

Between imagination and reality: the conquest of a new space

Colette Dubois

I.

The assumption that the intellectual population of millions of years ago or perhaps an extinct foreign civilization had the irrepressible longing to install a museum in orbit around the planet Mars seemed entirely plausible to them.¹

Wesley Meuris's most recent works focus on space and more specifically the way in which the machines that humankind sends into space – satellites, probes – live there. Through volumes, graphic works and seemingly abstract panels, the artist introduces a new perspective on the thousands of spacecraft that currently populate the cosmos. Representations of space, whether in photographs, films or drawings, are stereotypical: a uniform black or midnight-blue background against which objects stand out that are often spherical – planets, galaxies or other nebulae – or cylinders, parallelepipeds equipped with solar panels that are larger than them when these are objects sent up by humankind. In all cases, they are bright, colourful and emerge clearly against a dark background. Wesley Meuris's latest works² – sculptures and graphic works – do not conform to these stereotypes; his representations are both more synthetic and, although he denies doing science, undoubtedly more analytical and therefore scientific. In his previous works the artist questioned the institutional architectures that surrounded us, presenting fictitious reproductions of them based on existing typologies and systems. He thus cast a critical and somewhat ironic³ gaze at the phenomena of standardization at work in these architectures, and in doing so he (almost) always relied on a frontal approach. Here the deconstruction is less about the elements themselves – which retain their opacity – than about their representation in science and the imagination. For Meuris, it is a matter of shifting the gaze, of moving from a frontal gaze to a vertical gaze in the context of a fusion between humankind, the environment, nature and technology. This gaze would no longer position humankind at the centre of the representation, but would question the place it occupies in its immediate and distant environment.

II.

The very first wooden satellite could be launched from Japan as early as 2023. It is in any case a joint project of Sumitomo Forestry and Kyoto University. Their objective is to develop a satellite capable of self-destructing without leaving any waste behind.⁴

¹ Alexander Kluge, 'Zum sozialistischen Begriff des Erbes, Schwammartige Struktur der Marsmonde', Chronik der Gefühle: Band I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 2000), 909.

² Most of the works discussed in this text were on display at the Annie Gentils Gallery between 25 October 2020 and 24 January 2021.

³ As Pieter Vermeulen observed aptly in his text 'Show, Don't Tell: Framing Wesley Meuris', in Wesley Meuris (Breda: Club Solo, 2014).

⁴ 'Un satellite en bois pourrait prochainement être envoyé dans l'espace', RTBF, 04 January 2021,

https://www.rtbf.be/tendance/green/detail_un-satellite-en-bois-pourrait-prochainement-etre-envoye-dans-l-espace?id=10664058

Monochrome wooden sculptures – models of probes – lie on the ground. While in space most probes and satellites have a name, these are soberly called ‘Probe’. The design is simple, massive, opaque, with few elements emerging: a small box closed by a glass pane, bits of cable, threaded rods ... A few objects are attached to the surfaces of the volumes – here a roll of bright yellow string, there a scallop shell or a Colson cable tie. They may represent a specific device, be metaphors thereof or simply triggers of the imagination. When we know that in 2002 the first Earth-observation satellite was the size of a bus and that today some nanosatellites measure barely a few centimetres in length, these models are in real size. The Probe sculptures are plausible, synthetic elements, stripped of any technological element. They are models. Ida Soulard has described the functioning of the model in Wesley Meuris: ‘Meuris’s models function as “abstract machines” where, rather than “knowing that”, it is a question of “knowing how”, spatially, i.e. of being interested in the “arrangement” of things and the ways of orienting oneself in relation to them.’⁵ But, whereas until now the artist has mainly constructed empty and hollow probable architectures, with the Probe sculptures he has created an exterior shape of remarkable opacity. Other sculptures combine plants and raise the question of life in space (several space programmes actually include plants for scientific purposes). In one of these sculptures, small bunches of leaves push up through the upper surface of the volume. Another seems to have generated vegetables, aubergines and turnips.⁶ This is a turning point in the artist’s practice. Previously, when he left room for living things in his work, he did so by making spaces available, leaving visitors the choice to occupy them or not.⁷

III.

But above him, in the heights of the night sky, this agent knew THE ONE EYE OF THE ENEMY, a satellite eye (...) He had orders to launch the rocket at the very latest when the “eye” fell. The immediate eyes which Suslov had at his disposal in the front of his head, whose continued presence he occasionally checked, were, on the other hand, the extended organs of the instruments in his laboratory...⁸

The Verticality series of works on paper, with its five concentric circles, appears as a sky map quite similar to Copernicus’s map of the solar system. However, there is not a single planet. The concentric circles are made up of data. On the outside, the GEO orbit is represented by ‘stacked sticks’ with blue, gold, black and the name of a satellite, its function, type and distance from Earth. The next two circles, conceived using the same process, refer to medium Earth orbit (MEO) and low Earth orbit (LEO) satellites. The smaller circle forms several observation holes in the Earth’s crust. So the Earth itself is a circle with an empty centre.

⁵ Ida Soulard, ‘Les hypothèses matérielles de Wesley Meuris: The Public Art Center’, in Wesley Meuris: The Public Art Center (n.p.: Société des Nouveaux commanditaires, 2018).

⁶ These sculptures are part of the work that Meuris is pursuing with Jill Gasparina as part of the ‘Inhabiting the Extra-terrestrial Space’ project set up by HEAD in Geneva. The aim is to see how the imagination of extraterrestrial life – art, cinema, comics – engages in dialogue with science.

⁷ I am thinking in particular of Urbanmodel presented at the Bruges Triennial in 2018.

