



TO WHAT DO WE ASPIRE ?

Conversation between
RENE DE BARTIRAL and AXEL VERVOORDT

Living as we do in an age of materialism, we feel a need for the metaphysical, a need for relationships, a quest for meaning.

AV – Over the centuries, artists have felt that there were questions, things missing, and have tried to provide answers, new solutions.

Art, rather than aesthetics?

RDB – Yes, but it's more than a simple question of aesthetics. Sir Winston Churchill once made a very astute comment in this respect. He said: "We spend a few hours of our life designing our home; it then spends the rest of our life designing us".

AV – At present, we are confronted by, fashioned by, the chaos, disorder and violence of towns and cities. And the artist is constantly seeking to restore peace and recreate harmony there.

RDB – Indeed. We are unconsciously doing exactly the opposite of what the Greeks did consciously. In ancient Greece, all free men were obliged to visit the temples from time to time, not to listen to what the

priests had to say but to be in contact with beauty. Because the Greeks were convinced that this contact would change the observer himself; would lead him to behave like a better man. In contrast, what all too often dominates recent urban developments is ugliness, for which we find excuses such as functionality or economy. It would not have surprised the Greeks to find that such ugliness leads to violence.

AV – There are exceptions, however. For example, in St Petersburg certain avenues are built using the golden section to give the proportion between their breadth and height. It is the void between the houses lining the avenues that corresponds to the golden section. This creates an extraordinary atmosphere in this city – one feels more comfortable there, one holds oneself more upright, carries oneself more proudly. When it comes to houses, I always advise people to identify with every object. Essentially, it is in our homes that the question “Who are you?”, of which we are so fond, finds expression. When clients visit the castle and the Kanaal, I form an opinion about what they like, what they really dislike and what leaves them indifferent. Sometimes when they tell me that they don’t like certain things, if we discuss the reasons why, they eventually come to appreciate these pieces. It’s important to be initiated, to listen, to be open to new ideas. Often that begins with hatred and ends with love, or the other way round. For me, it’s very important to be surrounded by a home and a collection, because these reflect the personality of the occupant. We come under the influence of these art objects, we are contaminated by their beauty. Art has this initiatory quality of changing us without our realising. Which is what makes it so valuable. Sometimes brilliant people who suddenly become rich and who didn’t have access to culture during their upbringing become great collectors, perhaps because they are influenced and inspired by these works. Which also explains why art is sometimes worth so much money: it plays an important part in changing society and in forging its image.

RDB – I always talk about art as a modelling of the social structure; it fashions a society, not only aesthetically but also through its message. This was something conscious among the Greeks. At other periods – our own included – it has been less so, but that doesn’t make it any less operational.

AV – The classical style took root under the Puritans. In Catholic countries, the Counter-Reformation found expression in the Baroque, then in the exuberance of the Rococo, as in southern Germany. While in England and Holland, classicism endured. I also believe that when works are carefully conceived and created according to the rules of art, one can never absolutely reject a style. Every period has had its extraordinary men and therefore produced extraordinary works. We are in a period that is free from dogma, which is a positive thing in my opinion. Knowledge does not involve dogma, and it is this plinth of knowledge that is so important in experiencing a feeling of liberty.

In the end, I believe that it will be beauty that will save the world.

Recollection (= voluntary recall of memory) of tradition

AV – In this age of Aquarius, we have a situation in which the flow of knowledge is circulating openly.

RDB – Indeed. Everything that was once esoteric knowledge, knowledge that was once restricted to small, closed groups of people, will now become universally available. Esotericism played a role in preserving knowledge and tradition, in transmitting the knowledge of the past, but in my opinion, this is coming to an end. Under Aquarius, the water of knowledge is allowed to flow freely in the open air. Before it was enclosed, concealed in an urn.

AV – Today, information technology encourages the dissemination of knowledge; everyone can have access to it.

