

Exchange Encounter: On Walking Van Houwelingen's Statues

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'N'est-il pas fou pour réveiller les statues en sursaut
après leur sommeil séculaire?'
- Jean Cocteau¹

So why wake them? Why rouse the statue of Spinoza in The Hague and that of Thorbecke in Amsterdam from their secular slumbers? On the one hand, to reconstitute them to where they 'belong', to facilitate their return 'home'; on the other, it would be to allow the statues more forcefully to embody what it is they stand for. To exchange them, one for the other, in such a way that each attains to a place properly its own, in order better to monumentalize what it is these figures are figures of. It is a 'double move' not just because it's a straight 'swap' of two statues, but because in moving them something about the idea each statue embodies will show itself through the other.

The implementation of an exchange of this sort would be, says Hans van Houwelingen, the artist proposing it, a work of art. However, the artist does not in his proposal say how the exchange would be carried out, he does not outline how these statues would be woken up and allowed to move from one city to the other. This leaves us with a task – how to envisage the exchange of these statues in such a way that it shows us something about what these statues 'stand for' that we would otherwise not see were they left where they currently are. The answer is simple; we invite them to walk to where it is that is rightfully theirs to stand.

What do these statues embody for the artist? Democracy and freedom: "Thorbecke's ability to call the forces of democracy to order is matched by Spinoza in his potential to revive respect for freedom of thought." We shall take these two ideas, of democracy and freedom, and allow them to guide us in our task of thinking how to bring about the exchange Van Houwelingen calls for. We shall propose in turn that it is only by allowing these two statues to walk and to wander off as a condition of their meeting that we will see something about the force of democracy and freedom of thought that is denied visibility by keeping those statues where they are, asleep on their respective plinths. Only by being the event of democracy and freedom confronting each other whilst wandering will these statues become what they are.

There are two photographs accompanying Van Houwelingen's proposal. They show articulated lorries transporting the statues of Thorbecke and Spinoza, together with their plinths. The implication is that this is how Van Houwelingen imagines that the statues can be exchanged. But this is surely only to create the image of these two statues as mobile, and not to propose how to move them. We would do well to take the photographs as metaphor in the Greek sense. The phora of metaphor is carrying, it comes from the stem pher- – to bear, carry, where metapherein means 'to transfer'. These photographs are images of transfer before they are representations of the mode of transportation. We will argue that the transfer of these statues away from the fixtures to where they have been misplaced is best achieved, indeed can only be achieved, not by forcibly carrying them, but by letting them take a step. For only then will the statues be seen to body forth the ideas they might embody. After all, it is only when Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*² and the statue in Rousseau's *Pygmalion*³ step down from their pedestals that they are seen to live.

The statues must take a step for two reasons. If the statues are to exchange then they will only do so in a material encounter. And it is only by walking that the statues are given the chance to encounter each other. They must be allowed to wander from their fixed place, for the event of wandering is the chance of the encounter. If there is to be an agreement to exchange places then it must be freely met in the encounter. If art is the only way of staging this encounter it is not because it is the law to which

freedom and democracy appeal to be reconciled, it is because art is before the law in that it can un-form the expressions and the locations in which ideas of freedom and democracy have been fixed. It is not simply that art's materials or practice can exceed the concept, it is that art can free the concept from its materialization. The second reason that the step is the condition of the exchange of the statues is because the step is in itself both free and democratic. The step is what the ideas of freedom and democracy have in common, it is what they share and the manner of their sharing.

In contrast to what is being called for here we recall that for Socrates, who claims Daedalus as his ancestor,⁴ and whose father Sophroniscus was a stone-mason and perhaps even a sculptor, statues are worth nothing if they are not fixed. The wandering statues of Daedalus are like runaway slaves, valueless until tied down. Plato's Socrates invokes this image when arguing that true opinions, which tend to wander from one's mind unless tied down, have a chance of becoming knowledge only when grounded by reason.⁵ But we contend that knowledge is exactly what the statues of Hexhamer (Spinoza) and Leenhoff (Thorbecke) are setting into question, in the sense that we do not know what these statues yet are. We must not make the mistake of claiming to know in advance what Spinoza and Thorbecke are as the basis of an argument for exchanging them. Rather, the case must be made that what they are will be revealed by allowing for the exchange. Unlike the statues of Daedalus then, Spinoza and Thorbecke would acquire their value as ideas not in being tied down, whether that be where they are fixed currently or to where Van Houwelingen wishes to transfer them, but in their being able to get up and walk. Walking is the condition of their being able to be fixed anywhere at all, because it is what delivers the statues up to the material possibilities of their concept.

