

When animals still spoke

Daan Van Speybroeck

Non seulement les gens oublient qu'ils ont été des animaux,
mais aussi qu'ils ont été des enfants.

Un artiste est quelqu'un qui n'oublie jamais son enfance,
qui préserve en lui la mémoire de l'enfance :
l'âge de l'innocence, de la pureté. [...]

Pierre Guyotat, *Humains par hasard*

The sculptures of Bob Lejeune are easily accessible, but through closer inspection there is a secluded world to them. They are amusing, or is this just illusion? They are decorative, ornamental, illustrative, beautiful, or is this just pretense? In short, they are resourceful and cannot be understood easily. If we take the trouble to closely observe them, they will open up an entire world of their own. Consequently, we end up in the same explorative mood as the artist's, or rather we find ourselves embarking on a long and arduous search for the sculptures the artist has led us to.

Bob Lejeune, in the course of his artistic career, has always been conscious about his sculptures not becoming too illustrative or too decorative. Perhaps he uses the qualities of his work as a strategy, conscious or unconscious, good-natured and faint, to draw our attention to one or another sculpture, to tempt us to think about it a little bit longer. It is his desire to accommodate his sculptures with an existential layer through which he touches the beholder. In accordance with Georges Perros, a French novelist, Lejeune is convinced that the work of art has completely disappeared from categories like beautiful or ugly. It has become something much more important, a fragment of something sacred and nourishing, offering us an unique company that lives on and brings new dimensions to life. When something like this shows itself in a piece of art, when the sculptor has managed to shape this in the sculpture, he feels great enthusiasm.¹

But immediately he sees the limitations of this imagery, and creates a next one. The creation of an sculpture gives the impression that it is precisely that sculpture which excludes and suppresses a great many other things, and therefore remains unseen. In this sense, the artist has to continue creating new images. Bob Lejeune's oeuvre can therefore be summarized as an ongoing and fundamental search. It goes further than an escape from these seductive maneuvers and superficial clarity. After all, an artistic process can not be purely motivated by

¹ Georges Perros, *Plakboek*, Uitgeverij Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1991, p. 237.

denial. It must pass into affirmation, and reach for the unseen, the unattainable. That is what this artist strives at, over and over again, tirelessly enthusiastic, energetic, without getting discouraged. Thus his work not only has existential dimensions; in a repetitive reach, together with the already mentioned exploration, his oeuvre becomes the embodiment of the existential, human existence.

Such a process, deeply anchored in the person of the artist, can become eternally endless and without thorough introspection, alone within itself. Bob Lejeune turns away from this pitfall by calling in the animals that tell him their story - which is perhaps as much his own story as it is ours. Initially, this process, recorded in sculptures, is close to man. Man's own person and those who are close to him, all of whom are introduced indirectly and far from recognizable, are confronted with animals. Thus the situation of the animals, man's state of being and that of the spectators of his sculptures are tested in a true conversation. Through thorough observation of the other, and in alienation of oneself, images reveal themselves surprisingly clear. Such projection in animals is an old and proven method, known among other things from fables. We know the examples of Jean de La Fontaine, it also was practiced as a genre in Greek antiquity. As the aforementioned French novelist renewed the genre by bringing it up to date, Bob Lejeune in turn felt inclined to breath fresh visual life in animal art. By holding us and himself a mirror through his sculptures, the artist is better off. Refraining from moralization, his art is more directly, more concretely, more intrusively, as it leaves fewer escape routes open. His fabulous work abstains from being moralizing; for that his sculptures are too close to himself. Looking over his shoulder we see him in the mirror simultaneously with ourselves. Together we smile at the situation in which we have arrived personally and socially. The people have slowly disappeared from the sculptures of the artist. Certainly not convulsively, since once in a while there is the exceptional powerful appearance. We think of the ode that he recently brought to Piet Mondriaan.

The sculptures of Bob Lejeune have a duplex nature, which may not all stand out in each of them, but is all the more manifest in the collective oeuvre. They show much more than they show at first glance. The latter concerns what they can not represent or depict, precisely by showing what they show - in short, a sense of what is missed. In it lies the meaning of his sculptures in part, and it is the driving force behind his oeuvre. The missing part is discussed in the next picture, but this time too, inevitably, that what it shows is sacrificed together with the experience of what had to be surrendered.

Anything that takes solid form, by withdrawing from the fluid of multiplicity and modeling, is simply based on a sort of selective, discriminating and ultimately misguided or premature pretension. It demonstrates overconfidence when one attempts to cover the unattainable. In his novel *Le Baphomet*, Pierre Klossowski expresses this when he writes: '*He has caused thousands of gods to die in Himself to create Himself as one!*' Later he adds: '*All the gods died of laughter when they heard that one of them proclaimed he was the only god!*'²

² Pierre Klossowski, *Le Baphomet*, Mercure de France, Paris 1965, p. 139.

