork with parts that are transparent and parts where one sheet hides the other.

On the landscape, I have drawn dotted lines that lead to the tower and converge at the base. With the lines, I want to guide the eye of the public towards the tower. I want people to look inside the tower, and in doing so, I almost force them to step onto the paper and damage it.

M.M. – There is the *Mind Sculpture* in the landscape, but there are also two of the four walls that are covered with drawings. The earliest drawing dates from 2003 and was made during your first stay at the .ekwc.

R.D. – In this instance, too, I thought the double line was quite interesting. As you enter the room, you are confronted with the most recent work (the *Mind Sculpture* on the paper landscape), which is linked to the earliest work.

M.M. – The drawings in the second room are not original drawings: they are photocopies. Why don't you show the originals?

R.D. – At first, I wanted to make a time chart with drawings arranged from the earliest to the most recent. When I started to hang the original drawings, I felt that the installation in the room was dominated too strongly by the noise of the drawings. By photocopying them, I was able to filter out the materiality of the paper and the drawing—all sheets now had the same colour, texture and size. The whole looked more quiet. I gave the drawings the title "thought exercises". In this way, I could hang scribbled notes between them, without giving the title of "drawings". When you take a close look, you will notice that some copies are too light and I added lines with pencil. So basically what you see are photocopies of drawings, onto which sometimes I have drawn once more... This confusion, the layeredness was quite interesting. It is a layeredness that is woven into all aspects of the exhibition.

J.B. – This doubt is ubiquitous at the exhibition. High, low, old, new, from top to bottom, retouching, model, real, fake... The doubt is present in every installation, can be sensed in every room. There are constantly different plots, which finally all together tell us what has happened.

R.D. – I don't like things that are "perfect". If something is perfect, it's "complete" and for me, things are never complete. In the third room for example, I sensed that I couldn't hang anything on the wall, not even pho-

tocopies. I wanted to focus on one particular work in this room, the *Unbearably Beautiful Landscape*. There are two more sculptures in this room, but this landscape is overexposed, leaving the other works in the shadow. With hindsight, I realize that I should have darkened the room entirely, to emphasize the overexposure. Looking at the work should hurt the eyes. Initially, I wasn't thinking of an "unbearably" beautiful landscape, but of a "dangerously beautiful" one. In the .ekwc, I had fired porcelain dust at a temperature of 1,250°C. The result was a pile of small razor-sharp knives. It would be quite perilous to walk on them. Firing the dust had turned it into wonderfully sparkling objects. At first I wanted to make a landscape with them, but the objects didn't sparkle on the ground. I tried to put them on a slab, but I sensed the work would only come out well if I could blow it up to monumental proportions. But in that case I would need a truckload full of dust—fifty kilograms wouldn't be nearly enough. I would like to create this *Dangerously Beautiful Landscape* when the occasion arises, but at this exhibition I merely retained the platform, the size of a floor slab. It is as if the landscape hovers over the floor, supported by its own shadow. It is an *Unbearably Beautiful Landscape*.

J.B. – You just mentioned that the use of fired and unfired earth has influenced your oeuvre. To illustrate the point, you integrated two paintings in the exhibition. Did you know from the start you would do so? Were they delivered together with all the other materials early in August?

R.D. – No, I decided that afterwards. I mentioned already I initially wanted my drawings to move through the rooms like a snake. Finally I decided to substitute the drawings with photocopies. But at a certain moment, I thought of selecting six original drawings anyway. I wanted to frame them as autonomous works of art and hang them. But in the end, I decided not to use drawings, but to integrate the two paintings. In the fourth room I put the large canvas on the floor, because I found it interesting that the *Mind Sculpture* would infiltrate the painting. The small painting refers to the studio as a place to think—as the core, the heart of the entire exhibition.



Unbearably Beautiful
Landscape 2007-2008

M.M. – You already mentioned that the cooperation with the architects also influenced your sculptures to a certain extent—I'm thinking of the small red bricks for example... In the drawings that are hung in the room the influence is obvious, both with regard to the drawings themselves and the way they were hung in the room. You didn't hang them "in a line": they form an array—this is a more "spatial" approach.

R.D. – These drawings are the result of a mental process that focused on a specific location. But because of the cooperation with the architects, I also started to think more spatially. I started to think differently—perhaps unconsciously—about how to set up an exhibition. Not only the walls, but also the ceiling and the floor started to play a part.

J.B. – Indeed, I see an evolution from two to three dimensions. To the extent that this exhibition has introduced a change in your thinking, it is quite visible in the way you quite consciously play with space.

