

Willem Harbers

Slow Sculptures In Speedy Times

While driving, on our way to Willem Harbers' exhibit, we try to find the words to describe his sculpture work. We come up with authenticity & uniqueness, quality & enjoyment, content & depth, slow pace & balance. Splendid concepts, but also dangerous ones, since they quickly turn hollow and vacant. Who doesn't (does not) want enjoyment, who won't (will not) pursue quality, and isn't (is not) in search of content, depth, and balance? Is it possible to realise such a dream? Make it definite? And can art play a role in this?

“Yes,” says Willem Harbers, “A sculptor is by definition slow, the material with which they work is slow, and the beholder can only enjoy the work if he or she takes their time, stays with the sculpture, walks around it, slows their step, views the the work from all angles, or otherwise: becomes slow themselves.”

To explain why a sculptor is a slow artist, Harbers makes a comparison with the sketch artist. “If you want to learn to draw then during a course you can make as many as fifty charcoal sketches in one evening. That is equal to fifty end products. If I work hard, I can produce 10 sculptures per year.”

Harbers began as ceramicist: in 1994 he won the competition for young artists of the Ceramics Centre of Den Bosch. “Clay is a slow material. That is because clay has memory. If you don't start with dividing the clay equally, first pressing hard here and then pressing lightly there, then the clay product will come out of the oven with bubbles, because, while in the oven, pressed clay will expand and dent in where it was smoothed out. The mistake you made at the start of making your sculpture will only be seen after the piece comes out of the oven. If you want to work with clay, you must start the thinking process while removing the clump of clay from its plastic wrapping.”

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The past years you've worked mainly with steel and stone. Are these not more sluggish materials?

“Marble is metamorphosed limestone. That is extraordinary, since limestone is soft. Under great pressure marble is transformed over a period of several millennia into hard stone. This material is even slower than clay.

With a starter's stipend from the BKVB Foundation, I was able to work a year in Carrara, the marble quarries. Therefore I could explore and discover all the possibilities of marble, and that takes a lot of time. You have to learn to choose the proper stone. To do that you have to learn to see the difference between a vein or a beginning of a crack in the chunk of marble with which you want to work.

Then, from there, you patiently work the marble. With clay you can always try to smooth it out, but with marble, what you've chopped off is lost forever.”

Slow material suits a patient artist?

“That is a question often asked by my students. Those who work with such hard material, who can make irreparable mistakes, must have tremendous patience. On the contrary. 'You must have tremendous impatience,' I answer those students, 'otherwise you will never finish your piece of work'. A patient sculptor has no career.

You must be impatient but still be able to exercise control. That hardly goes together. This means: work hard. Especially true for sculpting is the cliché: he who wants to be fast must first sit down. You must first make a plan, think out your sculpture, and make sketches. From the very start of your work, you must mark time, slow your pace. Not until thereafter can you stand up and truly begin to sculpt.”

A few years ago Harber's work consisted mainly of white marble, then colour was introduced, as well as other materials. In a work such as *Monochronique*, from 2009, much wood is used as well as steel, but very little marble. But we're not that far, we've only just arrived at the exhibition, and are now standing next to *Gyroclaaf LG1*, a sea blue sculpture from 2007, made of steel, marble and powder-coating.

The two marble blocks draw all the attention. They look like cylinders. But what are they doing in this steel? Are these marble cylinders perhaps recharging, just like a cordless drill? Or is this steel appliance draining energy from the stones?

“By suggesting that something is charging or discharging, as an observer you think(get the idea) that there is an exchange of energy taking place. The energy centre could be the large steel reservoir or compartment above the marble cylinders.”

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Is it of any importance that the cylinders are made of marble?

“Could I have made the cylinders from wood? No, impossible, it's the massiveness of the stone, that's where the energy comes from, or that's where the energy goes to. I know these stones, that's where it happens, they form the core of this closed system.”

We're talking about an exchange of energy, can it also be warmth?

