



MODERN CONTEMPORARY

Arne Quinze

With an interview with the artist and texts by /
Avec un entretien avec l'artiste et des contributions de

Jean-Pierre Frimbois
Sieghild Lacoere



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John Tittensor

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Arne Quinze Attitude

In the lush, prolific jungle of the international contemporary art scene, the early twenty-first-century artist must, first and foremost, be able to blaze his own trail. He owes it to himself to have what might be called an Art Attitude. The preceding century was the century of endless invention and reassessment, and a time of influential movements: Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Dada, the Bauhaus, Surrealism, Cobra, Pop Art, Fluxus, the New Realism, Conceptualism, and Minimalism—to name only a few. It was also the century of the reappraisal of painting and sculpture in all their forms, with the advent of the new technologies putting the icing on the cake. Art came from the street, too, via such iconic figures as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The last ten years have seen things speed up internationally, with the emergence of the Chinese, African, Japanese, Russian, and Indian scenes: in brief, a new art planet on which the sun never sets and where creativity is endlessly renewed.

Arne Quinze is very much aware of these considerations as his personal artistic approach evolves in the wake of other Belgian contemporaries such as Wim Delvoye, Jan Fabre, and Luc Tuymans. We can already trace his first steps through his experiments in the world of graffiti and his perceptions of architecture. Some segments of that life have been stormy, not to say chaotic, but there has always been personal determination to continue moving ahead, even if this means constantly calling everything into question.

Born in 1971, Quinze belongs to a freshly emergent generation of European visual artists whose common denominator is an urge towards new, identifiable forms. On this front, Arne Quinze advances prepared to struggle. First, there are the *Stilthouses*, those emblems of the notional house that are central to his oeuvre. With their stilts and posts, they appear solid and fragile at the same time. They're also sometimes enhanced with video screens, which place an emphasis on looking. Another mainstay is the *City Views* series, a three-dimensional reinterpretation of his travels and observations worldwide. This is his way of taking a new look at apartment blocks and residential entities that have caught his eye, the shantytowns he finds so moving, even the cities of the future as he imagines them. And all of this is dominated by his use of a highly individual hue of fluorescent red-orange. Setting his sights on Africa, he came up with the *Africa Electronica* sequence, with its distinctive masks reminiscent of his *Stilthouses* but emanating a different kind of energy: that of the rituals and dances of the men and women of Africa, an energy, he says, whose dynamism and sound qualities add up to a group of performances that is positively electronic. Extended to include drawings and mixed-media paintings, this series was shown in London at Phillips de Pury and at the Saatchi Gallery.

Intellectually, Arne Quinze functions in a context given tangible expression in the astonishing *Controlled Chaos*, a multitude of wood shavings painted red and gathered together in a translucent oblong container. This is, and the artist makes no secret of it, a self-portrait: Arne Quinze Attitude. Another high point in his output is the large sculptural installations that have already made him famous, among them *Uchronia*, consigned to the flames at the end of the Burning Man Festival in the Nevada desert in 2006; *Cityscape* (2007), an installation twelve meters high and forty long in Brussels' Louise neighborhood, intended as an invitation to people to come together, meet, and talk; and once again in Brussels, *The Sequence* (2008), eighty meters long and fifteen meters wide, a project aimed at unification and instigated by the Flemish parliament. As the numbers indicate, these kinds of works require many hands: not only the artist, his studio team, and the people who actually conduct the building process, but also all the outside contributors who back projects that ultimately become architectural feats and gathering places. The most recent of these projects is *Camille*, built in Rouen in the summer of 2010 as part of the "Rouen Impressionnée" festival: a vast tangle of wood 120 meters long, up to twenty meters high, and weighing 110 tons. Its site is highly symbolic: on the Boieldieu bridge, running across the Seine from the sophisticated Right Bank to the working-class Left Bank. Arne Quinze's art has to be considered as standing for unity, and this is why the Rouen challenge interested him: social interaction, human relationships, a sharing of emotion triggered by this powerful yet serenely named sculpture, *Camille*. Months of preparation, two weeks in the building, two months in use, and one day for dismantling: Arne Quinze Cycle.

This cycle also left him time to paint the works for the exhibition *Les Jardins The Water Lilies*, also shown in Rouen, at Saint Ouen Abbey. Dedicated to the modernism of Claude Monet, this was an emblematic undertaking for the artist, a demonstration of his personal attachment to merging the modern with the contemporary; of how past, present, and future can intermingle and liberate personal creative energy into an ongoing data-flow of rhythm, imagination, and innovation: Arne Quinze Saga.

