

Monumental Fail: Identity, Ruin, and Art in Post-Crisis Netherlands

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Both this text and Hans van Houwelingen's proposal for a Dutch National Monument to the Guest Worker of the Netherlands have "overlived" (in the striking Dutch word for "survived") into times that least of all need circumlocution, so let us say, odious times. Van Houwelingen's premise for the monument consisted of restoring the decaying "Bijenkorf Construction" by Naum Gabo, a public sculpture installed in Rotterdam's retail centre in the mid-1950s. Through this restoration, performed, at least notionally, by descendants of the first wave of migrant workers imported into the Netherlands to fill its demand for cheap labour to aid post-war reconstruction, an anamorphic monument would emerge, a contraction of tensions surrounding the discourse of cultural memory as much as the institution of public art. But the staging of such debates, already constrained by the noxious air of political populism in which the original call for a monument emerged, now no longer seems possible, if incalculably more crucial. The demagogic halving of the Dutch culture budget, an offensive explicitly targeting any sites of production for critical or reflexive culture that operate at an angle to the market, not to mention official history, translates this rancid climate into monetary terms. Whatever means of support there were for initiatives with the conceptual rigor and political acuity of Van Houwelingen are now destined for VVD's chauvinistic glue factory where the weak solvents used to hold together capitalist profitability are produced and applied to its unsightly stumps.

In somewhat other words, then, we can say that the critical framework that the realization of a project like the guest worker monument would have both drawn on and enriched faces a challenge to its existence which erupted onto the scene some time after the project was proposed, accepted, and finally canceled; nor was it a factor in the development of this text. Here we no longer speak of ruins metaphorically, metonymically, or in other uncertain terms: we murmur from somewhere underneath them, and that is bound to change the key of reference. This is especially so for a project that takes its point of departure from the authenticating notion of "re-building" that continues to preoccupy Rotterdam and fuel its controversies of belonging. A reckoning with this abrupt shift has to be constitutive for what will follow, if hardly conclusive. Perhaps the best way of putting this in focus is to work retroactively through the immediate past and discern the tendencies that have so violently shaped the possible future.

One of the first elements in the monument project to strike the beholder is the disjunctive relation between the non-identity of the modernist art object embodied by the Gabo piece and the centrality of identity politics to the municipal desire to commemorate the contribution of the guest workers to Rotterdam, coming as a polemical response to the exclusionist identity politics deployed by the populist right. This solicits the imaginary community of nationhood in parallel with the imaginary community of art, or the real community of international capital that the sculpture's placement by the Bijenkorf department store couldn't help but invoke. Here there are at least three sorts of politics to which the category of identity is fundamental: the internal non-identity between concept and object and with its outside that Marxist art theory after Adorno posits as the condition of the artwork's politics; the affirmation of a positive and pluralist concept of identity advanced by the migrant cultural organizations and leftist factions in local government that commissioned the monument; and the affirmation of a positive and pluralist concept of a specifically national identity to be purified and defended at all costs from its Others that is held by the centre-right and points beyond.

In distinction from the nativism often found in colonial states like the U.S. or Australia, phobic and conservative in nature, Dutch, and more broadly, Northern European nativism couches its appeal in notions of tolerance and pluralism which are under threat from a backward, intolerant alien culture settled within its borders and fostered by that very same tolerance gone to liberal seed; pluralism as a national property which must be jealously defended. It is the abstraction of a progressive history from

a time with emancipatory horizons within capital re-used to house a reactionary project in an era with no such horizons. It is this contested quantum of identity, its adaptation to the racist doxa whose two faces are integration and expulsion, that the anamorphic monument addresses, seeking to inscribe a visible rupture into the assumption of a homogeneous culture and history that underlies both these versions of identity politics. Whenever identity becomes the strategic locus of affirmation, it at the same time feeds into a logic of representation that quickly switches over into resentment, whether it's the "allochtoon" or "autochtoon" side of the equation that's favored.

"Anamorphic" here is used to refer to the principle of construction used to render a single image, or object, plural depending on the angle of vision. Here the optical trick is a historical one: what was a monument to the International Style of progressive Modernism - the Gabo - is turned into a monument to the one of the erased conditions for that vision, an underclass of migrant workers. The object remains one, but when it is cleaned, two entities emerge from the restoration process and occupy the place where the singular object used to stand.

It may be that the Monument to the Guest Worker, by not being built, fails in the representative function destined for it; rather, it alludes to something which eludes representation. In its negative being, that is, as neither a "concrete" object nor an ephemeral activity, neither the kitsch of abstraction nor the kitsch of relation, it refers to the problematic history of its own kind -- public art -- and to the problematics of history -- the memorializing genre of this art. But these are references which have a momentum that takes them beyond the referential. The self-containment of an arch-Modernist artwork such as Gabo's sculpture is already impinged upon by the fact that it's sitting in public, and consumer, space rather than a museum; the linguistic act of transforming it into the Monument means now that it is not contained in that space either, or in time. What could that mean?