The statues are not the copy of a model which would pre-exist them, they must become the originals of that which they embody. If indeed they embody the ideas of freedom and democracy then what freedom is and what democracy is will be shown by what these statues do, not by remaining fixed in place but by grasping their displacement and erring from place. It is an argument for performativity. Van Houwelingen is requiring of the statues that they perform something of that which they embody. If what is to be performed is freedom and democracy then they must be woken and untied and allowed to wander. Wandering is essentially free and democratic. It is democratic in the sense that it allows for an encounter with anything at all. Wandering is aleatory and chance-like in that it establishes the conditions of equal footing. Indeed for Gilles Deleuze, following in the footsteps of D.H. Lawrence writing on Walt Whitman, nothing less than taking to the open road with one's body and the step forward of the foot is the 'democratic contribution' of American literature,⁶ or as Lawrence puts it: 'The true democracy, where soul meets soul, in the open road.'⁷ And errancy is a constitutive part of democracy. As Jacques Derrida shows us, Socrates' aversion to wandering is out of a concern of its errancy, not simply that it may be led astray from what is proper to it and what it is the proper of, but because it can be led astray by anyone. This is most forcefully expressed in his scepticism towards writing: because the written word is able to wander it opens itself to being used by persons who have no business with it, right to it, or competency with it, or in other words by anybody at all.⁸ In this respect writing is essentially democratic; by performatively enacting the ideas they embody the statues will redraw the limits of the *dēmos* and the place of freedom in which their ideas may confront each other.⁹

For Socrates sculpture and painting share the same disability as the written word, they are mute. You can ask them whatever you want and their reply will be always the same. Neither know how to address the right people. But only writing, it seems, can be taken up and made to speak. Only the written word can 'roam about everywhere'. We suggest that if statues are to be 'made to speak' the truth of what they embody, they must be free to wander. Only then will they be worked with the words that would allow them to participate in and renew our debates on democracy and freedom of thought. Why does Ricardo Reis, discoursing with the ghost of Fernando Pessoa, the original author of him, or rather of the heteronym Ricardo Reis, say that for a writer there is nothing more depressing than to have a statue as his destiny? 'Let them raise statues to military leaders and politicians' he says, 'we are men of words only and words cannot be set in bronze or stone'.¹⁰ Because statues do not move. They do not walk. It is the task of the artist to inscribe in the stone of statues the words that would have them walk.

And we might add one final reason why we should let the statues walk, to free them from what Spinoza himself has to say about statues: that they are not symbols of the truth of equality. In his *Political Treatise* begun in 1675 and left unfinished at the time of his death two years later, statues are 'symbols of servitude rather than of freedom'.¹¹ They may once have acted as incentives to virtue, he says, but are now erected to men of no account other than wealth. In this sense it is 'slaves, not free men, who are assigned rewards for virtue'. If the extraordinary honour of a statue is to be conferred on a man renowned for his virtue, says Spinoza, then 'equality ... cannot possibly be preserved.' It is on this basis that we contend that a statue attains to its greatness not by symbolising virtue but by becoming an expression of equality. If statues are not to remain enslaved to virtue but are to become free they must be liberated for the possibility of equality. That any man is capable of virtue is not the equality that Spinoza believes statues should symbolize; rather it is the 'love of freedom' that must be preserved. Through the exercise of free will and in freedom of thought is to be found greatness. Spinoza's thought, if it is not to remain sedentary, must be freed from the sitting position his statue resolutely adopts.

Thorbecke's statue will meet freedom in the form of Spinoza's statue not by freedom being met in the form of a fixed and decided object which 'fits' its place, but by its being a condition for something unforeseen happening in the meeting. The encounter with freedom is freedom being revealed in the encounter, something concealed or hidden about freedom being unconcealed in the encounter. It might appear that in proposing an exchange in the form of a straight 'swap' Van Houwelingen is presupposing an exchange without remainder, as if nothing remains once the statues have settled down in the places to which they belong by right. But the fact that the statues find themselves in their new places, places which are both their own yet older than them, as a consequence of having met in the open space of the encounter to which they were brought by walking, and which was formed by their wandering, is precisely what remains beyond their being secured in their homes. There is nothing to say that both statues will arrive at their destination at the same time. Indeed, there is nothing to guarantee that they arrive at their destination at all. Such is the risk of affording them the chance of being at home. To wander is to open the statue to chance and that chance is doubled, it is at once both the possibility of being at home, and the risk of not arriving home at all. Van Houwelingen suggests that his proposed exchange would 'correct past errors'. But this should not be understood to mean that error is negated. On the contrary, it is only by introducing the possibility of errancy that errors of the past might be rectified. If the statues currently find themselves misplaced then this is not because they have erred, but because they have not been afforded the necessary chance of errancy. This is what they must now be allowed to do, it is the necessary risk of the double bind of democracy and of freedom.