Jean-Pierre Frimbois

Arne Quinze Attitude

Dans cette jungle luxuriante qu'est l'art contemporain, considéré de façon internationale, l'artiste de ce début du XXI^e siècle doit être d'abord capable de tracer son propre chemin. Il se doit d'avoir ce que l'on pourrait appeler une *art attitude*. Le siècle précédent a été celui de toutes les inventions ou de toutes les reconsidérations. De puissants mouvements ont émergé : le fauvisme, le cubisme, le futurisme, le constructivisme, le dadaïsme, le Bauhaus, le surréalisme, Cobra, le pop art, Fluxus, le Nouveau réalisme, l'art conceptuel ou minimaliste, pour ne citer que ceux-ci. Le XX^e siècle a été aussi celui de la reconsidération de la peinture et de la sculpture, sous toutes les formes. L'arrivée des nouvelles technologies complète cet ensemble. L'art est aussi né de la rue avec ses figures emblématiques comme Keith Haring ou Jean-Michel Basquiat. Ces dix dernières années auront été celles de l'accélération internationale. Elles ont été marquées par l'émergence des scènes chinoise, africaine, japonaise, russe ou indienne. Le soleil ne se couche jamais sur cette nouvelle planète de l'art actuel et la création est en perpétuelle relance. Autant de considérations dont est conscient Arne Quinze au moment où son approche artistique personnelle est en train de se consolider, dans le sillage d'autres personnalités de l'art actuel belge comme Wim Delvoye, Jan Fabre ou Luc Tuymans.

Il existe déjà une traçabilité de son parcours initiatique : celle de ses expériences dans le monde du graff et de son regard porté sur l'architecture. Certaines de ses tranches de vie auront été mouvementées, voire chaotiques, mais toujours empreintes de la volonté qui est la sienne d'avancer, même s'il faut tout remettre en question. Né en 1971, il appartient à cette nouvelle génération de plasticiens européens en pleine émergence qui ont en commun cette volonté de création de formes nouvelles et identifiables. Sur ce plan, Arne Quinze avance en ordre de bataille. Nous citerons d'abord ses *Stilthouses* qui sont autant de balises artistiques de cette notion de maison, axe central de son œuvre. Avec leurs piliers-échasses, elles semblent à la fois solides et fragiles. Elles sont aussi parfois enrichies d'écrans vidéo. Une affaire de regard. Autre point d'appui, la série des *City Views*, sa réinterprétation, en trois dimensions, de ses voyages et observations autour du monde. Voici comment il revisite les immeubles ou les groupes d'habitation qui l'ont fait réagir, les bidonvilles qui l'auront bouleversé ou même les cités du futur telles qu'il les imagine. Avec une couleur dominante, ce rouge orangé fluo qui lui est personnel. En se focalisant sur l'Afrique, il a fait naître la séquence *Africa Electronica*, avec ces masques particuliers qui ne sont pas sans évoquer ses *Stilthouses*, mais avec une énergie différente : celle issue des rituels ou des danses des hommes et des femmes d'Afrique, à tel point, dit-il, que cet ensemble de performances actives et sonores devient électronique. Cette série, prolongée