RDB – It is interesting to recall how people imagined the future of information technology only 20 years ago. In the film *2001*, all the information was handled by *Hal*, a gigantic mainframe computer. But what really happened in 2001 was the internet – the emergence of a network of millions of small, interconnected computers. The power of the Information Age lies not only in all-powerful mainframe computers but in the IT network. The computer is probably one of the most masculine inventions ever created: a totally mathematical and cerebral tool where everything is controlled. By contrast, the network is a fundamentally female structure. So that, even if the tool is masculine (yang), the power emanating from this structure is female in nature (yin). I often hesitate to use these old Taoist terms of yin and yang, because some people can find them rather exotic. But unfortunately there is no satisfactory equivalent in any Indo-European language. The most succinct way of expressing what I am trying to say is that we are witnessing a powerful renaissance of the yin.

AV – Indeed. Particularly with the emancipation of women.

RDB – Yes, but female emancipation is only the most obvious tip of a much larger iceberg. I'm referring to the emergence of the feminine, which goes far beyond the role of women. For example, ecological necessities will force mankind to enter into a more yin relationship with nature, quite simply because our current approach is putting the whole of the biosphere in danger. I have already mentioned the yin nature of the internet. Here is another example: in physics, the most rigorously mathematical of our sciences, there is chaos theory which provides a yin model of the universe and which replaces the mechanical visions of Newton. Yesterday we were talking about the original meaning of the term "chaos", which in Sanskrit referred to an "infinite becoming", a continuous and uncontrollable creation. Filtered through a patriarchal society, this word "chaos" has become synonymous with "disorder".

AV – Often, certain worlds with which we are not familiar may appear chaotic, rather like when we look at the sky and the stars at first seem completely disorganized. Yet today we know

that they are governed by precise laws, that they have variable life spans, etc. The temptation is to label anything that we don't understand as chaotic.

RDB – Or rather what one does not yet understand, because creativity in understanding emerges out of chaos. Today we are witnessing the convergence of extraordinarily entangled, complex global phenomena: climate change, energy problems, monetary crises, technological change, the awakening of China, female emancipation, the clash of civilisations, etc. It is pointless to try to grasp or control part of this in a linear fashion, because in some way everything is connected with everything else. These transformations must be seen as a whole, in which each element affects the entire thing. What Ilya Prigogine and chaos theory have taught us is that the most important changes take place on “the edge of chaos”, through structural reorganisations which together create a new level of complexity. This is the process which our civilisation finds itself in today.

AV – In a way, this is the message of our Academia exhibition – always to take into account and take inspiration from the past in order to recreate a new harmony with the present. To make times co-exist, to create a continuity between objects whose periods and functions at first sight appear unconnected.

RDB – The new challenge will be one of integration, both of the past with the present and of different cultures, each of which has its own riches to offer. Historically, there has been a tendency to repress cultural diversity for the benefit of a dominant culture, whereas today the challenge is to give space to each culture, each civilisation.

AV – As Beuys has explained, artistic tradition influences the contemporary artist. So, for example, in these same works one can find Japanese zen signs together with Renaissance symbols.

He also said, “one invents nothing, everything is transmitted”.

RDB – It is a question of reintegrating tradition but in a non-passive way: not of doing something new-fangled but rather of integrating the tradition of each culture, of accepting the best creations of each culture as a gift in a new planetary civilisation. As I see it, we are at a key juncture, just a step away from “rupture”; on the edge of the chaos of a major change. This involves a choice between what the English so neatly call “breakdown or breakthrough” – either we break through to a new level of complexity or collapse backwards to a lower level. If we look within Europe for historical precedents for these two scenarios we find, respectively, the Renaissance and the century that followed the fall of the Roman Empire. Most probably we are experiencing these two particular scenarios at the same time, but in different parts of the world.

