

October 25th, 2022

BRAFA ART FAIR

BRAFA 2023: Interview with Nicolas de Liedekerke and Daniel Culot from Volume Architecture



BRAFA 2023: Nicolas de Liedekerke & Daniel Culot © Olivier Pirard

You have been working as architects for BRAFA for 20 years. How did this collaboration begin?

NDL: For several years, we had been designing the stands of a gallery, specialised in tribal art. When the Foire des Antiquaires de Belgique decided to move from the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels to Tour & Taxis, they needed an architect to compose an overall look and to understand the new volumes, and Bernard de Grunne referred us to BRAFA. We proposed a project that immediately gained approval, even though we had no previous experience working for fairs.

DC: At the time, it was a real challenge because the Tour & Taxis district didn't have good press.

NDL: We also had to find the right way to enable people to move easily around the aisles. Not favouring such and such a stand and using the space with its high ceilings. From the beginning of this shared adventure, Beatrix Bourdon has placed her trust in us. It is thanks to her constant collaboration that all of this has been achieved, with great success each year. For 20 years, Beatrix, Daniel and I have maintained a very constructive dialogue. I think it's fair to call it a symbiosis.

What does your work consist of at BRAFA?

NDL: First of all, there is the practical aspect: having the floor plan with the installation of the stands accepted by security, by the fire department. Then, we bring a look that should somehow create a buzz, that should make people want to go to this fair and contribute to its status as a must-see event.

DC: All of this on a relatively reasonable budget (laughs). We're kind of like show directors. The importance is how the visitors will perceive the Fair: from the moment they leave their cars, up until the discovery of the stands, it must be a prestigious experience.

NDL: The difficulty is not doing too much. It is foremost a fair for exhibitors, the goal is for them to be able to sell their works. There is a limit that we can't cross. You must find the right balance.

Can you tell us how you get inspired and how you manage to renew yourself from year to year?

NDL: We become imbued with what we see, and with everything that moves us artistically. We follow the spirit of the times, especially in terms of colours. With globalisation, influences can spread in an instant.

DC: For me, ideas are clouds that pass in the sky and every creative person, consciously or unconsciously, grabs those clouds and makes something new out of them by using them or recomposing them.

NDL: We always discuss the project first amongst ourselves, then comes the presentation to Beatrix Bourdon, and her contribution of goals and good ideas that enrich the project.

DC: We don't really have an ego. We work together to make the project better. Whether the idea comes from one or the other is not so important. What is important is the quality of the project.

Do you each have one particular memory of the Fair?

NDL: We will never forget January 17th, 2007, when the glass roof broke off at Tour & Taxis due to a storm. I had to tell Beatrix Bourdon, "We're going to have to close the Fair." Fortunately, after a lightning-fast repair managed by the Ecole de Cirque in Brussels, we were able to reopen the Fair and end on a positive memory.

DC: I have some memories of particular entrance halls, like the one shaped as the belly of a whale, made with ropes. We put coal on the ground to make everything brighter. Thanks to this, we managed to create a somewhat mysterious atmosphere with very simple means.

The theme of the 2023 edition is Art Nouveau. You met Benjamin Zurstrassen, the curator of the Horta Museum. Together with Beatrix Bourdon, the Managing Director of BRAFA, you have selected original drawings by Victor Horta. What will they be used for?

NDL: These drawings will be used to create the carpet. We're not going to make the Fair a whole Art Nouveau ensemble, that would be too much. The goal is to be able to show Victor Horta's work in a different way.

Do you feel privileged to have access to this kind of material?

NDL: From our position as architects, Victor Horta is an icon. When you look at his drawings, you realise that he drew extremely well. Even if it is not all to your liking, there is such quality and creativity that you can't help but be impressed.

DC: You can tell he had great talent.

NDL: The light side of the drawings is really in tune with the times. Something fresh, not too fixed.

Can you already give us any information about what we will be able to discover at the Fair in terms of decoration?

NDL: Since it has been 20 years that we have been working on the Foire des Antiquaires, now renamed BRAFA, this year we are having fun creating a new composition that will be inspired by all our creations made for BRAFA over this 20-year period. A kind of retrospective, but in an unobtrusive way....