In a certain sense, the artist Bob Lejeune has become entangled in this process of creation. How can he be enthusiastic about certain sculptures, once he realizes that a sculpture proclaims to be unique - even for that one moment of enthusiasm? At first glance, the sculptures - like the gods – start laughing. They know that they have received or will receive the same enthusiastic attention, with which they continue the process of exclusion themselves. In this way, Bob Lejeune's oeuvre structures itself.

From this both nonchalant and tragic perspective, creating art is fundamentally a fundamental search, an incessant event for Bob Lejeune. His path is paved with the sculptures that he himself has made. These could both discourage and expand his artistry. The bottom line is that it is not just his sculptures that get in his way. Being so closely attached, they are so kind to him that his own person is obstructing the artists creation, perhaps even more than his sculptures.

To continue the process of being artistically undisturbed, he cannot continue to cherish his sculptures. Even if he repeats the theme or form of one of them, as is the case with the pelican several times, he has to let go of the acquired certainties and deconstruct them. In the solid shape that the sculpture has assumed, the excluded forces gradually gain new importance. The animal figures come in a partial state of dissolution; they no longer seem to believe that they are the only deity - too affected by the laughter of other animals in their wake. The animal in question does not seem to be able to handle it any longer: either to continue rigidly or laugh together with the others.

Thus certain figures - animals or situations - turn out to be more stubborn than expected. We look at the pelican again. It is no coincidence that it is that mother bird who kills her chicks to bring them back to life after three days. And that with her own blood from her chest, open by herself! Thus - just like the sculptures of Bob Lejeune - the pelican, as if it were its destiny, seems to have to constantly generate itself, again and again. In addition, the pelican refers to Christ and his resurrection. Placed in a religious context by certain viewers, this bird suffers more than any other animal from this institutionalization. It is the only artist in art, as religion also elevates him to it. And the forgotten, the missed, the excluded becomes all the more trapped. When this comes to an end, a new pelican has to emerge once again, has to be created and brought to life.

Bob Lejeune's quest is a stroll in the visual artistic field. 'But even he who he searches does not await coincidence. One feels attracted by the by-gones. People are in a hurry. Every woman and every man rushes to where they got lost'.³

The artist – in the imagining of animals in ceramics - stayed close to a study of the animalians. These 19th century artists or craftspeople faithfully depicted animals, yet never in their literal sense or in their entirety. The animals received symbolic, sometimes personified layers; other animals became, in certain sculptures, representatives of the world, of a different world as we know and live in. In such a manner of representation there is an illustrative character. Yet gradually Bob Lejeune engages more freedom, both in imagining and combining the animals as well as in the colors he provides them with. In a recent period - at his exhibition in Munich,

³ Pascal Quignard, *Sur le jadis*, Grasset, Paris 2002, p. 15.

2016 - he goes a step further, looking at presenting rather than representing. He even lets go of the animals, in order to create purely abstract scenes. Still, it remains difficult not to notice some figuration in his sculptures. Some of those sculptures resemble gnawed carcasses in which the ribs can be counted, others become almost landscape-like.

Has the artist in this stylistic turn, in his own wandering so to speak, put himself off balance and do his sculptures come to a standstill? Such is bound to happen when the artist constantly works at the cutting edge of inspiration and creation, balancing between creating a single sculpture - over and over again - and sacrificing many aspects that are equally relevant. Is this not the consequence of the suspension of the creative process at that one moment when an sculpture reaches a stage where it exclaims itself to be momentarily unique? Eye to eye with such a sculpture, the artist and the public are surprised by a different time dimension. No matter how intense it may be, that is precisely why the artwork lasts longer than one glance. And time goes on, and takes us further along. Consequently the beholder proceeds to daily routines, while the artist continues to work, creating new sculptures.

It is quite conceivable that the artist Bob Lejeune is occasionally overwhelmed by his incomprehension where to search. Assignments - sometimes they come from third parties, others he sets himself - then work salutary. They define a field of activity on which to operate. The project that was already approached by Piet Mondriaan, as mentioned above, offered such an opportunity. He makes a kind of bust and puts a grid over the head. The lines are not tight and certainly not black; the boxes that have been created do not obtain the primary colors that Mondriaan has started to use after a while; some of those colors are blurred. Piet Mondriaan seems to be in full development. Can the tree that rises from the head of a statue refer to the early landscape work of this artist? At the same time there seem to be a lot of thoughts, murmurs: what did Piet Mondriaan think or feel exactly? This sculpture portrays what has been sacrificed to let the artist arrive at his monumental oeuvre. The suggestion remains of a tree that bears fruit. Here we have to do with the sculpture, or the sculpture of a great artist! All proportions have been taken into account: the imagined and the imaginary.