R.D. – That is correct. If I look at the exhibition now, I think that in a next stage it would be interesting to draw the space. As I already suggested, I wouldn't even need the tower to draw the landscape. The drawing can extend beyond a floor tile and cover the entire floor and even continue on the walls and the ceiling... The room as a white box in which the dotted lines constitute the drawing, through which you wander not only with your feet, but also with your eyes. You follow the dots with your eyes, but the dots no longer take you to a tower, but into nothingness... In first instance to show that a work is never finished. Even if the exhibition has got a definite shape, it still inspires me to think about new works or other ways to highlight things.

M.M. – As you set about the exhibition, the fifth room was equipped as a studio. In this room, the entire work and thought process started. Now your most recent drawings hang here, illustrating the construction of the exhibition room after room. We also see a table with *Bomb Children* under a glass bell jar and a PowerPoint presentation with photographs that illustrate the entire process between 2003 and 2008...

R.D. – The studio was the think tank where every now and then I could lose myself in thought and let ideas enter my mind... The PowerPoint presentation illustrates a three-month mental exercise that turned the studio itself into an installation. At first the exhibition was supposed to stop in this last room, the studio, but at a certain moment, someone from the technical department told me that I could use the adjacent rooms to store boxes and things I no longer needed. When I saw the staircase and the passageway, I knew at once that this was the perfect space for the laboratory I wanted to install since my first stay at the .ekwc.

J.B. – By opening this one door, suddenly a tremendous amount of possibilities were created. Yet you were uncertain about this development, precisely because it hadn't been planned...

R.D. – I certainly wanted to try, but I kept the option open to close the



Mind Sculpture 2004-2005

door if things didn't work out. With the CCM, suddenly the exhibition increased to a size we hadn't intended at first. Initially the exhibition would focus on the research project with fired and unfired earth, more specifically on the *Mind Sculptures* and head buildings. The chronology of this story ends in 2007. But during my third stay at the .ekwc, I met Zhifei, an .ekwc assistant who helped me to create a part of the CCM. While I worked on the towers, she was busy producing *Bomb Children*. In all, she produced some one hundred and fifty of them. The sculptures then stood waiting in my studio till I would realize the laboratory. When I saw this new space, I knew I would be able to use them there.

J.B. – So there was a small, medium and large version of the exhibition. In the first room, you presented a video—or rather, something that

eventually has turned into a video—and in the back room, you added the CCM. You could choose not to show both the first and the last room. You could simply leave both doors closed. But then, at a certain moment, you decided to show everything, to leave all doors open. With hindsight, do you still think that the studio is at the right place? In first instance, this room was intended to be the last one, where the visitor gets to know where it all started...

R.D. – I think the studio is perfect as it is now. You enter the exhibition and the first thing you see is the most recent work, the video. What follows is the entire research project that came first. Finally, the exhibition ends in the studio where the research for the exhibition took place. In the studio there is both early and more recent work. In 2003 the CCM was founded, but the *Bomb Children* weren't made until 2007. The installation with the *Bomb Children* under the glass bell jars in the studio dates from 2008. The final destination I intend for these sculptures—I want to export them worldwide and introduce them as “Saints” in the living room of people—came up only in recent research. In a corner of the studio, there is a sculpture in a plastic pot with foam, also covered with a glass bell jar. This is the “mother sculpture” from which all other *Bomb Children* were cloned. That's also why it's 17 % larger than the other sculptures. Zhifei has helped me to make that first sculpture. But when we removed it from the mould, it was broken. Zhifei was able to repair it, and then, to protect it, she put it in the plastic pot with foam. I thought this was an incredibly poetical gesture, and that's why I have put it under a glass bell jar and gave it a central place in the studio. This mother sculpture gave me also the idea to present some *Bomb Children* on a table. I took the sculptures from the CCM, so I could show that both the studio and the installation with glass bell jars comprise the most recent works. The studio is certainly situated in the right place, precisely because it represents past, present and future. The studio is a place of shifts.

J.B. – What do you mean with “shift”?

R.D. – The studio is a place where I hang around a lot and where I can put things in a different context. The glass bell jars are now on a table,

but it would be equally possible to place them on the ground, making them part of a landscape. The exhibition is ready, but the result also represents a point of departure for something else: because of the time span the exhibition is on view, I have the time to engage in a new confrontation with the sculptures and everything can further evolve. “Time” is something we hardly have nowadays. I was given the time to “make”, “present” and “cogitate” the work. That is probably the essence of the exhibition: because of the “time” element, it has acquired a reflective character. The research character that is typical of this exhibition, has become an installation—the exhibition itself has turned into a *Mind Sculpture*.

M.M. – In the left corner of the studio, there's a television on the ground, with a screen turned toward the wall. The viewer must therefore do an effort to watch the film—an early work. On the screen, we see a self-portrait with your head in a large ball. How did the film get into this exhibition?

