

## a posteriori Mihnea Mircan

Museum de Fundatie / Kasteel het Nijenhuis

Against the rich historical backdrop of Kasteel het Nijenhuis, home of artworks collected by Dirk Hannema (1896-1984), *a posteriori* deals with the friction between current and historical conditions as they impact our understanding of art. Invited to create an exhibition about the Hannema collection, Van Houwelingen replied: "Hannema is the most remarkable museum director in Dutch art history because of his outstanding collection – even if controversial, as it includes several false or at least questionable attributions to great masters -, his exceptional critical eye and absolute authority in the art business, as well as his role as NSB representative for Museums during Word War II." Hans van Houwelingen installs here a number of art works that function either independently or are interspersed, as critical reactions, with the collection, art works that are his own or that appear as cases of suspended authorship or ownership. By attributing works to Dirk Hannema, the artist becomes wilfully embroiled in the moral controversy he instigates, shirking the comfort and supposed neutrality of the documentary approach. "I like the incorrectness of becoming part of the moral tombola, rather than leaving myself out." These works and the art-historical or curatorial operations they embody realign the collection in an intriguing configuration of timelines and historical misalliances.

Van Houwelingen's intervention creates something of a three-dimensional, multi-scalar arrangement of works, political or aesthetic circumstances and the shifting, historicized moral considerations that these activate. The artist proposes a game where 'historical truth' colludes with lies and fabrication, clarification with complicity, 'artistic research' with artistic invention. Here, the indictment and exoneration of Hannema function as warped perspective lines, seeking to grasp the elusive vanishing point of art's asymmetrical relation to morality. Van Houwelingen proceeds by historical supplements, complicating and straining – as opposed to simplifying – an already fraught question of heritage. Speculative parasites infect and perturb a known course of events, bringing its distinct parts into reciprocal visibility. *A posteriori* is a hybrid of fiction and investigation, of values and verdicts, time and politics, marble, paint, rice and gold – referents in an allegory of art's positives and negatives, of what art represents and what it permits, of the spaces it opens to either imagination or power.

For Van Houwelingen, Dirk Hannema figures as a hinge to articulate a distinction between 'dry' and 'moist': these striking antonyms do not denote here physical properties, but the integrity of the museological object on the one hand and, on the other, the fluid markers of morality that constellate around it at each historical juncture. Each epoch "leaves a moist trail of moralism" on the art object it inspects. The difference is particularly apt if we think of humidity as a contaminating agent, as a medium for infection and the undoing of masterpieces, as invisible enemy of the museum. Humidity is to be banished from the spheres of patrimonial protection, be they the caves of Lascaux or Chauvet, or the hygrometer-monitored storage or presentation areas of museums worldwide. Moisture, its bacteria-carrying molecules eroding precious surfaces, deteriorates contours and reduces shapes to a blur – for Van Houwelingen it is an analogue for another corrosion, as hardly perceptible with the naked eye, resulting from shifts in the ethical paradigms that frame the understanding of art over time. One epoch's hero is another villain, one's epoch's landmark work is another's worthless copy, one's epoch 'negro servant' is another's 'portrait of a girl'. Such unstable families of attributes, the allegiances and strategies they stem from or reinforce, have the capacity to make and unmake artworks or reputations, to

sanctify or demote, to grant or withdraw historical significance. With each change of aesthetic or ethical outlook, the storage that holds our collective moral values is flooded.

The story of Dirk Hannema is well-known: young, visionary director of the Boijmans, Nazi collaborator, taste-maker of immense authority, practicing an almost mystical exercise of intuition and connoisseurship. Hannema rescued an early Van Gogh painting from oblivion, taking the risk of public scorn, and wrongly attributed to Johannes Vermeer more than a dozen works, among which *The Emmaus* was the most notorious case. This painting's true author, the forger Han van Meegeren, is – in Van Houwelingen's perspective – Hannema's mirror image, his negative twin. If Hannema was a broker of value, Van Meegeren trafficked in valuelessness: elevating craftsmanship to the point where it could pass for a unique manifestation of old mastery and, conversely, disseminating his bucolic *Deer* in countless copies that adorned, as icons of domestic solace, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch homes. The 'autocrat' encounters the 'democrat' in Van Houwelingen's ambiguous script, and they converse allegorically about work, worth, prestige and fraud. About art as a form validated from above or fashioned from below: in Hannema's case painting is a site for both contemplative absorption and the consolidation of professional preeminence. At the other end of spectrum, for Van Meegeren, the paintings of old masters are to be looked at intently, and furtively: he replicates their deftness, impersonates their facility, and he bakes canvases to obtain fissures, controlled decrepitude and other false signs of time's passage. Finally, Van Meegeren 'unique' forgeries and his endlessly reproduced *Deer* series, Hannema's artistic or political hits and misses interlock in a reflection where 'high' and 'low' are collapsed, where painstakingly acquired or aped mastery are no longer distinguishable. Because, in Van Houwelingen's project, Hannema and Van Meegeren's allegorical conversation is not about 'quality', but about art's capacity to persuade – to be a conduit of power regardless if persuasion is a way to exert the influence of the expert or, on the contrary, to con the expert. Regardless if it concerns Hannema or another highly trained art historian, Goering or another plundering invader, or any of the owners of Van Meegeren's *Deer*. In all these cases, and functioning as a kind of short-circuit between 'high' and 'low' valuation, art becomes pure instrumentality, its efficiency measured in degrees of authority or monetarily quantified.