par des dessins et des peintures en technique mixte, a été présentée à Londres chez Phillips de Pury et à la Saatchi Gallery. Intellectuellement, Arne Quinze fonctionne dans la mouvance de ce qu'il appelle le chaos contrôlé et qu'il a matérialisé par cette étonnante pièce *Controlled Chaos*. Une multitude de petites coupes de bois peintes en rouge, amalgamées dans un parallélépipède translucide. Il s'agit, en fait, d'un autoportrait, totalement revendiqué. Arne Quinze Attitude. Autre point d'orgue de sa production, ses grandes sculptures-installations architecturales en bois qui l'ont déjà rendu célèbre. Citons *Uchronia* en 2006 dans le désert du Nevada pour le festival *Burning Man*, installation immolée par le feu à la fin des festivités, *Cityscape*, installation publique de 12 mètres de hauteur et de 40 mètres de longueur, érigée dans le quartier Louise de Bruxelles en 2007, voulue comme une invitation à se réunir, se rencontrer, se parler, et aussi *The Sequence* en 2008, toujours à Bruxelles, sur l'initiative du parlement flamand, autre proposition fédératrice, œuvre de 80 mètres de long et de 15 mètres de large. Autant de chiffres qui sous-entendent que ce type de travail doit être monté à plusieurs : d'une part Arne Quinze, l'équipe de son studio et celle chargée de la construction proprement dite, d'autre part, tous les intervenants extérieurs qui participent et avalisent ces projets artistiques devenant à la fois des prouesses architecturales et des lieux de rassemblement. Le dernier en date aura été celui intitulé *Camille*, réalisé à Rouen en cet été 2010 dans le cadre du festival *Rouen impressionnée*. Un vaste ensemble de bois enchevêtré, de 120 mètres de long et allant, par endroits, jusqu'à 20 mètres de hauteur, pour un poids total de 110 tonnes. Une implantation hautement symbolique puisque placée sur le pont Boieldieu, cette transversale entre le quartier huppé de la rive droite et le quartier populaire de la rive gauche. L'art d'Arne Quinze doit être considéré sous le signe de l'union. Voici pourquoi ce défi rouennais l'a intéressé. Interaction sociale, relations humaines, émotions partagées avec ce puissant déclencheur répondant au doux nom de *Camille*. Des mois d'élaboration, deux semaines de construction, deux mois de circulation, un jour de déconstruction. Cycle Arne Quinze. Tout en ayant pris le temps de peindre, comme il l'a fait pour l'exposition *Les Jardins The Water Lilies*, montrée aussi à Rouen, dans l'abbatiale de Saint-Ouen. Dédiée au modernisme de Claude Monet et travail emblématique pour Arne, car montrant son attachement personnel à fusionner les dénominations de moderne et de contemporain. Créer de façon actuelle, sublimée par le souvenir vivant des grands maîtres que l'on s'est donné, c'est ce qu'il appelle *Modern Contemporary* : il s'agit ici de la manière dont passé, présent et futur s'interpénètrent afin de libérer une énergie créatrice personnelle pour que celle-ci s'inscrive dans des données de flux et de rythme, d'imagination et d'innovation. Saga Arne Quinze.

Jean-Pierre Frimbois

“Creating is all about sharing”

Houses that are also his house. Masks that are not masks. Paintings as so many adventures. Installations are intended as connections. Sculptures embellish the adventure. So many subjects for conversation.

May 2010, in Arne Quinze’s studio in Sint-Martens-Latem, Belgium.

Jean-Pierre Frimbois: Going back through your memories of your early childhood, do you recall the first things you drew, created, shaped, or brought into being?

Arne Quinze: It was being around the microcosms of nature that have always had a great influence on me, both at a vital level and at an artistic one. I would draw and that made me feel good. I began this special discovery of the world around me very young—when I was three—and I remember that, by age eight, I was mainly interested in robots and manga. I was intrigued by everything Japanese or Chinese. I made tubes that I painted and wore—that way I became a robot. My parents separated when I was nine; that was very disturbing for me and played a crucial part in the development of my personality. As a teenager, I was withdrawn, and I invented private worlds for myself. That lasted quite some time. Figures and names have never really worked for me. I’ve stayed someone who relies chiefly on his visual memory.

Frimbois: Who were the first artists to burst into your life or have an influence on you?

Quinze: The one that springs to mind immediately

is the great Japanese master Hokusai: so much so that, a few years later, I had one of his marvelous worlds tattooed on my back and part of my arms. From the time I was a teenager his ability to create remarkable settings always fascinated me. I know that he left an incredible number of sketches in his notebooks, and sketches play a very special part in my work. I've also been told that his tombstone bears a quotation beginning, "Oh freedom, beautiful freedom!" I like that, too. The rest of my early culture has to do with my attraction towards samurai stories, robots, comics like *Captain Flam*, from the late seventies onwards—that world of fantastic, unreal animation. Later I moved on to magazines like *Pilote* and *Métal Hurlant*, which were also a way of escaping from the world as it is.

Frimbois: Then you turned towards graffiti. How did that start?

Quinze: For two years, when I was fifteen and sixteen, I took classes at the Academy of Art in Brussels. I drew every day. It was a real pleasure, like the pleasure of learning to paint. My drawings were aggressive at that time, because I couldn't find my place in society. I was on a different wavelength. I even started living on the street. I was going to start a group of my own, because in the world of graffiti you mustn't be alone—ideas like boundaries and territory can easily get out of hand. Very soon I was doing graffiti seriously, spraying whole buses and trains. I was one of the first to start using the inside of metro stations, not giving a damn about the security cameras. The walls were the only canvas I had at the time. I instinctively used dripping, making my spray-pak paint run down the walls. I was at the opposite extreme from what all the others were doing. I had these volcanic high spirits, and an energy I've hung on to right up until now. Surviving, not going under, creating a better world through my art—those were my obsessions.

Frimbois: A really wild youth, then. And what came next in your personal history?