R.D. – The video dates from 1997; I gave it the title *27-07-1997*. It took me four years to complete, because I wasn't used to the medium and I had to seek advice from other people. For me, it is a very intimate work. In the video, my head is inside a clay sphere—a pile of brains on the table. I constantly try to lift the clay sphere with my head, which is impossible, because the thing is too heavy. But as long as my head moves, the stone moves too. For me, this work represents a reflection on the concept of the exhibition. If everything were clearly defined, there wouldn't be any movement, and that is precisely what I've tried to avoid with this exhibition. I wanted to be able to question everything time and again.

M.M. – Why make it difficult to watch the video?

R.D. – Precisely because it's such a personal work, and because the artist's studio is a very intimate place. Initially, I didn't want to open the studio for the public. I had a small wall built, so that people could look inside from a distance. But the window looked like a flat screen from this distance and I also wanted people to be able to sit down at



27-07-1997 1997-2001

my work desk. So I decided to open the studio for the public and make the video work less accessible. I put the screen in the corner, against the wall, so that the public has to make an effort and watch the film in a distorted pose.

J.B. – There are three videos on view at the exhibition. First of all there's *Touching the Earth and the Sky*, secondly a video-interview with a brief explanation by you about the exhibition and the research project. Thirdly there's *27-07-1997*. Then you have the PowerPoint presentation in the studio with an outline of what preceded the exhibition. You could view *Touching the Earth and the Sky* as an architectural film or as a documentary. The PowerPoint presentation, too, has something of a documentary. Does that tune in with the whole? Was it necessary to show it?

R.D. – I found it important that I would illustrate my way of going about things. For me, the PowerPoint presentation is not some “didactic extra”: it's an autonomous entity. It illustrates how thinking becomes something autonomous that is expressed visually. If you walk through the exhibition, it's as if you walk through a way of thinking.

J.B. – Isn't it rather a way of “working” instead of a way of thinking?

R.D. – It is, but the way of working is determined by the way of thinking. I develop things, because I think about them. I also found the PowerPoint important, because it demonstrates how images can be manipulated and how they often deceive the public. When you watch the film *Touching the Earth and the Sky*, you cannot possibly know where it has been filmed. There aren't any clues about size or place. There aren't any references at all. As you enter the next room, you see a small porcelain tower. The observant spectator will maybe wonder whether this is the tower I use in the film, but actually, I have used four different towers, which becomes clear in the PowerPoint. In it, you also see how small the tower is. I wanted to afford the spectator this glance behind the scene...

J.B. – Making the film, you could have chosen to present the walk towards and the tour inside the tower in a very documentary style. In the end, you chose for an “experience-oriented” style of filming. You pass the experience the film comprises to the viewer—a particularly well-defined choice.

R.D. – The experience transcends the tower. For example, we doubted for a long time whether we would add credit titles at the end of the film. In the end we didn't, which leaves the film without beginning or end. The public walks in and sees for example the end of the film, some clouds passing by. If you don't watch any further, you miss the essence of the film. It's the intention that you are able to dream away watching this sort of film, though I'm quite aware that not every viewer does. But credit titles at the end of the film may wake up the dreamers among the public, and I didn't want that. Another option was including a timetable with the hours when the film would start, but in the end we opted not to do that. Now you can choose whether you submerge yourself in the images or not.

M.M. – You frequently referred to the fact that the exhibition is very “controlled”, but the public has a different impression. It tries to find a certain *leitmotif*, a plot, which is nearly impossible, because there are so many collateral stories. For example, looking at the thought exercises, you seek to follow the thought process and discover its logic. As that is impossible, it seems to me we’d better let in the “uncontrolledness”, because then in the end, we can “understand” the whole.

J.B. – That seems a fair analysis to me. You could choose between two exhibitions, either a didactic exhibition, or the exhibition as it is now. Most research projects are presented in a very didactic manner. You could have done so too, by presenting for example in the first room the material of your first stay at the .ekwc, in the second the material of your second stay, in the third everything pertaining the “combined residence”, the FLACC episode in the fourth... But precisely because the plots are interwoven, we have created a particularly “immersive” exhibition, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an all-embracing work of art. Maybe that is why it’s not a typical exhibition for a typical public—it has become a gigantic *Mind Sculpture*. You enter, immerse yourself and you are carried away. You have to walk around, stray and lose yourself to become absorbed by the work. That’s what constitutes the strength of the exhibition in my view. There’s incessantly the heartbeat of form and content. From your first stay at the .ekwc, you have followed a line from which you have never deviated. Along the way, you have never lost yourself in the various materials, but you have used them to create “meaning”. The exhibition is as it should be—it relates in the right way to the architecture, but also to the artist Ronny Delrue. It is anchored in your own work. If you had turned it into a didactic exhibition, you never would have caught this “controlled uncontrolledness”.