⁸ Alexander Kluge, ‘Unter drei Augen’, *Chronik der Gefühle: Band I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 2000), 905.

This map coincides with a diagram to become an object full of information while being indefinite. If the representation of the satellites uses a type of graph that could be generated by a computer, it has here been designed and materialized by hand (notice the slight trembling of the small lines, the thickness of the layers of paper glued together to form the sticks). Verticality refers to a form of observation that takes place in an advanced vertical position with regard to the Earth's crust. In the Debris series, the drawings include a few circles in thin or dotted lines. Dense clouds of tiny dots evoke dust particles as well as virus projections; they are 'debris' produced by man floating in the new space ecosystems. They visualize the consequences of human activity more than the ecosystem itself. Representing the sky, representing actions in space comes down to mapping.

Cartography is a construction of the mind, a vision of the world. As Louis Marin remarked, in a map 'the gaze is dominant, vertically, but it is not in a place or at a point: it is everywhere and nowhere'.⁹

For a long time, sky maps were a matter of astrology rather than astronomy.¹⁰ The vision of the sky they give refers to a geographical position and a period of the year (or are inspired by them). Although they are somewhat emancipated from the central and unique point of view, they are not totally separated from it. In visual terms, modern representations of the sky, including the most recent, are ultimately very little emancipated from it, even when it concerns analogue images sent by telescopes on board satellites.

For Wesley Meuris, the centre of these circles belongs to the unknown. 'In Verticality it is not humankind, because the centre of verticality lies deep beneath the conceptual surface of the Earth.' The questioning of humankind's position at the centre of the universe is akin to rejecting the single central point of view.

By emphasizing the verticality of the gaze, by asserting an ambiguous position as to the position and direction of the gaze – this occurs via the circle, whose centre is only a construction artifice and never a gaze – Wesley Meuris poses the question of the centre of the universe, and it is certainly not humankind. In the cosmos, humankind occupies a shifting position, lost among the planets and among the machines humankind sends there. A wandering assumed by the artist in order to multiply the points of view until he loses the very notion of the point of view.

As codified in the Renaissance, the *perspectiva artificialis* – a mixture of Euclidean geometry and natural vision – is based on a monocular point of view. It too reflects a view of the world. By preferring the map, Wesley Meuris distances himself from this view, but the Observation series, works on paper in watercolour and coloured pencil, cannot. They are in the tradition of naturalist illustration: at the centre of each work is a representation of a satellite, with its photovoltaic panels unfolded. This type of drawing is related to botany, zoology, anatomy or mineralogy, never to objects designed and manufactured by humankind. In the Observation Satellite series, the *passe-partout* includes two windows, the larger one for the satellite and the smaller one for a plan of the rare materials on a planet in another galaxy. The title of each work provides information on the planets observed in this way. The planets belong to distant galaxies and are named by their code in specialized catalogues or atlases, but all this remains obscure to the casual visitor. This precision establishes a strange game between a codified galaxy and a fictitious or real machine, a model.

⁹ Louis Marin, 'La ville dans sa carte et son portrait', in *De la représentation* (Paris, Hautes Etudes, Gallimard, Seuil, 1994), 213–14.

¹⁰ Even though, until the seventeenth century, the two were closely linked and astrology was at the source of astronomy.

The Observation series also depart from the naturalistic drawings by the virtual absence of legends. In the same way, the satellites in Verticality are identified, but the letters of their names are part of the graphic design. In Debris, the only indication, 'critical zone', fits in a small rectangle from which the pointillism unfolds. These absent or incomplete legends allow 'all the possibilities of spatialization and narrative orientation to open up, but of these we will never know anything'.¹¹ Even though the representations of space resulting from the human gaze are multiplying, the fantasies they generate are also multiplying. 'Perhaps', as Wesley Meuris says, 'it has something to do with getting lost. The labyrinth of these stratified observation positions. Which seems paradoxical, especially since much of this equipment concerns navigation and orientation'.

IV.

*We build in this space just as we would on the ground, and therefore must take as our point of departure the concepts of gravity and force of attraction.*¹²

The Reformulate/Reconsider/Replacing series constitute a third facet of Wesley Meuris's recent work. They are 3D panels in wood or black MDF. The surface is structured by relief elements to which loosely wound metal wires sometimes cling, or on which a small cube of coloured polystyrene rests. In formal terms, these structures are reminiscent of the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s.¹³ They differ by their close ties with the Probe sculptures. These panels are monochrome and their apparent abstraction is contradicted by the metal wires that cling to the projections and by the coloured cube placed in one of the corners formed by these relief elements. Reconsider is structured with tips of rods threaded with a nut and a projection that acts as a shelf supporting a small hank of string. It could be the 3D map of a constellation. The position of the coloured cubes in Replacing and the theoretical possibility of moving them, beyond its playful aspect, makes the panel appear as a space in which to formulate hypotheses. They are as far removed from abstraction as they are from common spatial representation, while at the same time participating in both.

They are similar to the avant-garde research of the early twentieth century on account of their desire to establish a new type of view of the world, whether close or infinitely distant, that surrounds us. Whereas the old perspective limited and enclosed space, by shattering the optical centre we can break with finitude and set out to conquer an imaginary or real space. Wesley Meuris thus revives the exploration of possible futures, the very notion of avant-garde.

¹¹ Marin, *La ville*, 212.

¹² 'From "Theses on the PROUN: From painting to architecture" (1920)', <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2013/09/16/proun/>

¹³ Constructivism, Suprematism, Bauhaus, Proun, etc.