“Certainly. Stone has a different temperature than steel. Stone is colder, at least in the winter.”

In the summer stone can take up warmth.

“Then we're looking at a power station, when in the winter warmth is given to the stones and in the summer warmth is removed from the cylinders.”

Perhaps this is the summer version, since the colour blue of the steel suggests cold, as if the compartment now draws warmth from the stones.

“Colour also plays a role in the interpretation of a piece.”

And the powder-coating, the material with which the sculpture is sprayed?

“Powder-coating is often used to protect industrial products and provide them with colour. Thanks to an electrical process, your sculpture or product is magnetically charged, after which powder is sprayed. In the oven the powder melts and flows out. It is much more environmentally friendly than wet paint, as the powder that falls next to the sculpture is simply swept up.”

The artist is suddenly environmentally conscious?

“It doesn't hurt to consider the environment. But the most important reason that I use powder-coating here is because of its technical appearance. These sculptures are unmistakably reminiscent of machines, shapes and forms from industry, that will certainly not be coated with wet enamel paint.”

Do you use those kinds of paint?

“Let me show you.”

We walk towards a white sculpture, that immediately can be associated with a submarine, with two wing nuts at the ends.

Harbers: “I love thick books, in which you read a long time. They guide the process of making your own visual arts, taking the same time span. *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, for example, or Melville's *Moby Dick*.

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Doesn't the name *Ahab* come from there?

“In *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, Captain Ahab is in pursuit of the great white mysterious whale, that once bit off one of his legs.

I've always been fascinated by the colour white. After art academy in Rotterdam, I deliberately chose to go to the Rietveld Academie, art academy in Amsterdam. There I worked a lot with white, that is classic for a sculptor, even academic. White is about form, and absorption and reflection of light. I was thrilled that after my studies, I could work one year with the the best, whitest marble that there is.

Later I also started using colour, such as which is very apparent in the piece *Tronix Classic*, 2008, a very red sculpture. It's further on.”

We'll approach that later. I want to know more about this white *Ahab*.

“Well. For a sculptor who often works with white marble, there is a fabulous chapter in *Moby Dick*. I have brought the book with me and shall read a part:

“Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls; and though various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal pre-eminence in this hue,”

- and then comes twenty more examples on the superiority of white, which I will skip over and continue a page further on -

“yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honourable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.”

Do you agree with what Melville writes?

“That's not important, no, not unimportant, but is for the viewer to find out. For me it was exciting that Melville turns all clichés about “the colour white” upside down and makes a completely different association with the colour. That's the association I wanted to investigate,

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and that's why I made this sculpture, that's why I let the marble white – that you see in what you call the wings of this sculpture – be in contrast with the white of the enamel paint. But now I had a desire for an intense white. And that intensity is obtained with enamel paint, which you spray in several layers, and not with powder-coating. That is why, here, I have chosen for enamel paint.

Do viewers need to know this to appreciate your work?

“Certainly not. To answer this question I will take a short detour.

I have discovered this past year that certain qualities of a certain material do not suit me, or do not suit me any longer. A well-known, magnificent property of marble is that in very thin layers it allows light to pass through. Sculptors have endlessly worked with this – myself included. But gradually over the years I discovered that these thin layers of marble did not suit me. I prefer to work with thicker slabs of marble, steel, and clay, solid material from the earth, that doesn't have properties by artificial application.

If I use other material nowadays, such as plastic, then I emphasise this by exaggerating, by applying it artificially or thumb thick. See the plastic caps on the *Ahab*, that close off the steel tubes, they are just like the caps of chair legs? Also with other sculptures I always show the construction: the rivets, the blind nuts, the inscriptions in the steel, numbering by the welding curve, the grinding track.

When I let my work get sprayed, sprayers assume they must remove the small irregularities. 'Please, do not,' is what I say. 'Whatever is imperfect must remain imperfect. That is real, and imperfection is hard to imitate.'