The principle of the anamorphic construction is that two images occupy exactly the same space -- the blur and skull in *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger are not superimpositions or double-exposures, they occupy the same spot in the picture plane. The duration of the image coming into focus is equivalent to the viewer's arrival at the moral focus of the image: the clarity and implacability of the common destiny of death, regardless of worldly pomp and power. Van Houwelingen takes this axiom and transposes it into time. If or when the piece is realized, there will be two works in one, and two phases of time -- the building of the Gabo colossus in the 1950s, and its restoration in the present -- will coexist in the present moment. By extension the city of Rotterdam could also finally be seen from the special angle afforded by the Monument as the double metropolis that it is, echoing China Miéville's speculative fiction *The City & The City*, in which the inhabitants of two cities that occupy the same space walk past each other every day with no recognition that the other exists. This mode of interaction is called "unseeing" and it also applies to the built environment of the two cities, which is "unseen" by each city's respective inhabitants.[1] Like the Monument/Construction, the trick here is that there is a literal occupation of the same space by two separate entities, which is why this is science fiction rather than critical sociology. One could with equal facility invoke the iekian concept of "the parallax view"[2] with its roots in the anamorphic character of both the Lacanian figures and the Hegelian contradiction - the visible and thinkable occlude its preconditions until a cognitive shift discovers them and disrupts that economy of vision.

A similarly trenchant and refractory energy animates the monument project. The history which is not one and the city which is not one are traumatically opened up by the paradoxical object of the monument which isn't one. It could ostensibly be seen as a classically Conceptual revocation of the laws of physics through the imprimatur of Art and performed via the technique of the Name, were it not for the practical and processual character of the restoration that equally forms the new work and gives new life to the old one: as Van Houwelingen writes, "the monument to the guest worker will be contained within Gabo's sculpture, invisible, but essential to that sculpture's continued existence." It is also through this practical activity that a disjunctive history of global flows and local struggles enters the work of re-definition that enables the two objects to be present in the same space. The two artworks in the same space are like a dialectical image, bringing to light a historical aporia by means of an oblique cultural act. The sculpture and the monument thus perform a Benjaminian dislodging of the kind of even historical continuum which would offer a progressive narrative and authorize the

"contribution" of the non-Dutch for the edification of a majority public. Likewise, any national identification, including the projections of its identity-others which define it, also has something of an anamorphic character: neither the native nor the migrant are fully visible or inhabitable as self-consistent singular identities at once.

There is thus an essential vacuity to identity that becomes dangerous because of what rushes in to fill the vacuum, whether it is transcendent ideas of abstract virtue or an immanent insistence on cultural specificity. In this sense, the Monument is very germane to the discussions about "community" which have surfaced in art practice in recent years, with "community" serving as the index of a displacement and a contingency which are far from the reification of a pre-existing togetherness or the strategic imposition of such togetherness on the anomie of neoliberal urban space. Such a "community" could perhaps in this case be located in the "infra-thin" space between the Construction and the Monument, between its assembly and its rehabilitation (taking into account here, perhaps, the time of dilapidation which coincided with its whole existence). Here a temporal disjunction would augment the customary application of the "infra-thin" to refer to a notional space that acts as the hinge which enables a brute object and a readymade to be both at once. It would be a highly speculative community of course, and no more so than in the speech-act of "giving a monument to the guest workers" as if there were a group thus identifiable nowadays, an addressee for this gift.

As Jean-Luc Nancy writes so aptly on his notion of the "common," "That which remains is a common workyard (chantier) ('common' as a workyard is: a broken-up space, disordered, neither constructed nor deconstructed)."[3] There is then a link between the non-identity of the art object and the non-identity of a community, which the artifice of the "declarative" mode taken by Van Houwelingen highlights very effectively. Such a translation of Duchampian nominalism to the monumental genre could be evocatively aligned with e.g. John Latham's Five Sisters project for the Scottish Development Office in 1976, whereby he proposed transforming five industrial shale heaps or "Bings" in the countryside near Edinburgh slated for clearance into land art by titling them the "Five Sisters" and giving them national monument status. With this gesture, an unwanted industrial past could be instantly re-formatted as valued heritage, just as Van Houwelingen's proposed monument would revalorize the pragmatic presence of the migrant "guests-workers" into a cherished aspect of municipal heritage.

If anamorphosis here can be converted from a technique to an axiom -- two things can and cannot exist in one space[4] -- it brings with it another double bind; that is, that the contemporary monument is always inevitably a monument to itself. We encounter it as part of a series, as a member of a genre - - it is always a second-order signifier, making one think of monuments or of nothing, rather than its honorable subject. In the case of much-derided "plop art" -- the examples of Modernist sculpture that occurred in large numbers in Western public space from the mid-20th century onwards -- however graceful, as the Bijenkorf Construction unarguably is, we are also dealing with the metal embodiment of a social form, a certain phase of capitalism that really loved abstraction: Modernism. It is additionally as a monument to the premises of its autonomy, then, from the standpoint of today's heteronomy.[1] And part of this heteronomy is the question of the entities that exert a historical claim to that autonomy; that is, history as an "external determination" on the immanent structure of an artwork which is absorbed as a contradiction, and thus made immanent to the work. This is what makes the restoration of a modernist sculpture such a poignant operation; it's not just a modernist object that is being brought back to life, but a modernist utopia that is being polished. This is not to even go into the architectural monumentality of the adjacent Bijenkorf itself. The Bijenkorf chain inhabits striking and often purpose-built mid-century buildings across the Netherlands, with the one in Eindhoven a particular standout. Such buildings can scarcely be enhanced by the proximity of a Modernist artwork; they must then likewise enact a problematic claim of their own to autonomy. Didn't Schiller elaborate his concept of the autonomous artist with the example of a building that with its consummate form rejects the sordid activities that transpire inside it?[5]