On the other hand, the process of distancing oneself from one's artistic wandering probably is as beneficial as are the assignments the artist gets or sets. Bob Lejeune namely, is apart from his artistic work professionally engaged as a history teacher at a teacher training college. Not that he is unable to choose between two activities - he keeps in touch with either activities, both in what he does and in what he actually excludes and prevents: creating versus studying, conceiving versus passing along, intuition through ratio, showing versus demonstrating, presenting versus representing, etcetera. He knows how to make this situation fruitful: because of this bipolarity he does not completely submerge himself in his artistry, but regularly distances himself from it enabling ways of reflection. With that he incarnates in a way what he attributes to his sculptures: being something or someone, being unique cannot be achieved without seclusion.

In his quest, Bob Lejeune also involves art as such. Or is it rather his way to find his own way in art, to acquire a place of his own, and to be inspired by it at the same time? For example, he has a thorough knowledge of ceramic art - a surprisingly rich area, albeit less well known - within which he cultivates his own terrain. Gradually he pays more attention to his material

and its special qualities and the manner in which it can surprise him. With this greater sensitivity, more attention is paid to the skin of his sculptures.

But that is not his only fountainhead. Closer to his personality are his younger imaginations of ceramic art and clay, 'the well-preserved laughter of a child, / [...] I am looking at where the child I was has remained'.⁴ And with Pierre Guyotat, Bob Lejeune can say this about his work: 'My postures are both child-like and incredibly skilled at the same time'.⁵

By studying and exploring this domain the artist maneuvers himself beyond the choice he made or did not make, between the artist and the teacher. It is no longer about either the one or the other, it offers him a myriad that can develop in every direction. In his sculptures we notice - although they seem to proclaim themselves as unique - that as an oeuvre they convey the child-that-he-was. This they seem to pronounce through their form and expression. The contiguity his sculptures make with this existential dimension is by definition limited and imperfect; after all, too much has to be surrendered and sacrificed. Yet Lejeune will never renounce that source as an artist. His sculptures permanently keep in touch with it, participate in it. Every piece of art he creates is coherent with the ambivalence that one creates wholeness through the sense of denoting that substance that cannot be recovered. To renounce this ambiguity, to abandon the search, would make him something other than an artist. It would reduce his sculptures to decorations and ornaments, if not to illustrations, being stripped of internal tension and contradiction. For Bob Lejeune, it would be mean being chased away from 'the pre-native land'.⁶ 'With my own hands I dug the unbridgeable gap that separated me from my youth'.⁷

In the artistry of Bob Lejeune all this interlocks. With the animals as the most striking figures, and with the childlike as the source, there is an intimate entanglement of his own person and the oeuvre he develops - a entanglement that presents itself without ever being able to come to a completion. His oeuvre is not so much a fable, because this would offer a solution. By confiding in permanence he would ignore the continually necessary and mysterious dynamics. But that is precisely why it is fabulous, imaginatively fabulous - about which Pierre Klossowski states: '*fabula* comes from the Latin verb of *fari*, which means both forecasting and raving, foretelling and fantasizing fate, because *fatum*, fate, is also the past participle of *fari*'.⁸

Bob Lejeune's oeuvre is involved in this existential field. It is his *à la recherche du temps perdu* that he is expanding. Something like this effectuates the necessary and inescapable developments - like a child growing up. Yet it is necessary to suspend that moment, and to resume that suspended moment in every sculpture, otherwise he would be deprived of that which is lost. This he will continue to do, sculpture after sculpture, one by one, through exploration and expression, realizing that no sculpture, no matter how artistic,

⁴ Louis-René des Forêts, *Les Mégères de la mer*, Mercure de France, Paris 1967, pp. 18 et 22; en vertaling 'De Hellevegen van de zee', door Jan H. Mysjkin, in Jan H. Mysjkin, *Geboorte van het vers - Levende Franse poëzie*, Poëziecentrum, Gent 1994, pp. 135 and 138.

⁵ Pierre Guyotat, *Humains par hasard*, Arcades / Gallimard, Paris 2016, p. 144.

⁶ Louis-René des Forêts, *Les Mégères de la mer* / 'De Hellevegen van de zee', op. cit., resp. pp. 22 and 138.

⁷ Louis-René des Forêts, *Le Bavard*, Gallimard, Paris 1981, p. 131.

⁸ Pierre Klossowski, 'Nietzsche, le polythéisme et la parodie', in *Un si funeste désir*, Gallimard, Paris 1963, p. 194.

will ever be able to cope with it. Notwithstanding the revelations of his successive sculptures, they cannot become representational images of the *temps perdu*. Bob Lejeune's art emphasizes *à la recherche*. When he gives particular emphasis on the finding, it becomes clear that it will not be able to occur. When one believes to have found uniqueness in a sculpture, the moment passes quickly in order in favor of creating another.

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