AV – I believe that things are already in the process of changing, that the centre of gravity is moving away from the United States towards the rest of the world and that after an apogee and glorification we are witnessing an intermixing, an inter-crossed assimilation with, for example, some Chinese people being more American than the Americans themselves and some Americans being more zen than most Chinese people. Today it's possible to select the best from each civilisation.

RDB – This is the first time that we have had a genuine choice about the identity we want to live with. Only a generation ago, our parents did not have that choice.

AV – Everything is possible, and that is also reflected in art. In the writings of Judaism, God created the world and then withdrew from it. This meant that he left man faced with the void – in Hebrew, *kadosh*. The sacred is split from the profane; there is separation. By withdrawing, God breaks the vessels which contained the void. Man must repair them and thus recreate the void.

The Zero group of artists – a 1960s movement founded after the Second World War – proposed that things should be done away with and that we should start again from scratch. In Italy, Lucio Fontana took the same approach; he started (again) from scratch and created a third dimension by opening up the canvas. It was from this void that everything was to be re-born; essentially, the constituent element was what was not there. In English one speaks of the “void”, the plenitude of the void. In the East, the relationship with the void is different; it is the quest for life, down through the generations; there is this initiation, this daily exercise of emptying one’s mind and one’s body.

RDB – There is a link here with the question of yang, which represents the solid, while yin corresponds to the void. It is this notion that we in the West have such difficulty assimilating. When one looks at a Chinese painting, the void is just as important, just as necessary as the figure represented; whereas in the West we tend to fill the void. Among eastern peoples, the yin is at the origin of creation; but with us, the void is not at the origin, instead there is God, the Divine Word, or Leibnitz’s monad.

AV – As I see it, the void is more important; which is perhaps because of the path I have followed and my interest in the East.

What is extraordinary about Fontana is that many of his canvases are called “Attese” or expectations, and in expectation there is the void, but also the unknown. When my friend Jef Verheyen began addressing space and void through his monochrome paintings, he also took into consideration the golden section, esotericism, the Kabbalah, correct proportion. He was a friend of Yves Klein who was a Rosicrucian. Both of them used monochrome and Klein used the female body as a brush. Essentially they were achieving a void by using monochromy and I like these works precisely because they involve great reflection before they are executed.

RDB – With Fontana there is the idea of using time as a spatial dimension. He addresses the void through time.

Proportion as language

AV – In the spirit of the Academy, a knowledge of proportion is a very important thing. There is a symbolism attached to proportion.

RDB – Numbers, including transrational numbers (what mathematicians call irrational numbers) formed an esoteric language in which each value had a precise meaning. This meant that the layout of an ancient temple could be read just like a sentence, and each proportion fulfilled the role of a word. Mathematically speaking, the same proportions can be found in musical chords, which is why we say that architecture is solidified music. For example, Chartres Cathedral was built in the Gregorian major scale. At that period, the role played by the architect was like that of the creator of a poem or an original musical phrase, but he knew and respected the meaning of the “words” that he used and that had been handed down to him by the tradition that preceded him.

The celebrated 17th and 18th-century “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns” was essentially a battle between the initiated and the uninitiated. This quarrel did not take place in France alone and not only in the field of literature. In architecture, the Ancients were the initiated and knew all about the art of design and its symbolic meaning, and the Moderns were the uninitiated who were only interested in aesthetics, and not in meaning. When Louis XIV founded the French Royal Academy of Architecture in 1671, its first director, François Blondel, was an initiate, but even he was not allowed to communicate the esoteric dimension of his craft to the uninitiated. In his “Lessons on Architecture” he admits that the Ancients passed on very useful “secrets” but that these were not publicly taught... The result was that those who knew were not allowed to speak; and eventually only qualified architects were allowed to practise the craft. And yet they could be taught only superficial aesthetics, rather than what lay behind them. Which is how, gradually with the modernisation of architecture, we have lost the deeper meaning of the proportions used. There was a reason for this secrecy; it was thought important that certain knowledge should be protected.