Now you asked if the viewer must be aware of all these technical properties of this material. No, absolutely not. Ultimately it is not about viewing a technical feat, but looking at a sculpture. As long as the viewer says: 'well made,' you're not there yet; the work is missing something. Viewers shouldn't be talking about technique, they should be discussing what they see and what you have to say about it.”

I can imagine that some craftsmen sooner see the workmanship in your art.

“But they then don't understand why I produce this. Why don't you make something useful?”

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This work is not useful?

“People ask what I think is a good reaction from the viewers. I once spoke with a woman who stood long by the *Introscoop*'.

I was coincidentally in the gallery where the sculpture was standing. Because the woman kept looking at the sculpture – I believe at least a quarter of an hour/fifteen minutes – I approached her: “What do you think?” I did not tell her I was the creator, I found that to vain.

'You know what,' she answered, 'I feel as if I can breathe again.' Of all the responses I have had to

my sculptures, this one is most complimentary.”

W h y ?

“That is difficult to say, but it is about the essence of my work. That's why I will try to make an effort to explain this. We live in fast times. I'm not complaining; I don't judge speed; I even enjoy it. This speed is a direct result of the industrial revolution. Just look at the marble quarries in Carrara. Marble mining has taken place here for 2000 years, and that has been in the same way for the past 1900 years: with hammer and chisel slabs of marble are broken off, and brought down the mountain by horse and wagon. The past century has seen the introduction of one machine after the other. Mining marble is now quicker and more efficient: in the past hundred years more marble has been extracted than in the nineteen centuries before.

It is difficult to ignore that this speed brings with it haste. My work is often reminiscent of machines, but they are not machines that speed up our lives but slow it down. They are stationary machines. It could very well be that the response of this woman was a result of a delay, or slowness within her, of a certain introspection.”

T h e t i t l e o f t h i s w o r k i s ' I n t r o s c o o p ' .

“This telescope doesn't look to the universe, but within. And he who takes the time to look within, slows pace. This delay, or slowing was the core of the compliment that was given to me by this woman. I ask time from viewers. I ask my viewers to make an effort. Not for me but for themselves. If they do, they will slow down, and as a result they can breathe again. That is the compliment of the woman: she gave my work the attention.”

A n d s h e c o u l d b r e a t h e t h e r e a f t e r . T h a t s e e m s t o m e
v e r y u s e f u l .

“Even stationary can be useful.”

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In the distance, at the further end of the room, stands a sculpture that appeals to me from the moment we entered the room, a kind of laboratory. Before we approach it we stand still by *Monochronique*, 2009, which Harbers spoke of earlier. In this striking coloured work only a small stump of marble is visible.

Harbers: “Here you see a sculpture where, for the first time, I used a lot of wood. Firstly because it is difficult for me to make such turned forms in stone, but also because wood has a different sentiment. I hear that in the reactions I get on this sculpture: protective, compassion, soft.”

M o n o c h r o n i q u e . F r o m t h e t i t l e y o u t h i n k o f m o n o -
c h r o m a t i c , b u t a l s o o f a c h r o n i c l e r , w h o t e l l s a s t o r y .
W h i c h s t o r y i s t h a t ?

“I regularly give lectures on marble, marble mining, and my own experiences with marble. At one of my last lectures I showed this picture as an example of my recent work. “You're very engrossing when speaking about marble,” someone told me, “but in your own work you use less and less marble. In *Monochronique* its only a stump of marble!”

It's true, I say, that in quantity there is little marble in the sculpture, but the stump has great importance. Without that stump, the sculpture would be entirely different. It's not about the amount but the meaning of marble in my work.

Besides that, I must admit that material comes after my ideas. There can come a time when I'll make sculptures without marble, because it no longer has a function. I've no idea, that's part of the adventure."

We continue walking, towards the largest installation in the room: the *Labogrigneur*, a series of large white sculptures consisting of tubes or pipes. Not a stationary machine, but a stationary or frozen laboratory.