Quinze: I went through a period, you might say, of total excess, during which drugs were a pretty complicated experience, but one that made me discover another part of myself. LSD, for example, can trigger

a real atomic blast in your head. It's dangerous and alluring at the same time, but I was never into self-destruction. I was lucky enough to stop in time, when I turned twenty. Another experience was working in a factory for a year, slicing up steel sheets. Daily contact with steel and automatic work left me time to think. It was like a long period of artistic meditation. I also started getting into everything to do with polyester and concentrating on the third dimension. I made things out of polyester and exhibited with that fantastic artist Herman Brood, who died tragically in 2001. There were exhibitions with Takashi Murakami and David Lynch, too, in the disused basement of the main station in Brussels and in Amsterdam as well. I discovered the art world with great curiosity.

Frimbois: Which art world are we talking about here?

Quinze: The contemporary art world, with all its excitement and full-time partying. But what really grabbed me was the world of what's called modern art. Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollock, Alexander Calder—the quintet that fires all my artistic emotion—and Claude Monet, of course. I knew all about them from going to exhibitions and devouring art books. I kept up my experiments with polyester pictures for a while, and I said to myself, why not make a design object that could become a multiple? When I say something, I do it. I had to experiment. I didn't know anyone in the design world, but what the hell, I was going to come up with my own strategy.

Frimbois: And the result was the pouf/stool *Primary*, in 1999: an extremely geometrical, not to say minimalist seat made of polyurethane foam for indoor or outdoor use. Did success come knocking straight away?

Quinze: Absolutely not, because we needed to invest at first in order to continue to create. The company got bigger, and that's how an experience I saw as taking a year became an adventure lasting five years. That's all finished now. At the same time, I'd reworked my wood installations and kept on painting. I also got a real artistic jolt from Jean Dubuffet's *Hourloupe* cycle. It's a world of pure sign, unknown language, and the unreal, a parallel world whose cells slot into each other. I also loved his thickening

technique, something like masonry, with the mix that included stuff like sand, gravel, tar, plaster, paint, and even asphalt—and all that, I’m told, cooked up in pots. And then he drew into the magma with a trowel, a soup spoon, a scraper, a knife, a wire brush, and even his fingers. That’s what taking risks is all about.

Frimbois: I’d like us to talk about a notion that’s particularly dear to you: architecture. So where should we start?

Quinze: The moment my street life began I was seeing things from below, experiencing the city in a different way. How to survive in this jungle? How to eat? Where to sleep? There you’re directly plugged into your own construction mode, your functioning, your personal logistics. I looked at the houses and buildings very intensely—an architecture which for me was both human and urban, and which can be found in my work now.

Frimbois: Now let’s look at your sculpture. The works are mixed media: wood, cardboard, polyurethane, paint, and marker. Some of them are on metal bases. Others have their own wooden plinths. In the titles one notices recurring notions like *House* and *Home*. What’s all this about?

Quinze: It’s a search for a place where I feel good. When you’re a kid, you drape a blanket over a table and you go underneath. That’s the first house—the camp, you call it. And then, I remember, there’s the garden of the house, and around the garden another wall. And behind that the city, itself surrounded by another wall. On my travels I see so many different cultures, but ultimately they all end up building houses as protection and a place to be. The work *My Home, My House* can be considered a permanent quest for the best of all worlds—in a way that’s not utopian, but positive. The *City Views* are slices of cities, they’re what I see around me, my visual take on how the houses are built. The *Stilthouses* are like human beings. You think they’re fragile because they’re set on tall posts, like long legs. We human beings stand on two legs and always keep our balance. It’s a question of survival. I like my *Stilthouses* to be set up as high as possible, so as to have the best possible view. I often choose this very saturated orange-red for them. The idea is to find

the color the most in contradiction with the natural materials in other works. I’ve occasionally used another color, a light purple for example, but not often. The notion of contradiction very much underpins my *Stilthouses*.

Frimbois: You mentioned a multicultural factor in the designing of your sculptures and installations. Could you tell us more about that?

Quinze: In the course of my travels I’ve noticed that, in cities, you always see the same big apartment blocks. You don’t notice any basic difference, except architecturally. The linking factor is the human, but this humanity seems to be living in cells or compartments. So what’s the orchestration involved, and what’s my orchestration going to be? This is part of what I’m trying to work out.

Frimbois: One also notices in the blocks making up *City Views* that you’ve done away with elements like the street and the sky and even the inhabitants. Everything seems very compacted—and very closely thought out, too.

