

Death and the Statues Mihnea Mircan

Hans van Houwelingen's *Sluipweg*, waarlangs de dood heeft weten te ontsnappen charts our understanding of death today, our moral and political consent to it. The monumental amplitude of the work relies upon a particular segment of recent history - the emergence of a new paradigm of death-making and dying, accompanied by a marked political instrumentalization of compassion. This text stems from the premise that *Sluipweg* monumentalizes a sense of fragility pervading the contemporary world and being negotiated between political power and its subjects, that it plays the role monuments have always played, yet in relation to a dramatic change in our perception of collective time and historiographic inscription. The past that *Sluipweg* refers to lacks splendour, the future it points to is an unhinged agglomeration or an anticlimactic flow of time that meticulously subjects individual aspirations to an erosive "logic of big numbers"[1]. Its present tense, like the majority of Van Houwelingen's works, is a potent counter-argument to the assumptions and strategies of the monumental genre, part in an extended critique of the hypocrisies and fantasies of political predominance evinced by our memorial culture.

To the visitor at Kunstfort Vijfhuizen, pacing the tombstones and devoting a second to imagine each of the lives and deaths whose end these stones emphatically proclaim, or at least realizing the imperative of such a moral reflex, the work invites the ritual gestures of pilgrimage. Its structure and atmosphere are unmistakably those of the war memorial.

There is no other immediate correspondent for the mutation operated here by Hans van Houwelingen, no other term of comparison: "A footpath of a few hundred tombstones, obtained from recently-disinterred graves, was built along the old artillery wall surrounding the nineteenth-century fortress at Vijfhuizen. Surviving relatives made the gravestones available for this purpose during the previous two years. Each of them gave up their claim to a personal monument so that the stones could be recycled as a single, large work of art - a work that calls attention not only to death but also to its absence." Instead of an elaborate setting for the preservation of a dead body or idea, the work produces a drastically different experience where the trauma does not precede the memorial. The memorial institutes the very history of violence it deplors and reminds future generations that of: it is it. Maya Lin's celebrated Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington was a troubling image of distant death, and so was Chris Burden's *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, created as a polemic response to the first work and inscribing onto a vague replica of Lin's design a few million names picked from a Vietnamese phone book. Hans van Houwelingen's is an image - or rather a piece - of death brought here, from a distance that can support all sorts of metaphoric extensions, yet still manifests itself in all determination. A relic of death - as, conversely, there are relics of a saint's life.

The Kunstfort is a particularly appropriate environment for the work to actualize its disquieting life-size quality precisely because of Vijfhuizen's intricate relation to time. First, the fort was built before the war, before the birth of aviation that rendered the quasi-biblical defence strategy perfectly irrelevant, that consumed its history before it started, or transformed it into a loop of cause and unrealized effect. It also stands after the war, a war waged on other battlefields, won by combatants whose existence or identity was not prescribed in the original architectural and martial equation. It is pure obsolescence, untouched by usage, time past in the absence of incident and hence the purest, undisputed form of history. The historical hiatus that the Kunstfort represents places the construction ahead of yet another confrontation: Vijfhuizen lies in our own post-historical chasm, and before our end. It is the withdrawal from history that Van Houwelingen's piece disrupts, by constructing here another timeline, by articulating the endpoints and trajectory of another passage. *Sluipweg* is an effective bridge between a history that never came and the history to come - inevitably and forever, at least in terms of our ability to conceive of history. It produces a looming future, which we can frame as the spectre of yet another war, the dominant factor traversing contemporary society and continuously refashioning its political and moral attitudes, or as the vacuum against which our deaths occur. The

work forces the site into a relation of adherence to another species of time, political time perhaps which is necessarily scripted in view of an Apocalypse. Because there is no ideology without the danger of utter obliteration, a danger that ideology itself averts, rephrases, and averts again. There is no history other than building up to a cathartic culmination, to a point of explosive, final intelligibility, be it the Big Crunch, implosive Doomsday or a slight miscalculation engendering the gridlock of our interwoven systems and global shutdown.

La mort et les statues is a book co-authored in 1946 by photographer Pierre Jahan and poet Jean Cocteau that documents bronze monuments overturned, dismembered, decapitated or set-aside in a Parisian scrap yard. The essay is a combination of distanced focus and Surrealist juxtaposition that convincingly tells the modern story of the monument as ideology incarnate and hence subjected to historical fluctuations to the same degree as any political configuration. The book assembles a disjointed and quirky narrative from the parts of bronze sculptures lying on the ground or being moved through air by cranes, a narrative disconnected from any teleological story of progress or salvation. The incongruities that monuments need to silence emerge when the statues are decommissioned and replaced. *La mort et les statues* is relevant here because of this intuition of a death of death, the demise of a nobler version of the end.