"No, you could call a laboratory the successor of an engine room, filled with machines. In the Boterhal in Hoorn, I had a solo exhibition in 2005 which consisted of independent sculptures arranged as a workshop of machines. Thus the individual sculptures created an entity. You could arbitrarily "use" them, producing diverse "brain functions".

Now we come to the *Labogrigneur*. The various parts form one entity. They can be randomly arranged together. Compact or spread out. Intense or calm. Dangerous or peaceful. In the engine room a certain arrangement determines a certain outcome. A 'laboratory' is a collection of objects with which you can determine insights, conclusions, definite answers, and so forth, if properly used, and with the proper manner of thinking."

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W h a t a r e t h o s e o b j e c t s , w h a t i s t h e r e p r o p e r u s e a n d p r o p e r m a n n e r o f t h i n k i n g ?

"You don't seriously think I'm going to answer that? Or can give answer?"

Due to the complexity and diversity, a lot happens simultaneously in this sculpture. The composition can not be taken in with a single glance. The clear organization that I was initially aiming for has made way for complexity. While walking around the *Labogrigneur*, each glimpse is different. The various parts continuously cross one another, making new connections, and giving one another new meaning. You could call all those new connections and meanings a deepening of insight. But they can only be discovered by the willing viewer who is in search of a personal experience – or spiritual experience, to reconnect with with the similarity between art and religion.

"The *Labogrigneur* reveals where I as a sculptor now stand: I use all sorts of materials: marble, wood, metal, plastic. I combine shapes: round, square, oval. You could say that the various parts that characterize each of the other individual sculptures, are combined in this one sculpture. What I find very important is that the *Labogrigneur* is different from each angle. The biggest difference between a sculpture and a painting is that a sculpture is three-dimensional. That is the quality that I try to exploit. The oval steel shape has a different effect when you stand in front of it than when you look through it from above. Then it becomes a kind of magnifying glass, as my daughter said."

E v e r y t h i n g a n e w i n w h i t e , b a c k t o s q u a r e o n e .

"That seems so. This sculpture is entirely sprayed with mother-of-pearl enamel, an old-fashioned, expensive, slightly transparent enamel, applied over a layer of white paint which, in turn, is sprayed over adhesive primer. The pearl enamel acts as a topcoating, which collects all the colours.

We call it white, but that is incorrect. If you were to look at the sculpture in the sun, you would see some red, some blue, a little bit of yellow, very subtle. This diversity in colours makes the sculpture dynamic; nowhere does the sculpture appear the same. That was exactly what I wanted to realise: the hoses that connect the various parts had to appear flexible, even suggest they were flowing with liquid. This was achieved thanks to the pearl enamel coating. Earlier we discussed the concept 'slow'. This certainly applies to the *Labogrigneur*. I work with various materials, various kinds of paints, with various colours, in various shapes. It took a lot of time to learn the various properties of all these materials, and learn to work with them. That calls for craftsmanship which requires several years. Or better said: it takes years before you can make slow sculptures quickly.”

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And what do see when looking at those slow sculptures?

That's a question I'd like to ask you. What do you see?

Work that looks nothing like I've ever seen. Authentic work.

“Yes. That makes it original but difficult to place somewhere; it's hard to label. The authenticity is very appealing to the public but it takes some time before they can identify with the work. Not until after several encounters and slow exploration can they come to a pact.”

With this final chord agreement we leave the exhibit. *Monochronique*, *Gyroclaf LGL*, the terrifying white, the stationary machines, and the mobile laboratory. I feel like I at least temporarily have acquired an understanding of these sculptures. But I suspect a next time they'll once again be unfamiliar. Is that awful?

“No. The content of an individual sculpture trickles on after seeing more works and more exhibitions, over a period of time. That is a lot to ask of my public; faithful, persevering, believing, daring to experiment and think along with me. But after the initial anxiety, that oneness is all at once really nice. This suits me, I belong there, it fits! Here lies my strength but also my weakness. In these matters lie my opportunities but also my vulnerability. I need my slow public, because without them my slow work can not exist.”

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