M.M. – There’s one didactic extra: the explanatory video at the start of the exhibition, which the public can “potentially” watch.

J.B. – There are a lot of visitors who don’t read the accompanying text or watch the video right away, as they enter. They simply walk through the exhibition, in first instance seeking an emotional experience. Even

without this additional information, they experience the exhibition as an all-embracing installation. For example, they refer to the anxiety and loneliness with which they associate the *Mind Sculptures* and thought exercises. When you hear that sort of thing, you know, you have achieved your goal. I think that the public feels every emotion the artist has put in his work—think for example of the rather frightening Bomb Children. In other words, there is no need for an explicit didacticism. It’s not about the chronology, not about “facts and figures”, but about emotion and experience.

R.D. – Indeed, this open interpretation is really important. If people tell me that they feel “locked up” as they watch the film, or that they are overwhelmed by a sense of discomfort, I can only say that I haven’t intended it to be “oppressive”. For me, the walk towards the tower is central, the act of watching the clouds that pass and never return. For me, that is something “positive”, because it enables our mind to cast off the dead weight that burdens it.



CCM, Center for Cloning
and Manipulation 2003-2008

Ronny Delrue and the .ekwc:

A Mutual Discovery

Four times already the Belgian artist Ronny Delrue has spent a working stay at the European Ceramic Work Centre (.ekwc). This is really exceptional, for it is the .ekwc's policy not to admit artists more than twice for a working stay at the centre. The fact that Delrue largely exceeded this limit has to do with the significance of his artistic research.

In 1991 the .ekwc was set up in 's-Hertogenbosch. It is an international studio where ceramicists, visual artists, designers and since 2005 also architects can experiment with ceramics. Their research is not limited to the artistic and technical potential of ceramics, but also concerns its presentation. The knowledge that is acquired in the process is then spread to as wide a public as possible. The aim of the centre is to promote the development of ceramic techniques. To achieve this goal, the centre annually provides accommodation and a studio to some fifty people, who are assisted by a team of specialised staff. For three months, uninterrupted or split into shorter periods, the participants can experiment in their studio with ceramic techniques. What makes the centre unique in the world is the fact that it not only provides accommodation, working space and equipment, but also a large team of specialised staff. They guide and advise the participants, so that these are able to realise their ideas themselves. Because of this interactive process, in which participants and assistants continually learn from each other, it is possible to attract also people like Ronny Delrue, who had no knowledge of ceramic techniques or previous experience with the medium.

From the very beginning the centre attracted not only ceramicists, but also visual artists. Near the end of the 1990s, some designers were invited, and in 2005 the centre also opened its doors for architects. In the coming years, the centre will extend its activities to the realm of digital

techniques by opening a CAD/CAM studio. Because in addition to its artist-in-residence function, the centre also serves as a centre-of-excellence with regard to ceramics, the results of the artistic and technical research projects are always published in English.

The cooperation with Ronny Delrue and the .ekwc dates from 2003, when the artist was invited by the centre for his first three-month stay. He experimented with fired and unfired clay—at that time an unfamiliar medium for him—with which he captured the organic process of life and death in an laboratory-like installation. Delrue documented the work with an almost scientific accuracy, as can be inferred from drawings in his diary, which he continued to keep during his stay at the .ekwc.

During a second stay in 2004-2005 the experiment continued with a more sculptural ceramic approach of the physical and psychological aspects of the human body, resulting in the so-called *Mind Sculptures*. In these, the artist not only refers to the theme of body and mind, but there is also a three-dimensional aspect. With a symbolic opening in the crown of the skull, the artist creates a literal and figurative link between inside and outside. Characteristic of Delrue's visual art is that it always focuses on the essence of things. Figurative details are usually avoided. The human figure is only outlined, with a focus on the physical mass and the psychological overtones that almost become tangible in it. I deliberately use the term "visual arts" here because Delrue's approach in this context is not different from the way he approaches a drawing or painting. The images Delrue draws, paints or models, are therefore in a certain sense like after-images the retina retains. During this stay, the artist also experiments with the relation between the human figure and architecture. Like in his human figures, he focuses in these architectural sculptures on the experience of inside and outside. Another analogy between humans and architecture concerns the combination of hardware and software, in the sense that humans are defined by body and mind, while the architect defines an immaterial space with material floors, walls and roofs. As such, the step from the human figure to architecture is quite understandable.



Mind Sculpture 2008

From these developments, it can be inferred that Ronny Delrue's participation in the long-term .ekwc project *Ceramics and Architecture* (2005-2009) became almost obvious.