The traditional monument's relationship to death is one of elision: death is annulled, triumphed over in the name of the ideology. More to the point, the story told by the monument is always one of ideological martyrdom: in the monument even death belongs to the victor. In this context, *Sluipweg* can be framed as a way of internalizing the relationship between monument and death. The operation here seems to be one of memorial equivalence, whereby death is simultaneous with the monument, and the memorial "comes alive", in the grip of a Pygmalion complex [2]. Death and the statue fuse, literally, in an operation that is ethically provocative and that elliptically revises an entire genre of commemorative sculpture. Read within the political strand of Van Houwelingen's work, this operation suggests the possibility of a monument to nothing, extricated from the task of glorification but still a monument by virtue of its communal address, or of the monument to something else, to another place and another sequence of events by which the monumental object constantly denies the political task of exalting specific forms, episodes, victims, gaps in the social issue. *Sluipweg* takes its tombstones out of the cemetery into a terrain of political radicalism that resists both the collective Freudian slips of the traditional monument and the tactical doubt or the consensus as static irresolution acutely present in the counter-monument. Its radicalism is, finally, to step out of the logic of remembrance.

The culture of memory is the terrain where the alliance of politics and metaphysics operates untroubled. In a text entitled *The New History of Death* [3], architectural theorist Mark Jarzombek argues that, while the alternative language of commemoration, specifically that of the German counter-monument of the '80s, was created in opposition to the mnemonic policy of the state, this contrast - and its transformative potential - no longer holds. "The state nowadays is interested in the themes of trauma, having recognized the political advantages of victimhood. And this, of course, allows metaphysics to crawl back into its accustomed space." Political power switches between the language of the monument and that of the counter-monument in a calculated display of contestation and plurality. Yet the channelling of these commemorative acts diverges today from previously rehearsed scenarios: power no longer asserts itself as descending from its own history of power. It draws its predominance from a different ethical construction: what is monumentalized is the insubstantiality underlying our modern lives, the ephemerality of our position in the world, the limitations of control over our destiny in relation, for instance, to terrorism or ecological catastrophe. The tradition of landscape art and the garden cemetery, born in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, described death as a noble, dignified, and inclusive passage to another order, in continuity with life and hence capable of making sense. New, ferocious realities and the numbingly multiplying images of death have begun to overturn these concepts and practices, with a two-fold result. On the one hand, the omnipresence of death begins to overcome the omnipresence of memory, indicating that the current mnemonic regime cannot appease its inbuilt contradiction, and cannot absorb, justify, and vindicate the totality of deaths. At the other end of the mnemonic spectrum, and across sites where a mode of resistance could be formulated, there arises the need for a post-metaphysical practice of commemoration, pitted against the old epistemological construct. *Sluipweg* works resolutely in this

direction: it asks a poignant question about compassion and traumatic history, about the category of traumatic history itself, and therefore the formidable power of categories to rest on the ground of metaphysical difference. It also investigates the political ownership of traumatic history, the identities or counter-identities that can fill that slot in the collective imagination and activate collective piety.

As already argued, the memorial divests itself of the political exigency of commemoration. Death is impure, contaminated with the residues of other processes, of which the most significant here is real estate. The work engages the Dutch economy of death: the cost and symbolic significance of land, of family ties or memories, and perhaps the cost and significance of time - the time that visitors will spend with each stone and the whole work. Death is not eternal immobility, but a commodity with an oscillating price, dependent on negotiations and modes of togetherness for which Sluipweg is an apt synecdoche. The hundreds of deaths made visible, tangible, at Vijfhuizen as deaths having occurred somewhere else, are equivalent and therefore strangely absented. By donating the tombstones to the project, the inheritors, friends or relatives agree to renounce the equivalence of death to a body and a biography and enter a network of transfers, where each death and each tombstone further complicates and encrypts the collective point of the memorial. Each stone literally embodies the question that this memorial asks, and resonantly prolongs - or diffracts - its echo. Nothing could be further from the pilgrimage to a church where heroes and poets rest in ornate crypts: the form of pilgrimage at Vijfhuizen does not culminate in enlightenment, in some phantasmagorical participation in history, but in circular inconsequentiality, where the last effect is identical to the first cause. Sluipweg is a conceptual device to resist any metaphors of glorification. The angel of history does not fly into the future, looking back into history. Redemption is at hand, unmediated and completely unallegorical: it is to do with vulnerability and communality, with the tired, the poor, the huddled, tempest-tossed masses [4]. Thinking about a community of the defenceless is perhaps the first step in supplanting any ideological projection of what a community is.

[1] ...the "logic" that Louis-Ferdinand Céline identified as death's always winning argument.

[2] The Pygmalion complex could be said to link, as a phantasmal undercurrent, figurative sculpture from Greek antiquity to Alberto Giacometti. It is a drive to break the limit of resemblance, by which the statue replicates the appearance of its model, and to produce the apparition, by which the statue embodies the model and comes alive. Pygmalion negotiates the threshold between life-likeness and life.

[3] In Memosphere. Rethinking Monuments, The Romanian Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennial, edited by Mihnea Mircan and Metahaven, Revolver, 2007, <http://www.metahaven.net/mhPDF/memosphere.pdf>.

[4] A line from the The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus, on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York.