AV – In fact there was danger in sharing it. For example, I only use the golden section, that ideal proportion, for certain objects that are worthy of it. Sometimes it is better to use $\sqrt{2}$ (the square root of 2) which is better suited to everyday objects.

RDB – $\sqrt{2}$ represents the separation between interior and exterior, the essence of duality, and by extension marks the frontier between the sacred and the profane. For example, this proportion is found in the inner courtyard that divides the exterior and interior of a mosque, and in a city’s defense gates.

AV – In a way, the use of these proportions allows mankind to be more alive, in the sense that we are here on earth to transform it into something more divine, to metamorphose it. Earth is symbolised by a square or a cube, the sides of which correspond to a single unit: 1. The number four is the embodiment of this, hence the four elements. All the important proportions can be derived from this initial square. The circle or unit radius sphere represents the heavens. In fact, each proportion has an identity, expresses a state of mind, and it is the architect who knows how to use them correctly.

RDB – There are three families of proportions: $\sqrt{2}$, $\sqrt{3}$ and $\sqrt{5}$. One basic rule is that one can never mix together members of different families in the same design because they are by definition incommensurable. However, the square and the double square form part of all the families. For example, as well as the square and double square, the $\sqrt{5}$ family includes the transrational number $\sqrt{5}$ itself (diagonal of the double square), the value $\sqrt{5}/2$, the golden number ϕ , $\phi/2$ and ϕ squared and cubed. It is the richest family because $\sqrt{5}$ represents the human essence.

AV – It is found in the pentagon; da Vinci placed a man in a pentagon – the perfect harmony of man in the cosmos.

RDB – Precisely, and one finds no fewer than ten golden proportions in a star pentagon! And the golden proportion ϕ indicates progression towards perfection, the connection of the human and the divine, the accessible means by which a human being can attain the divine plan. Hence the expression “divine proportion” that Luca de Paccioli gave to his work on the golden section, the first in which this extraordinary number was spoken about publicly in the West. It is, for example, the only number which when increased by one unit has the same value as multiplying it by itself: $\phi + 1 = \phi$ squared.

AV – I have the feeling that today this ideal proportion, the golden section, is still part of the current climate.

RDB – Le Corbusier used it systematically in his work...

AV – It's possible to express our respect for and knowledge of nature through proportion. The danger of divulging the esoteric is that these proportions, which are sacred in some cases, might be hijacked from their original objective, misused, made commonplace.

RDB – Which is in fact what has happened. These proportions became the simple prerogative of an aesthetics of an earlier time, a debasement that was foreseeable once the meaning of their language had been lost. When the fashion changed, those proportions which had until then been independent of culture and epoch for centuries were abandoned at the same time.

AV – For example, until the 19th century, working men's houses were built on the basis of a 13-knot cord. The mason knew how to use this to create the right proportions. It is easy to identify these houses at a simple glance. In the 20th century, other criteria took priority: speed of construction, use of less costly materials, cramming the largest number of people into the smallest possible space... all of which meant that these once noble standards were cast aside.

RDB – Le Corbusier remains famous for having tried to reconcile correct proportions with the use of modern materials and modern construction methods. His intention was to found a school, but in the end he lacked a large enough following to actually succeed in reintegrating traditional proportion into contemporary architecture.

AV – It was an important stage in the history of architecture but it didn't alter its course. We have Le Corbusier stools designed for a housing unit in Nantes which are in simple triplex and yet their proportions have made these utilitarian objects into works of art .

RDB – He wanted to give back meaning to objects through proportion. He is the last to have tried such a return to basics. Bernard de Clairvaux's 12th-century Cistercian reform also wanted to see a rigorous return to the principles of Pythagoras. St Bernard's teaching on Cistercian architecture can be summed up in one short but very expressive phrase: "Let proportion be the only decoration". The Cistercians were purists, like the Egyptians; they had no need of ornament, of words to communicate the meaning they wished to express.