In 2006 the international selection commission chose the three-man team Ronny Delrue, professor/architect Stéphane Beel and architect Wim Goes to participate in the project "combined residencies". In short, the team's proposal boiled down to the idea that Delrue's *Mind Sculptures* would be the point of departure for two buildings. Essentially the proposal involves a parallel between the storing of recollections in the human memory and the way in which spaces in a building are defined. During the summer of 2007 and during a somewhat shorter period in 2008 Delrue used his third and fourth stay at the .ekwc to

elaborate both ideas in close cooperation with the artists. This resulted in the creation of model-like sculptural buildings in the .ekwc.

In the course of his third stay at the .ekwc, Delrue also explored an entirely different issue. Bearing witness to this is a series of ceramic sculptures entitled *Bomb Children*, which the artist prefers to show under a glass bell jar. According to Delrue, he was inspired for these works by the countless suicide actions of Palestinian men and women who blew up themselves in Israeli occupied territory with explosives hidden under their clothes, in order to make as many casualties as possible and draw attention to their political case. With this series, the artist expressed his great concern about the fate of children who are born only to die violently as a walking bomb. Yet this will probably not have been the only motive to create this series, for its creation coincided with the birth of a son. It is particularly remarkable and also hopeful that an artist who quite explicitly and at great length dwells on issues of life and death, body and mind, memory and amnesia, and whose work undeniably has a certain melancholy about it, in the end chooses for new life. For most mortals, there is only one way to live on after death, namely through their children. Artists belong to a select group of people who live on through their work. Delrue has chosen both.

Koos de Jong, director .ekwc

March 2009



A conversation with Wim Goes

Mieke Mels (M.M.) – You were invited by Ronny Delrue to join the combined residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre, together with Stéphane Beel, on the occasion of his research project about fired and unfired earth. The cooperation focussed in first instance on the concept of the head building as a Mind Sculpture, a tower in which the public can walk around. Once you are inside, you are confronted with simply a well-defined fragment of sky. Jan Boelen essentially created a mental framework: two concrete spatial situations, comprising the gravel pits in the Maas valley and an undefined (i.e. interchangeable) site in a public place. How did you set about this issue?

Wim Goes (W.G.) – The three of us started with visiting the gravel pits. In my view, these are “cultural” shapes, created in nature. It’s really a wonderful area.

M.M. – You focused mainly on the mobile aspect of the Mind Sculpture, while Stéphane concentrated on the flooding aspect.

W.G. – Indeed, this division grew spontaneously. Together with Ronny, I reflected on the element of “placelessness”. Initially we basically discussed about the “mobile” character of the Mind Sculpture, but then we started to think about “placelessness”. That became rather a mental instead of a mechanical element, for the placelessness refers to the “archetype” of the tower. Within the history of architecture, the tower has always had its “position”. It is like a beacon in the landscape, but as you stand on the tower, you also get a view of the surrounding area. That implies a balance of power. Essentially, two positions are possible: either you stand on top of the tower, or you stand below. Geert Bekaert once said that architecture vanishes in that which it causes to be present. I think that is very beautifully said. Architecture redeems this expectation. Art needn’t do that. As you look at Ronny’s tower, you notice that this balance of power is not defined—contrary to what one would expect.

M.M. – The tower, as Ronny has designed it, does not provide us an opportunity to climb to a higher level. Isn’t that an essential characteristic of towers?

W.G. – Indeed, that is the first thing the public is robbed of: it cannot oversee the landscape. What remains is a framed fragment of sky that is without any reference to scale—references that are supposed to make sure that the architecture remains human. Because of the “scalelessness”, the visitor only confronts himself or herself. I think that this aspect also comprises the “mobility” of the work. This placelessness represents the impossibility to capture the framed fragment as a human soul. Because of that, the confrontation with the work of art is almost inhuman. The work of art is more inside the human beholder than in the sculpture. The person who has seen the work, carries it with him or her, and thus it remains placeless.

M.M. – As your stay at the .ekwc progressed, the placelessness was replaced by a particularly concrete spatial context, namely the site of the beguinage in Hasselt, where Z33 is housed.

W.G. – Indeed, we have evolved towards a “real” context, but in my view that should not be considered the core of our research project. The significance of our cooperation resides first and foremost in the “thinking about” the work, not in its materiality. In first instance, we have thought about what a Mind Sculpture could be: a building, a sculpture, a plinth? I think we focus on the specific cooperation between artist and architect and its meaning with regard to both the work of art and the architecture.

M.M. – In October 2008 Ronny Delrue organised the symposium “From line to stone: the interaction between free and applied”, where you were one of the guest speakers. On that occasion you focused in first instance on the relation between artist and architect.