Polishing a Modernist utopia. It is to be expected that such an operation carry an element of perversity. It is this perversity however which directs us to the integral perversity of any monument: it is always a fetish of the nation, even and especially when it's an abstract sculpture, as this gives it

access to the universal which is by far the most fetishized dimension of nationalism. By the same degree that the abstract structure is a more powerful fetishism of identitarian principles than a figurative object could ever be, participatory and "new genre" public art utilize a fetish of community which substitutes for the more easily graspable and dialectical fetish of the autonomous artwork.

Although the question is not being posed this way for the first time, it could be re-phrased in terms of e.g. consistency. Where is the consistency of the participatory artwork as opposed to the internal consistency of the modernist art object as Adorno would describe it -- is it a consistency of ideology? For Adorno there would be no artistic consistency in this kind of work; it would be a capitulation to heteronomy, a naked appeal to the "whole [which] is the false." [6] It might also be hard to find. That's also why it's interesting that Van Houwelingen's gesture eschews both reified norms, choosing further not to ironize or elide their polemical stakes; a new work is implanted in the interstices of an existing work, and it is not a work of community but a work of maintenance: the work, rather than the community, enacts the subject of the work's imagined address. Here rather than counterpoising the Monument to these very same reified norms, it might be more relevant to briefly cite "community work" whose sophistication and longevity on questions of social aesthetics would distend the limitations of this essay: Stephen Willats's and Katerina Šedá's are two quite disparate practices that come to mind. What these practices highlight is that we are at the very beginning of exploring consistency as a mediation of, or alterity to, the critical closures of autonomy and heteronomy as an approach to work which is "realized" in or through a public which is not that of the art institution.

The conservation of the Naum Gabo sculpture transforms it into a new art work. Like the spectral structure of value in Marx, the invisible labor contained in commodities which make them equivalent to one another. Value is invisible, but essential to capital's continued existence. The re-valorization of this labor as an artwork commemorating that labor in a suspended temporality connecting the guest workers of the 1950s and the "migrant communities" of today also produces an analogy between the transition from objects to services in the economic sphere and the art sphere. Just as the red herring of "immaterial labor" distracts from the continuity of commodification, as well as the spectrality of value which always shaped labor in capitalism, the transition from "plop art" to relational and ephemeral gestures has in no way created a distance between itself and the market or political control. If anything, Rotterdam's recent years of flirtation with the "creative city" agenda has disclosed how the re-valorization of land depends on the replacement of objects (industry) with cultural services, be they the evocation of that industry as a consumable past or the participatory projects meant to effect a reconciliation of "difficult" and identifiable groups to the mainstream. The brutal gentrification that is the successful outcome of these measures is less often analyzed, though key for residents -- Rotterdam has some of the most iniquitous "population sorting" laws on its books of any city in the Netherlands.

It is this rampant train of fictitious capital, symbolic capital, and the obfuscation of labor that makes Hans van Houwelingen's monument project so salient. Fictitious capital, it should be remembered, is what imploded in the crisis; it rests not just on the fictitious commodity of land, but on claims to value which has not yet been created -- future labor. Van Houwelingen's monument materializes this fiction in, as it were, an exploded diagram: the invisible labor that makes a work of art, the invisible labor that builds Rotterdam, the invisible labor abstracted into land speculation. But not only that, if it wasn't enough: by bringing in the figure of the worker and the migrant into the space of public art as (unreconciled) subjects rather than objects of administration, he creates an unbearable tension in the corporatist self-concept of a tolerant and creative Dutch polis. This self-concept, predicated on its twin axes of fictitious capital and imagined community, is already disintegrating under the assaults of the financial crisis and political reaction. However, it might just take the anamorphosis of genre fiction (here, the memorial) for this mess to resolve itself into a skull.

[1] China Miéville, *The City & the City* (London: Macmillan, 2009)

[2] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2006). The term "parallax view" was first coined by Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2005).

[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Comparution /The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence'*, trans. Tracy B. Strong, *Political Theory*, vol. 20:3 (1992), 371-398.

[4] Compare this axiom to some other "koan"-like propositions from modern art's archive - Carl Andre's "a thing is a hole in the thing it is not" or Robert Rauschenberg's "art is what makes life more interesting than art."

[5]"... the noble architecture of the palaces that shielded the infamy of Nero and Commodus were a protest against them" (Letter IX, in Friedrich Schiller, *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man, Literary and Philosophical Essays*, vol. 32 (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14), <http://www.bartleby.com/32/509.html>).

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 50.