

Monument to concomitance Mihnea Mircan

In response to the commission to design a monument for the guest workers in Rotterdam, Hans van Houwelingen's proposes to look at the economy of the monumental genre, at the political imaginaries that constitute and condition this particular undertaking - to look from a raking, oblique angle. He excavates the historical foundations of the unrealized monument, yet not in view of placing there - and of blotting those foundations out with - an emblem for multiculturalism. Instead, the archeology finds a hole, and makes visible a monument perfectly, delicately balanced between its possibility and its inability to voice the eloquent decisiveness which distinguishes monuments from slabs of concrete. Hans van Houwelingen's work consists in introducing distance between monument and its object, as much distance and as many degrees of separation as this relation can hold. The monument-to-come and its object-to-be nudge each other into a kind of reciprocal removal, a permanent regress into their distinct histories, or into an unwritten history that leads to them both, inevitably and simultaneously.

Hans van Houwelingen interweaves the narrative of the guest workers - the political discourse defining, validating or contesting their presence in The Netherlands and beyond -, and the politically agnostic metaphors of the Naum Gabo sculpture at the Bijenkorf in Rotterdam. When two perspectives converge in a single image, when the same image accommodates two distinct vanishing points, the 'painting' becomes anamorphic: looking obliquely at the skull in Hans Holbein's 'Ambassadors' reorganizes the experience around the Crucifix and symbolically turns the Ambassadors themselves into an irrelevant smudge of color. I would like to suggest that van Houwelingen recuperates this operation in and through the social and political ramifications of his commission. Two disparate subjects, modes of alienation and forms of invisibility, converge in the monumental anamorphosis. Naum Gabo's sculpture becomes primal scene and speculative site, a measurement unit for social disconnection.

The decision not to build, but to redistribute and re-signify, echoes with the artist's recent proposal for the mutual dislocation of the Spinoza statue to Amsterdam and the Thorbecke statue to The Hague. This aimed to re-activate the two statues' ideological motivations, inquiring into their presence and lack, their necessity and counter-necessity, without simulating a contemporary homage to 'founding fathers' and without adding more bronze to the already dense texture of commemorative acts in the two cities. As the artist notes in the statement accompanying the proposal: 'If Thorbecke is to spur revived interest in democracy, his monument must not be a product of the very forces that threaten it, such as the identity business, populism or market branding. (...) Amsterdam has a Thorbecke monument that belongs in The Hague, and The Hague has a Spinoza monument that would be more at home in Amsterdam. The present desire to revive attention for the respective heritages of Thorbecke and Spinoza could be satisfied if Amsterdam and The Hague were to decide on a statue swap. Redressing past errors in the commemoration of these two great Dutchmen would help place them in a contemporary light. The authentic nineteenth century sculptures would throw the original ideas they represent into sharp contemporary relief. The double move would bring them to the attention of today's public without any detriment to their historical presence in the street scene. The course of their history would revive the currency of their heritage but leave their dignity unimpaired.' There and here, van Houwelingen opposes an economy of not building to the political injunction to remember.

The logic of inversion operates at yet another level of the project. It has to do with the simultaneity of ideologies, desires and anxieties of reconstruction after World War II, manifested in modern art and in the political decision of inviting guest workers to assist in the Northern European economic boom, to rebuild and clean the surfaces and angles of modern daily life. The Rotterdam scenario of restoration has two contemporaneous protagonists: Ossip Zadkine's 'The Destroyed City' (completed in 1953) and Naum Gabo's 'Bijenkorf Construction' (1953-1957). Art historian Joan Pachner perceptively traces their interrelated histories, observing that in the mid-fifties modern art had abandoned the avant-garde rhetoric of purity, essentialism and sitelessness, and placed itself in the service of urbanistic, cultural

and political plans of European renewal. Pachner also suggests a continuity between the two Rotterdam sculptures[1], via modern art's articulation with ideas of citizenship and government, and more overtly through rhetorically encoding 'the indomitable spirit of the people of Rotterdam and the miracle of a modern city rising from the rubble'. While Zadkine's work triggered an uproar of indignation because the sculpture aimed to be 'commensurate with the horror of the event' it memorialized, without sublimating or forgoing its ravaging impact, the elaborate composure, organic metaphors and balance of the Gabo, in addition to its affiliation the world of commerce around it, earned it the severe objection of 'sculpture of opportunity not passion.'

These political and emotional correlates translate into today's situation, and confine Hans van Houwelingen's endeavor, the political opportunity in which he operates. The first step in Hans Van Houwelingen's proposal is that descendants of guest workers restore the sculpture of Naum Gabo to the pristine condition it and the city deserve. This is technically indispensable and artistically significant, as it engenders a flux of history instead of yet another mnemonic object. Instead of feeding the same omnivorous archive of collective recollection, fetishism, and Freudian slips, the work of restoration produces history, a non-ritualistic - and only secondarily symbolic - reenactment of a historical situation. As Gabo's sculpture coincides chronologically with the arrival of the first waves of guest workers, the project assumes the latter may have been involved in setting up the statue, or part of the same ideological give-and-take. Reading the two events in tight sequence, Hans van Houwelingen posits a problematic symmetry between 'then' and 'now': a mirror reflection, with the cohorts of guest workers moving around the same object in the opposite direction. As if old footage were played backwards, with the guest workers as extras in a different scheme, or film, of ideological restoration. By handing the sculpture to guest workers, and equating 'work' and 'worth', van Houwelingen tests the radiant rhetoric of multiculturalism against multiplying instances of xenophobia, and more importantly against the act of historical repossession it itself performs, confirming indirectly that legal aliens indeed want 'a piece' of The Netherlands.