W.G. – I wanted to highlight the relation between both disciplines and I did so by referring to my current cooperation between Kris Martin, and myself and to the question with which Ronny confronted me. In case of Kris Martin, architecture is the “medium”, and as an architect I create a design that refers to an idea that belongs to the artist. Because of the idea, it is a work of art, but because of the medium, it is architecture. Both my coop-

eration with Ronny and with Kris will finally result in a work of art, but the difference is this: as a sculptor Ronny has designed the work himself. Kris has handed me an idea and a basic shape. I use these to create architecture. However, Ronny, urged by a personal quest for a “shape”, goes much further in his activity of designing—to the extent that one could wonder whether in this instance the architect’s position is reduced, notwithstanding that the architect is supposed to think about a possible construction... But I think personally that in our cooperation we went further, and in that sense the position of the work of art has remained central.

M.M. – During his stay at the .ekwc, Ronny noticed that initially he started to make architectural models, or at least he had a tendency to do so. But soon he realised that could not be the intention and that, as an artist, he had to create an autonomous sculpture. He interiorised the ideas that emerged from your discussions, and incorporated them in sculptures and drawings that bear his sole signature.

W.G. – I think this confusion has to do with a misconception with regard to the “crossover” the .ekwc seeks to achieve with the combined residencies. The concept of crossover is very vague; it is more antithetic than synthetic. I think that the conversations between Stéphane Beel and myself in first instance resulted in a deepening of his position as an artist. How we view art, how we view architecture... it has all played a part in our society.

M.M. – When is something architecture and when is something art?

W.G. – There is doubtlessly a certain tension between both and about this issue many books have been written. There is even a special terminology theoreticians use to describe relationships of this kind. But as an architect, it is not the sort of thinking I should get involved with. It is not up to me to decide what is art and what is architecture. I leave that to other people. I relate to architecture, because it provides the simplest interpretation of what I’m busy with. When I work with an artist, outsiders usually label the result as “art”. When a project relates more to architecture, the questions about this area of tension can only be answered departing from well-defined references that themselves are anchored in ideas about art or urban planning...



Mind Sculpture 2007

M.M. – The interpretation of this sort of joint undertaking probably rarely tallies with the experience itself?

W.G. – Quite so. You could for example reduce the artist to someone who creates architectural models. But Ronny notice that it’s not about that, because that would erode his autonomy. On the other hand, reducing the architect’s part to the merely “making” of a construction is equally wrong. What it’s about is the experiment, the search for how to approach matter. Thanks to the combined residency for example, Ronny has started to look at things in a different way. Ronny is more of a draughtsman than a sculptor, so for him, too, the research project involved an inquiry into what it “means” to end up with a certain design.

23 February 2009

A conversation with Stéphane Beel

Mieke Mels (M.M.) – In 2007 you participated in a combined residency with Ronny Delrue and Wim Goes at the .ekwc. The aim was to reflect on the realisation of a *Mind Sculpture* in a real landscape. The cooperation started with a visit to the gravel pits in the Maas valley?

Stéphane Beel (S.B.) – We had discussed things before this trip. Ronny had shown me various sculptures and drawings and I had made a few sketches myself. The rural aspect of the region of the gravel extraction region, but also the combination with a ceramic—a fired—object, seemed a wonderful point of departure. Once I made a series of drawings in which I looked for a specific architecture within a certain landscape. This series was entitled *The Love Nest* and somehow for me there were parallels with this project.

M.M. – According to you, and bearing in mind Ronny’s sculptures and drawings, is this a suitable combination: Ronny’s *Mind Sculpture* and the landscape with the gravel pits?

S.B. – The combination is wonderful, but I think also very bizarre, precisely because it conveys such intensity. In my view, an architectural construction should make two opposite movements in the landscape. It should both belong in the landscape and it should be alien to it. If it has only an alienating effect, it will be uninteresting, for it will not invite reaction. But the reverse is equally true: the architecture will not be interesting if it entirely belongs in the landscape. In this instance, you can feel this tension...

M.M. – The gravel landscape as such has an equally alienating effect, because it is so heavily damaged. The extraction of gravel has erased all natural aspects of the landscape.

S.B. – What’s a natural landscape? Do natural landscapes still exist? With our intervention, we create a landscape that is “man-made”. Just as with gravel extraction, we mould the landscape and with the material

provided by the gravel extraction we will turn it into a landscape that is ours. Our intervention comprises three aspects: we create a *Mind Sculpture*, the landscape is being transformed, and a relation between the two results.

M.M. – And then there’s the spectator, who can engage in a relationship with the whole in various ways. The area can be dry, or it can be flooded. In that case you have to approach the sculpture differently.

S.B. – I precisely proposed these two different approaches because of the different experiences they involve. As you visit the *Mind Sculpture* the first time, you will experience it in a way that excludes the other experience. As you enter the sculpture when the weather is dry, you experience an “oppressive” feeling because you have to pass through a narrow corridor. But as you approach the sculpture with a boat, there is on the contrary a sense of “space” instead of “oppressiveness”.