Van Houwelingen's conceptualization of value is a ruse where scales are purposefully tipped, and criteria of validation rigged. To give one immediate examples, the walls of the Castle's hunting lodge are crammed with dozens of copies of the *Deer* that Van Houwelingen was able to source from flea markets and websites such as eBay, hanging like trophies. His concept crystallizes most clearly in what might his exhibition's centerpiece, for which a stage is set as we approach the castle. Hannema's collection includes some African portraits, of which the 'Negro' normally hides on the banks of the moat, his head turned away from the visitor, gazing across the water. The clunky sculpture, whose stylistic allegiances are somewhere between Michelangelo's *Slaves* and the Modernist preoccupation with primitivism, has swapped places with Zadkine's *Sundial*, a work from the same period. In *a posteriori* the figurative sculpture is moved to the main site of the estate, in front of the entrance to the castle. While museum placards remain in the place they occupied prior to this second move, Zadkine's sundial now resides by the water.

It is in this area of Hannema's posterity that *a posteriori* intervenes most decisively. The collection is complemented with a new work, titled *the Art of Value*, that is wrongly and eloquently attributed to Hannema, subversively commenting on his attributions as a curator, on the political circumstances of his practice. To history's already charged findings about Hannema, Van Houwelingen adds another accusation: a counter-monument to slavery, sufficiently ambivalent to both emit a pungent whiff of racism, as well as to update the historical record with a reflection on post-colonial 'heritage'. This work is a copy of an Atlas, one of the four propping up the lower colonnade of the funeral monument for the Doge Giovanni Pesaro, at Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. Black marble clad, and masked, in white marble, this figure would deserve pages of symbolic and

political exegesis, as a disturbing example of the perverse alliance of mythology and colonialism. Yet what is immediately striking upon visiting Pesaro's funeral monument is that the four Atlases not only sustain the sculptural/ architectural edifice within which the Doge's apotheosis unfolds, but also that each carries a bag of grains. The Atlases sustain two distinct weights, they operate within two distinct regimes of value. They work, so to speak, twice: once as constructive elements, pillars for the Doge's influence and pedestals for his immortality, but also as copies of their own, toiling selves – should slaves be entitled to have their own selves. The Atlas is both Atlas and the mimesis of a slave, or a slave to architecture and capitalism. The motions of an actual African slave in Renaissance Venice, the signs of dehumanizing physical exertion, are arrested, so that the figure's stillness, crushed by the weight of the bag, can be employed sculpturally, as both body and as image, as human column and as negative image of his master's heavenly flight.

Van Houwelingen pursues this thread by a two-fold maneuver: his replica Atlas is 'prettied' with a real gold Rolex watch, which in such a context cannot but look like a copy, and burdened with an impossible stack of bags of Surinamese rice. Uncomfortably propped atop the marble piece, these 'original' bags make visible an economy that perpetuates colonial relations, forms of production and consumption that encode new, fuzzier modalities of slavery. Yet, perhaps more significantly, the vertical thrust of the bags emphasizes the void above. The Atlas no longer carries an edifice of marble and metaphor on his shoulders; the image of a comprehensible world is replaced with a collage of contrasting signifiers: crushing weight and the nothingness overhead, real rice and real gold, extreme poverty and extreme wealth. What is more 'out of place' here, inappropriate – and by which standards of moral or aesthetic adequacy? The slave accumulates so many contradictory attributes that the work extends across different – incommensurate perhaps – scales of value. Place and race, marble and collectability, the cheapness of rice and its value when it becomes part of an artwork, the value of solid gold and the worth of the work it ambivalently embellishes, victimization and liberation – all these contradictory markers enter a strange alliance to resist an easy assessment of the work. Equally importantly, the replica Atlas becomes protagonist in the murky, unsettled narrative of Hans van Houwelingen's own work, which orchestrates these material and symbolic transfers between a Venetian church and Hannema's collection, real and abstract subjugation, real and abstract emancipation, artistic evidence of inequality and its material equivalent, its calculation between the worthless and the exorbitantly priced.

As opposed to a chart of neatly ordered historical facts, Van Houwelingen bends timelines until they meet, or loop, to form something like a three-dimensional object, whose facets – time, place, value – are inseparable from one another. *The Art of Value* is a clear manifestation of the project's preoccupation with the notion of 'historical supplement': the unwarranted, unnecessary 'what if' that insinuates itself in the story to muddy it, and to complicate the question of a moral vantage point from where we would unify, and reconcile, the story's many ethical underpinnings. 'What if...?' – van Houwelingen's rhetorical strategy of historiographic speculation and artistic invention, sculpting shapes at the edges of the plausible, the imaginable.