AV – We are also in an age of reclamation; some of us realise that it is absurd to flatten the forests, destroy quarries, excavate the earth to create new things while jettisoning the old. Personally, I like things that have experienced life, their patina, their rustiness which are the product of an almost cosmic marriage.

RDB – In a way, it is an example of the "natural" reintegration of the past into the present. By introducing an old beehive from the Dordogne into a living room you create a dimension in which very different periods and functions live side by side.

AV – For me, these unpretentious objects, which originally had a utilitarian rather than an artistic purpose, become works of art, ways of establishing a relationship with the whole. As a collector I feel responsible for finding objects that bring us into contact with the earth, inspire respect, rather than bear witness to the superiority of man over nature by refusing to change colour when exposed to the sun, for example.

In conclusion

RDB – Was *Artempo*, with its sub-title "when time becomes art", in fact based on the principle of reintegrating the beauty of the past into the present?

AV – *Artempo · Academia · Infinito* form a trilogy.

The concept of *Artempo* was born of the respect I felt for works that were fashioned by time, often created by monks or shepherds. These are always simple objects which, it seems to me, have been made with love and a respect for nature and the cosmos. A shepherd was also a doctor, an astrologer, a meteorologist; in fact he was totally integrated into his environment. He would not have chopped down the most handsome tree to make what he needed, he would have chosen a branch which, once cut, would leave room for a new tree.

Artempo is a celebration of artists concerned about their time, who create the atemporal or the absence of time.

I wanted to make Chronos into an artist, to place the emphasis on the atemporal too. For example, certain Egyptian or Bactrian pieces that date back 4,000 years pass for contemporary.

And underlying this was this question of whether it is important to know by whom and when something was made.

The *École Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in Paris is an inspirational place and *Academia* will highlight the need for knowledge and the desire to share it. I would like to exhibit all kinds of objects, even some that while extremely simple in appearance involve knowledge, reflection, and real effort, that lead to a transcendence and better understanding of oneself and others. In the beginning, there is the training by a master, the transmission of knowledge to a pupil and finally the pupil's own interpretation, the solution in all its freedom. I am against dogmas, imposed rules that render knowledge sterile.

RDB – Indeed, all dogma by definition denies creativity. Creativity requires one to go beyond what one knows. But creativity can also flourish in the context of a tradition. A tradition that can provide the tools, the language with which one creates.

AV – Preparing *Artempo*, the unexpected realisation of this project, brought me so much satisfaction that I was convinced that it was the final reward and that after this I would die. My swan song... but in the end one only dies to be reborn and reborn better. After Venice I felt the need to go to Japan. I was advised to go to the island where Noguchi has his studio. I was expecting a wonderful island but after a long journey I eventually arrived on a very industrialised piece of land, bristling with enormous chimneys. When I reached Noguchi's studio, the door opened to a world of silence, a haven of peace amid the chaos. The artist told me that after his death part of his estate would be devoted to maintaining his studio as it is. There I discovered 300 unfinished sculptures, which moved me to tears, and it was there that the idea for this new exhibition came to me... that after *Artempo* there were still things to be said.

In Italian *infinito* means infinite, which I believe is what one sees in unfinished objects. The human condition is such that we are not capable of finishing things. So it is best to be clear and humble and place the emphasis on what is important, which is the progress we make towards things. Perhaps also to show the way forward for certain artists. There are different kinds of unfinished work: when the artist dies before completing it; because of a conflict that leads to the work being abandoned; or maybe the person who commissioned it can no longer pay, as was the case with Michelangelo. But this concept will find expression in an exhibition for the 2009 visual arts biennial. At the heart of our preoccupation is the artist who has decided to call a halt to his work because he has felt the infinite in the unfinished.

7 (2007) was for time, 8 (2008) is for initiation, 9 (2009) will be for the infinite.

's Gravenwezel, 19 April 2008