M.M. – This idea has doubtlessly influenced how to find the right site for the sculpture in the landscape. For example, you proposed to build the *Mind Sculpture* on a low-lying site in the landscape, to take greater advantage of the floods.

S.B. – I want to dig out a piece of the site, mould it to accommodate the sculpture. I don’t want to simply take a fragment of the landscape—I want to create a sort of sanctuary. Within this “unnatural” landscape—which has at the same time a touch of naturalness about it—we create another landscape with the same materials. For the platform on which the *Mind Sculpture* is built, a different material could be used.

M.M. – At the exhibition a *Mind Sculpture* has been incorporated in an installation that also comprises a painting, a strip of wood and a few miniature red bricks. The reds bricks allegedly refer to the idea to construct the platform with red bricks. Is that correct?

S.B. – Brick is an obvious choice, because it is simply another sort of “ceramic” material. Like the *Mind Sculpture*, it is also made of fired clay. The sculpture should also be rather monumental. If it’s built in the wrong spot, it will disappear in the surroundings. The red volume on which the *Mind Sculpture* is built will accentuate the cut in the hilly landscape.

M.M. – During the combined residency the three of you in first instance pondered about the realisation of a dream, and your conversations hovered somewhere between dream and reality. How did you manage to walk the thin line between these?

S.B. – There was indeed a dividing line, because Ronny had already created the *Mind Sculpture*. However, with regard to my own work, I always ask the various partners who participate in the construction process—the client, technicians and engineers—that they leave their own domain. That is precisely what happened in this instance. Ronny set foot on my domain, and I did on his. I didn't want to change the shape of the *Mind Sculpture*, but there were elements that we could add—not literally, but in our mind—to make the whole more powerful. I'm thinking in first instance of the “transformation” of the landscape, i.e. we wanted to put the *Mind Sculpture* in surroundings that makes the whole more powerful.

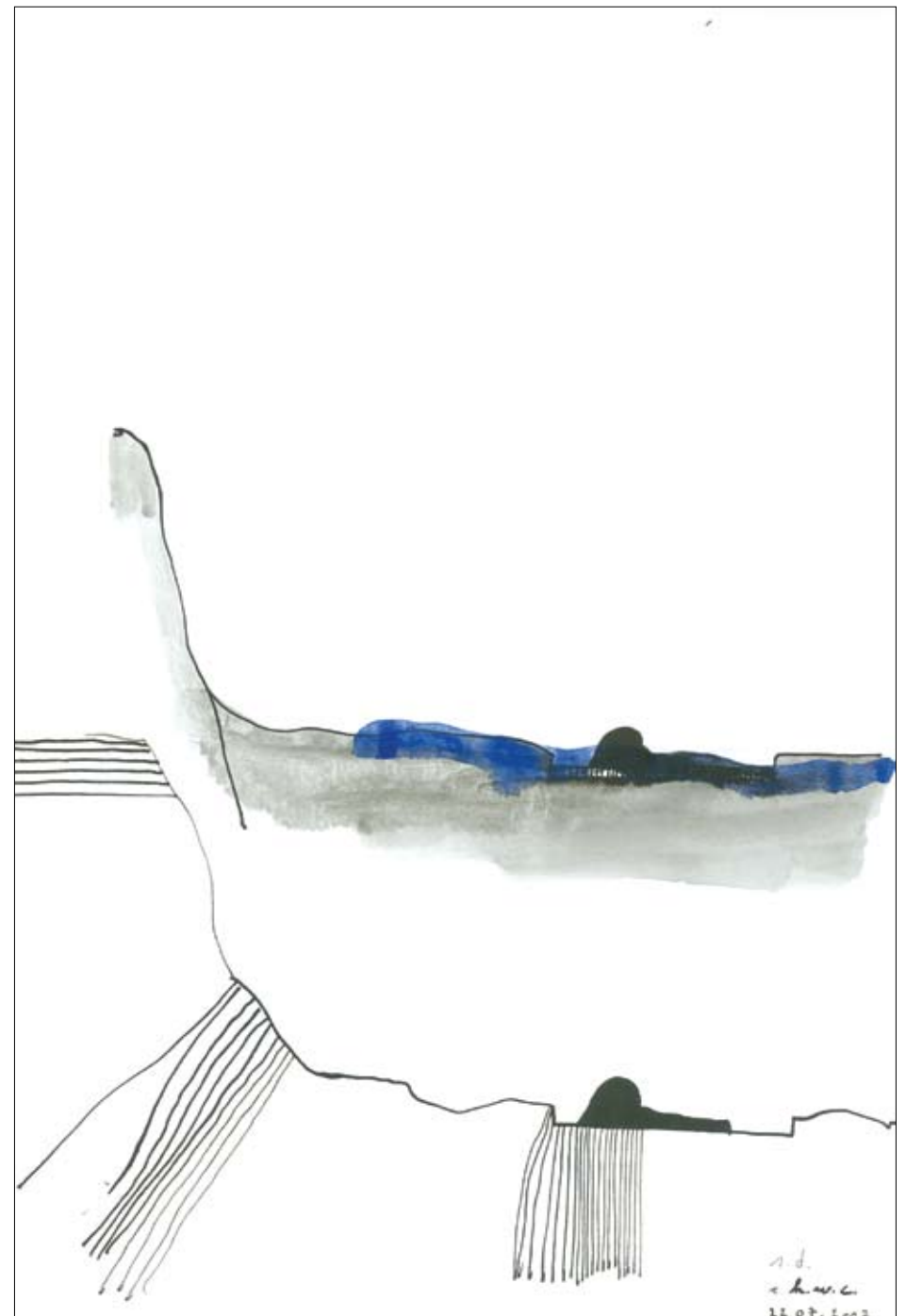
M.M. – Does the *Mind Sculpture* remain a sculpture if you create something monumental in the Maas valley?

