

The Sense of Unity, p.24, fig.41, Chapter: 'The Morphology of Concepts; The Mathematics of Proportion'

III. From Known to Unknown

As much as human beings feel the fundamental need to define their surroundings and the unpredictable, the known can also be a burden. The familiar provides a sense of security through which the peculiar can be tackled but not always immediately understood. Dealing with the unknown implies leaving the known behind and also relinquishing control. In all kinds of production this applies not only to knowledge but also to learned skills. At the beginning of his practice Oushoorn made some crucial works that deal with the obstruction of his own skill, in order to free himself from his knowledge. Having been trained in woodworking the artist felt he knew this material too well and needed to free himself from it, setting the stage for curious outcomes. His object hereby was to seek out the unfamiliar in subtle moves rather than to create a quick effect of surprise. This attitude brought along some fascinating sculptures, which were perhaps already the precursors to his recent interest in the idea of an artist withdrawing himself from his own work.

The central postulate of the Way is that there is a hidden meaning in all things. Each thing has an outer as well as an inner meaning. Every external form is complimented by an inner reality which is its hidden, internal essence. The *zahir* is the sensible form, that which emphasises the quantitative aspect which is most readily comprehensible, such as the shape of a building, the form of a pool, the body of a man, or the outward form of religious rites. The *batin* is the essential or qualitative aspect which all things possess. In order to know a thing in its completeness, one must not only seek its outward and ephemeral reality but also its essential and inward reality— that in which the eternal beauty of every object resides.

(The Sense of Unity, p.5, 'Introduction')

A significant piece regarding this approach is *A Horse and Five Elephants*, which is a little object that looks like a side table or tabouret at first. Oushoorn torqued four wenge sticks until they were about to break and connected them to a frame at the top and the bottom.

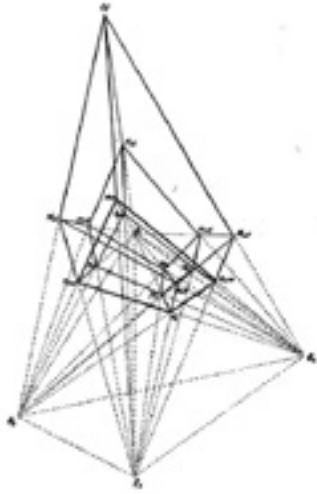
He wanted the piece to stand against the wall, but because of the distortion the only way to make the object stand up against a wall was to embed it into it. Bearing some gracious obscurity the object looks as if it is dancing, with a movement that is too soft for the assumed rigidity of the material. The elegance of the piece is striking, which confronts the viewer with the expected yet not immediately comprehensible. Even if the balance of the sculpture gives comfort to the eye, something remains odd in its appearance. There is a similar outcome in *Wenge Frame*, the artist's method being comparable to the one described before. The familiarity of the tropical wood motivated Oushoorn to challenge it with the peculiar, by making a frame that does not actually act like a frame. With all four vertices bent in different ways, two diagonal points touch the pedestal underneath; one of the remaining edges is slightly lifted and the other one is significantly higher than the rest. Despite its fragility the sculpture looks very balanced, but this isn't only caused by its own movement. More so than for *A Horse and Five Elephants*, which penetrates a wall in order to stand, *Wenge Frame's* own pedestal is essential to itself. Within the composition the white pedestal looks like an ordinary box upon which the frame rests. But its top is not quite straight; in fact the object is shaped to give the impression that the two edges resting on it are on the same plane. Oushoorn plays with the viewer's perception, whose eye at first tends to seek out the known and only discovers the curious later. In *Wenge Frame* the grace and balance of the frame stimulates looking at the whole piece more closely and even more slowly in order to discover that the unknown is as pleasant as the known.

But to confuse the material Oushoorn initially knew so well cannot have been enough for the artist. In both pieces mentioned above the control remains in the author's hands after all. It is an unavoidable part of his skill to know how far he can go with the material, even if he allows himself a certain degree of curiosity. Maybe, therefore, in two works from 2013, *Soutien* and *Neem Sphere* respectively, Oushoorn has taken some distance both from the material and the sculptures he produced. Both pieces demonstrate a distant rationality; they stand with a right of their own, despite their author conceiving them first and foremost through his knowledge and skill. One of them, *Soutien*, is an awkward installation that no longer exists. For this work the artist took a tall piece of oak and cracked it to make a structural hinge by attaching the wood to the floor and pushing it up with a forklift. His integral knowledge defined the sort of wood chosen, for he knew oak would fracture but not break easily because of its vein structure. Subsequently, he tied that cracked piece of wood alongside an existing column, between a beam and the floor, and pulled on it until it became whole again and almost straight. A still from the footage of that process shows the brief mo-

ment during which the original column and the added one stood side by side. It would have been possible to assume that the fractured oak was the old support that had been replaced by a new one that was still intact, only if the oak had not pushed the beam up and even partly the ceiling, causing horizontal cracks in the building's structure. Hence the old column would have become useless, been removed and the hinge would have become a tool, the *Soutien* that prevented the beam from collapsing. When the space was demolished, *Soutien* disappeared for good, except for a series showing every millimetre over a length of 36,4 cm of its CT-scanned body, which scientifically registered the hinge's location.

