



© Filip Dujardin

Labyrinth – an exhibition of Boolean voids. C-mine Genk, Belgium

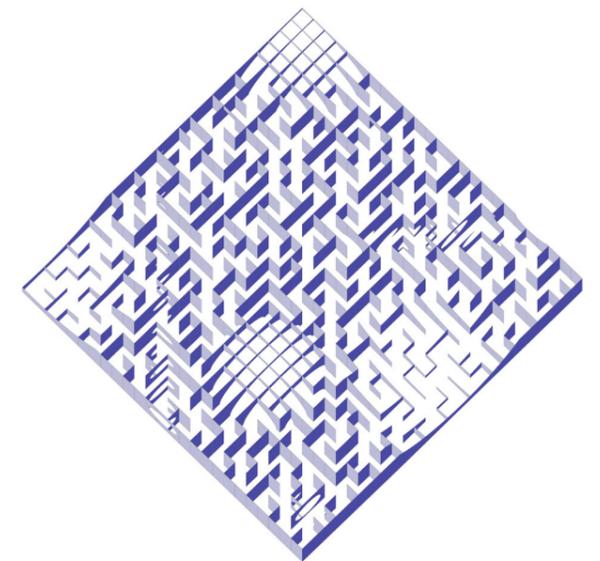
The practice of Gijs Van Vaerenbergh, an artistic and architectural collaboration of Pieterjan Gijs en Arnout Van Vaerenbergh (both 1983), originates from a staged ‘ignorance’ about what architecture is, which leads them to investigate what it could be. Since 2007 they create – parallel to their more ‘traditional’ architectural practice – sculptural installations and interventions that still refer to architecture, but are also stripped from at least one of its fundamental features: functionality. That is: if one understands functionality in a strict sense, because in the end, Gijs Van Vaerenbergh’s installations do still establish a relation with the viewer and intervene in the landscape and the way we experience it.

For the programme on the occasion of the 10th birthday of the arts centre C-mine in the city of Genk, Gijs Van Vaerenbergh again created an intervention that can be located at the threshold of architecture. This time, they found inspiration in an existing form of dysfunctional architecture, with a very long history: the labyrinth, which traditionally does not only defy all transparency, but also lacks a well-defined function besides perhaps diversion. Whereas earlier works of Gijs Van Vaerenbergh often transformed existing structures like cranes, a church or a greenhouse by stripping them from their immediate use, for this installation they started from a structure that is already a form of anti-architecture.

‘Labyrinth’ is a typology that reveals itself as a typology. On one level, this happens by directing the movements of the user to an absurd extent, as is also the case in the classic labyrinth. At the same time, however, the traditional structure is transformed by a series of Boolean transformations, resulting in cut-outs and views that allow the viewer to orient himself towards the labyrinth and the environment. Furthermore, the production and construction processes remain visible in the final design. And finally, visitors who ascend the mine shafts, can view the labyrinth as a materialized floor plan and sculptural whole – a perspective that runs against what a labyrinth should do: conceal itself.

As was already the case in earlier works, Gijs Van Vaerenbergh incorporates tensions between design and result, drawing and execution, part and whole, form and transparency. If one analyses these tensions as being part of a self-relexive exercise, conceptual gesture or attempt at artistic autonomy, however, one loses sight of the very real insertion of the installation in public space. More than their other works, ‘Labyrinth’ situates itself within the (institutional) context, not only visually, but also symbolically, by asking: what does this sculpture want? And what are their authors after?

One could say that with ‘Labyrinth’ Gijs Van Vaerenbergh towers above their own work. The viewer is allowed to have this very same view when he looks down upon the wandering visitors – a gaze that reminds us of the murderous writer Jack in the legendary scene in *The Shining*, where he imagines his family getting lost in a model of the labyrinth outside. Every labyrinth has a sardonic quality that is connected with the power of its creator – a power and thus also a responsibility every architect should be familiar with. Opposed to this connotation, are the pleasure and sculptural experience, which evidently play a central role in the context of C-mine. Happily preserving a balance between those two poles, ‘Labyrinth’ questions its own autonomy as well as its function.



© Gijs Van Vaerenbergh