At the core of the proposal is the idea that the decision of guest workers to stay in Northern Europe after the completion of their initial tasks was a-historical. The rights they claimed - to residence, to cultural and political representation - did not proceed from a past, and were not reinforced by history. This was, in a sense, a purely political act of possession, which did not derive from or need the justification of a sense of history unfolding between a founding moment and a predetermined conclusion. A political apparition, an event that ruptured the continuity of history, and that the history of multiculturalism itself has to mute (or else lose its discursive ground): to make its own, to monumentalize by molding it into the comprehensible terms of a globalized world and broadening social accord. The Gabo sculpture is understood as a disowned signifier, its historical foundation is pulled apart: made a-historical, or held at a distance from the history it would like to adhere to, the 'Bijenkorf Construction' can be given as monument to the guest workers.

It is thus that the proposal reaches, I believe, its primary target: the comfortable continuity of history, its uninterrupted progress from the past as elucidation of the present into a future that implacably confirms both. This mechanism of historiography fuels the largest part of contemporary political discourse, still predicated on apocalyptic scenarios of various kinds and intensities. By allotting the past that the Gabo silently occupies to the guest workers, Hans van Houwelingen's proposal evicts another past from the sculpture, that of the guest workers' Other, of the Dutch majority that would conceivably place Gabo's work in Rotterdam as a piece in their own identitary puzzle. The 'Bijenkorf Construction' is extracted from the historical continuity it enacts or simulates, according to which the sculpture embodies the inevitable circumstances of its making, then leads to a future metaphorically synonymous with our present, and, via us, to whatever messianic destiny awaits it. Artistic work and guest work are extricated from history, or divested from a mode a history which fails to acknowledge their contemporaneousness. They are reversed, with the Gabo sculpture as hinge, and inscribed in a tentative, critical history.

The project relies on the creative - and inevitably political - input of guest workers' descendants, as further episodes in the scenario laid out by Hans van Houwelingen will materialize in collective performances, engaging the sculpture in other ways than those it was designed for. The project has a

potential for debate that numerous artistic projects involving immigrants never achieve. Indirect consequence of classic institutional critique practices, art projects about immigration set into motion a simplistic scenario of empowerment, a phantasmal transfer of the power subtracted from the institution by the critical artist and conferred upon the participant, who is asked what his or her favorite color is and whose traumatic confessions are painstakingly recorded and archived, whose fundamentally scripted access to the art institution is to provide political legitimacy to artist and institution alike, in an endless variation of the statu quo. Van Houwelingen's intervention runs deeper: two granite blocks at the foundation of modernity - modern art and modern forms of border-crossing - reverse position. For a split second (in the case of each inhabitant of Rotterdam) and for however long the debate in the city will last, the vanishing points of two distinct ideological configurations are superimposed in the same frame, in a study of historical concomitance. Both granite blocks relinquish their supportive roles in the constructions they serve, and articulate a history where the present is not bound to the past as inexorable condition or to the future as necessity of confirmation.

The history Hans van Houwelingen works with is primarily that of art, tested in its ramifications into other spheres of historical discourse, and engaged a site where to imagine our collective destination. One of contemporary art's most stringent themes is to question its progress from its own past, and into various versions of the future; yet van Houwelingen's is neither an archival nor a futurological approach. He looks at the diverse ways in which abstract art, its deployment of a particular kind of modernist ideology, constituted an epistemological method to conceive and maintain post-war identities, and at the political entities these identities supported and justified. He makes visible a vast machinery of inclusions and exclusions, whose purpose is to make from the present the demonstrable product of a particular past, so that the past so staged might be framed as an object of historical desire, figured as that from which a modern citizen might desire descent. He asks: Who owns the Gabo construction, inasmuch as a fixed identity can be traced back to - or made to correspond to - the set of values that the sculpture itself circulates? Like any other art historical object and in spite of its apparent malleability, the Gabo sculpture is a device for naturalizing certain questions, while silencing or de-legitimizing others. Now its script ramifies to include that which dispossesses it of its certainties, and transforms it, even if not completely, into the monument it would have liked to be.

According to Robert Musil's dictum, monuments emerge from conflict only to be immersed in invisibility, an inability to hold our gaze only equaled by their gesticulating desire to do so. Monuments distinguish from the present an Other, reformatted so as to become legible as generating or producing the present: a prologue, a set of conditions, a victory which ensures the sense and purpose of the present. Like museums, monuments imaginatively fabricate and sustain the present. The Rotterdam proposal disturbs this sense of continuity, of history flowing in the right direction, and the historical formulation of self-perception through mutually consolidating alterities. It disintegrates the temporal identity in which 'us' and 'them' become legible: divergent timelines are collaged onto the same frame when the descendants of guest-workers restore the future that the Gabo sculpture promised in the '50s - and fundamentally alter its past, as well as their own. The unstable, complicated monument thus created will be recognized by the Dutch state as an official national monument for the guest workers, and then invisibility will work its way back into the scene: the invisibility of majorities and minorities, of assimilation and alienation, simultaneity and distance, of social ghostliness and the statues that speak of it.

[1] The transition from 'The Destroyed City' to the 'Bijenkorf Construction' was a passage from a time when public sculpture was assumed to be a recognizable image about a culturally shared event to a new era when monumentally scaled sculptures in public places were not necessarily monuments in the traditional sense at all. Moreover, these works highlight the challenges inherent in a public role for modern art, particularly the difficulties of reconciling a public need to commemorate important historical events in a manner that is meaningful with the abstract nature of much art produced since the end of World War II. The issues and tensions that permeate contemporary debates about public sculpture have much in common with postwar Rotterdam, Joan Pachner, Zadkine and Gabo in Rotterdam, Art

Journal, Vol. 53, No. 4, Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America, 1945-59 (Winter, 1994), p. 85