Quinze: When you look at a city, you only see the buildings and apartments horizontally. It’s as if the sky is absent. This makes up the cutout of what I call my windows on the world, which can also be considered personal postcards. The thought-out part is connected with my trips and moving about. I’m also working in the field of the thought-out when I’m doing my sketches. Then another story gets under way, the story of the rhythms that are in my head. That’s when I start getting materials together—wood, paper, cardboard, metal—and storing them away meticulously. All these components—natural materials I feel very close to—will then be assembled, given a coat of polyurethane and painted in a booth like the ones used for painting cars. These three-dimensional assemblages can give rise to other versions of my windows on the world. I’m thinking here of the mixed-media pieces made for the *Africa Electronica* series, with wood, paper, paint, pencil, marker, and adhesive tape. There are lots of volumes and layers interacting. It’s as if I were out to confuse the viewer, but in fact a certain legibility remains, together with a striving for an overall compositional equilibrium.

Frimbois: To go further into this notion of equilibrium, let's come back to the *Stilthouses*. Why have they been designed in such radically different sizes?

Quinze: As I recall, the biggest *Stilthouse* is sixteen meters high. The smallest is sixteen centimeters. We're looking at a proportion of 1:100. As it happens, when I was a kid I loved climbing to the very tops of trees. There you have a very different view and you feel as if you're protected by the branches you're leaning on and the leaves that surround and hide you and let you observe. Maybe that's where we have to go looking for the origins of my approach in *Stilthouses*. But whatever their size, I approach them all in the same way, especially via their contact with the earth, and sometimes even their attachment to it. The difference, of course, is in the medium chosen, as they don't involve the same parameters in terms of physics, let's say. I look into different notions, such as cities of the future which people will never come down from: apartment blocks on piles, for example, and shantytowns. Others are even self-portraits. Here I'm thinking in particular of *Mansize Stilthouse*, which you singled out for its look of greater solidity. And then there are taller ones. They delimit the world we need to build for ourselves. These are houses that I construct and deconstruct at the same time. I'm caught up all the time in this duality. If I build a wall around myself, I open it up as well and head off in search of what's happening elsewhere. What also fascinates me is the seeming fragility of these constructions and of people. You have the impression they could collapse at any moment, like in real life, but in fact they hold together. And if there are any problems you can always start again. I've seen shantytowns all over the world that make you wonder how they stay up. But they do, obeying their own rhythm and their own alchemy. I paid tribute to them with the organic sculpture *Bidonville City*, which you could compare to a beehive—more deconstructed and unstructured, but just as rhythmic.

Frimbois: Another major segment of your oeuvre is the recent *Africa Electronica* series, which is shot through with the whole continent's seething energy. Could you tell us something about that?

Quinze: The reason we're having this conversation is because of the forthcoming book *Modern Contemporary*, so I'll start by showing you the painting from

the *Africa Electronica* sequence that's going to be on the cover. I wanted something more startling than the covers of the other books about me, based on the *Stilthouses* and the big sculptures. So how did I do it? I worked on recycled paper. You can see the energy being discharged as I painted, and the overpainting, the words in boxes and other bits of painting as well. And the whole thing will be highlighted by a fluorescent red-orange spine.

Frimbois: In the painting you've just shown me, there's a lot of adhesive tape used as an integral part of the work. What's the aim here?

Quinze: I've always liked working with adhesive tape. I frame, I amalgamate, I stick several sheets together, I make up blocks. It's the same as in my constructions: I connect, I exaggerate the attachment points, I consolidate the houses. These things are kinds of safety measures and evidence of my intervention in the finished work.

Frimbois: To come back to the philosophy behind the *Africa Electronica* series: what are its roots?

Quinze: Off the cuff I'd say my travels, and Picasso's masks. The title *Africa Electronica* might seem contradictory. The Africa I'm talking about isn't the reductive one of a dark continent, with the near-colonial connotations that implies. For me what's involved is an entire people, men and women who give off such positive energy in their rituals and dances that they literally become electronic. I began the series with paintings and masks that I very quickly found too static. I couldn't see the fusion and the flow that I was looking for. The works seemed slightly haughty, as if staring us down inflexibly. So I set their lines in motion by introducing more materials, and collage techniques and new technologies. In fact, at first I was making African masks: contemporary ones, but still essentially African. So I decided to make my own masks, and they became much more abstract. Here I was working on the same level as for my *Stilthouses*, which are houses and not houses at the same time. Just as these are masks and not masks. And so I can really claim them as mine. You can see things that look like eyes, which are actually made up of a slow-motion video installation. That's my take on this African world that speaks to me so eloquently.