S.B. – It will clearly remain a sculpture, yet there will be an architectural element about it too.

M.M. – Because of this cooperation Ronny as an artist has started to think and work more in three dimensions. That can be seen for example in the way the exhibition was set up...

S.B. – That is quite possible. His inviting us for this joint venture also involved a natural evolution in his thinking. He approached us, and therefore he was involved already in an intuitive manner in exploring the architectural component of his work. The three-dimensional aspect was already there in his thinking, but I presume it became more intense because of this cooperation.

27 February 2009



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Contributors

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(1967, Genk) graduated as a product designer at the Media and Design Academy in Genk. He is now artistic leader at Z33 and mentor at the 'Man and Wellbeing'-departement of the Design Academy Eindhoven. Jan Boelen is chairman of the committee for Architecture and Design of the Flemish Community.

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(1955, Kortrijk) started to study architecture in 1974 at the School for Sciences and Art Sint-Lucas; he graduated as an architect at the Royal Academy for Fine Arts in Ghent. In 1983 he co-authored a remarkable radical proposal for the renovation of the Europe Junction in Brussels with his fellow architects De Geyter, Neutelings and Karssenbergh. Stéphane Beel leads his own architectural practice, but he also works with Lieven Achtergael, with whom he manages the firm Beel-Achtergael Architects. Since 2001, Beel is also associated with Xavier De Geyter.

Ronny Delrue

(1957, Heestert) graduated at the KASK (Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten) in Ghent and became laureate at the NHISK (Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten) in Antwerp. He is currently mentor at Sint-Lucas (Academy of Sciences and Arts) in Ghent and works as a plastic artist.

Koos de Jong

(1948, Amsterdam) has been director of the European Ceramic Work Centre (.ekwc) in 's-Hertogenbosch since 1999. He studied history of art, archeology and archival science, and obtained his degree in 1976. He first worked as a researcher and then as director of the Provincial Museum Overijssel in Zwolle till 1985. He then became head curator and deputy director of the National Agency Visual Arts in The Hague. Later, till 1999, he was director of the Zaanse Schans and the new Zaanse Museum in Zaandam.

Wim Goes

(1969, Ghent) graduated as a Master in Architecture at the

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Thanks to

- Wolfgang Becker
- Peter De Graeve
- Zhifei Yang
- Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, departement Beeldende Kunsten
- .ekwc – European Ceramic Workcentre 's-Hertogenbosch: Koos de Jong and team
- FLACC Workplace for Visual Artists: Ludo Thys, Steven Op de Beeck, Sarah Indeherberghe, Guido Mertens, Kevin Reynaert
- Jan Van Eyck Academie: Berto Aussems
- Audiovisual Studio Provincie Limburg
- IvOK: Yves Knockaert, Jan De Vuyst, Edith Doove
- Z33 Hasselt: Jan Boelen, Danny Bierset and team
- Hogeschool voor Wetenschap en Kunst, Campus St.-Lucas Gent: Luc Pien

Special thanks to
Céline and Pepijn

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First edition

2009

Published by

Uitgeverij Acco
Blijde Inkomststraat 22
B-3000 Leuven
uitgeverij@acco.be
www.uitgeverijacco.be

For the Netherlands

Kemper Conseil
De Star 17
2266 NA Leidschendam

Cover image

Mind Sculpture, 2007

Graphic Design

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Photography

Kristof Vrancken, Ronny Delrue
(cover image), Mieke Mels (p. 37)

© 2009 by Acco

(Academische Coöperatieve
Vennootschap cvba),
Leuven (België)

ISBN 978-90-334-7364-7

NUR 640

D/2009/0543/6

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