Around the same time, a second attempt to manipulate material was repeated in *Neem Sphere*. A freshly cut block of tropical neem wood was brought from Bombay to Brussels for the production of this piece. Oushoorn sculpted a sphere out of the block and allowed it to dry during the exhibition at room temperature. As expected, the moisture content of the wood reacted to this drying process and the piece started to crack. In the building sector such a reaction is known as irreversible damage resulting in uselessness. But in *Neem Sphere* that 'damage' is turned into a beauty that is unique. Even if the artist were to repeat the method, the results would never be identical. The almost poetic quality of *Neem Sphere* contrasts with the *Soutien*, alluding more to a structural building element. Yet both touch upon a particular aspect in Oushoorn's work, namely the endeavour to frame the unknown in an objective artistic approach, despite constant subjectivity being the starting point of every piece. Ultimately, the conception of *Neem Sphere* derives from trust in an intuition about beauty and *Soutien* from the personal longing to escape the self of the artist, with the same arguments also applying to *A Horse and Five Elephants* and *Wenge Frame*. This contemplation about subjectivity versus objectivity grows as a driving force behind Oushoorn's practice and steers him to look for methods other than the distortion of his own skills. To achieve his own absence within the work the artist is seeking out formulae. Through his interpretations of *The Sense of Unity* he increasingly works with rules that are stripped of subjectivity and based on reason in geometry.

A group of objects entitled *Numbers and Geometry (00, 13, 11, 9, 7, 5)* demonstrates this frame of mind. The work consists of six display cases, which display no object within. Lit from above and below the vitrines shine in the space in which they are installed, concentrating the attention on their elegant physical presence at first. Their shapes vary, starting from a square base and going over to polygons with five, seven, nine, eleven and thirteen sides. As vertical objects made of Plexiglas they share a footprint of 90 cm and a height of 220 cm. After cutting each of them in two at an angle of 45 degrees at the same height of 120 cm,



Drawing of a hypercube with four vanishing points, drawing by Victor Schlegel, 1882

Oushoorn rotates the upper half about one quarter from the lower one and plugs it back in. As in other works by the artist every decision becomes part of the final result; there is no mental or physical wastage and the familiar and unfamiliar are both integrated. The act of slicing and plugging is crucial to the work, since it completes the function of a display: the peculiar openings deriving from the rules of geometry become the focus of the exhibit for each vitrine.

Parallel to the displays, Oushoorn produced another piece entitled *Hypercube* that deals with the notion of the known and the unknown. The title of the work originates from the tesseract, a four-dimensional analogue to a cube. The concept is attributed to the Swiss mathematician Ludwig Schläfli, who properly introduced it in 1852 as part of his theorem for the two dimensional geometric projection of the fourth dimension⁴. Oushoorn, however, became fascinated by the topic through Carl Sagan, the American astrophysicist who popularised science during the eighties with his TV-programme *Cosmos*. In the tenth episode⁵ Sagan explains that the hypercube, bearing three cubes that meet at each vertex, is the proof of the fourth dimension, even though we cannot see it. He argues that 'we are trapped in the third dimension,' in other words, we have become stuck in the limits of our knowledge. To

4. *Theorie der vielfachen Kontinuität*, Ludwig Schläfli (1814- 1895), written in 1852, of which the first full publication occurred posthumously in 1901

5. *Cosmos*, Episode 10, 'The Edge of Forever – 4th Dimension,' written and presented by Carl Sagan, aired on PBS, 30th of November 1980

demonstrate the visual effect of the fourth dimension, he uses the shadow of a glass hypercube. Oushoorn replicates Sagan's hypercube in Plexiglas and photographs its shadows. The work tries to break free from the obstruction by coming through the familiar and opening up perception. As in *Numbers and Geometry*, *Hypercube* encapsulates the integrity of the familiar and the unfamiliar in a single work. Oushoorn silently recognises that to understand his own fascination he has to replicate the hypercube and hence study and analyse his interest meticulously, in a similar way to *Circle*, in which he used his own body as a tool.

The notion of becoming an instrument within one's own work and the envisioned absence of the artist gradually yet confidently settle down into Gauthier Oushoorn's practice, as described in *The Sense of Unity*: '... The operation of the artist – architect has not been to consciously express himself but to be the anonymous vehicle of realisation.'⁶ This points to a new dimension in his work, that somewhat resembles the relationship of the hypercube and its shadow: to create the fourth dimension the cube is essential, but in order to understand it, it is an obstruction. The shadow seems, after all, to be what makes the unknown imaginable.

6. *The Sense of Unity*, p.7, Chapter: 'The Morphology of Concepts, The Creative Man'