Why was the film *Les Statues meurent aussi*, by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, banned in France for ten years and only available in a censored form for another five?¹² Not because the state will never accept that artists articulate the matter of statues such as to allow them to speak, but precisely because it does accept this, and cannot allow it. 'Quand les hommes sont morts, ils entrent dans l'histoire. Quand les statues sont mortes, elles entrent dans l'art. Cette botanique de la mort, c'est ce que nous appelons la culture.' So opens the film's narration. How are we to understand these remarks at once so obvious to us now and so threatening at that time for what is implied about how the West gains from 'liberating' and delivering up the statues of Africa to its art-historical discourses and institutions? By grasping what it is that might bring about the death of a statue: the disappearance of the 'living gaze' upon it. If only we had granted those statues papers to wander freely the streets of Paris... but is not that exactly what artists such as Picasso did when offering their canvases to African statues to wander over that they may trouble precisely those art-historical discourses? What is censorship if not the belief that not everyone is in the proper position to understand what is being said or shown? Censorship is the presupposition of inequality. To have allowed such claims about 'black statues' to wander freely would have been to offer them up to those without the know-how, entitlement, legitimacy or the ethics for dealing with them: namely blacks. If the film argues that, its statues having died in their forcible relocation to our museums, the African sculptor's hand, which at the same time slaughtered the animal in the act of giving death, is now free because it wanders, and in its wandering will torment the living, it is because that hand is now useless. There is nothing more threatening than aimless, useless wandering, for it is the condition of an encounter which may bring

about the worst just as much as it affords the chance of the best. So turn that hand to the business of manufacturing 'cultural artefacts' for us, no more nor less a touristic imperative than the erection and fixing of statues as 'living expressions' of the inherited values of our culture.

If we are entertaining the possibility that ethics is not given in advance of the wandering which threatens it, it is because we agree with Derrida for whom there not being a right way is the very condition of our walking at all. If there were a right way known a priori there would be no ethics. Or in other words we would not be walking were there a right way. *Aporia* means impassable, to be without passage (*poros*). For Derrida the *aporia* is the very condition of walking: 'if there was no *aporia* we wouldn't walk, we wouldn't find our way; path-breaking implies *aporia*. This impossibility to find one's way is the condition of ethics.'¹³ To wake our statues is to open their eyes to the lack of a right way to conduct the exchange Van Houwelingen calls for. To invite them to wander is to bring about the chance of our being shown how democracy and freedom might encounter each other in such a way that we glimpse the chance of an exchange between them. It would be an exchange not reducible to that of utility or economics, exceeding both use value and exchange value. It would not be art otherwise.

An exchange which must remain unforeseeable, and take place according to a step which we are not able to anticipate or calculate in advance. Moreover, from the artist's proposal we see that the encounter would be both a return and without any possible return. It would be a return to a locale rightfully the statues' to assume from the start; and it would be a wandering without the possibility of a return to the places from which they depart. But this latter we must surely question. A place is defined as much by what is brought to it as by what is found there. If the entitlement which would appear to be the statues' is there from the start then the places are not what they are until arrived at by them. The statues would reveal those places of arrival as if for the first time. Thus transformed, there is nothing to say that those places might not in the future become locales for the further contestation of the boundary between freedom and democracy. The statues may need to wander again.

If we agree with Jacques Rancière that art's fraternal dream is a vanity we do so because we acknowledge that art promises a future it cannot bring about.¹⁴ The point is made in an essay responding to remarks made by Deleuze and Guattari about monuments: that they are preservations of compounds of sensations, and at the same time vibrate on behalf of a 'still-missing people'.¹⁵ It is worth quoting Deleuze and Guattari in full here: 'A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their re-created protestations, their constantly resumed struggle.' Thus an artwork's work is carried out without the artwork being able to achieve it by itself. Yet at the same time it strives to bridge the gap between itself and politics. But if there can never be a joining of the two without one of them of necessity having to disappear into the unified ontological consistency of the monument this does not mean art and politics have to be set back in their respective places. The task is to maintain them in their tension, in the play of their separateness and non-separateness.

What we are asking in waking these statues for the journey of an exchange between them of freedom and democracy is that they exchange our preconceptions of what these ideas are for ones that the statues themselves invent. Their encounter must be such that it is by chance yet born through the freedom of a decision taken by both in the space of their equality. So not only must these two conditions agree with each other, they must both be invented at the moment of the encounter. If we find it hard to picture these statues walking it is because of the difficulty of conceiving how freedom and democracy can be exchanged in an encounter where it is not decided in advance what these things are, and in which the two are to be held apart in a tension which would nonetheless be constitutive of their encountering each other. It is an impossible task, yet one which is necessary for art to seek to accomplish; indeed, it is precisely this impossibility that the artist must show and at the same time grasp as the condition of his inventiveness. If it is indeed dangerous to wake statues so suddenly from their secular sleep it is because in such danger does the saving power lie. In Cocteau's film the poet who gave life to the statue returns to smash the statue to pieces. He does so because he

realizes that to insert himself in the reflection of the values that the statue embodied is not enough; only when we break open the statue by confronting it with another do we liberate what it is that statue embodies in the first place.

Notes

1. 'Is it not crazy to wake statues so suddenly after their secular sleep?' *Le Sang d'un Poete* [Blood of a Poet], directed by Jean Cocteau, France, 1930.
2. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (1623).
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Pygmalion* (1762).
4. Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, *Complete Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) 11b, 11; Plato, *Alcibiades*, trans. D.S. Hutchinson, *Complete Works*, 121a, 578.
5. Plato, *Meno*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, *Complete Works*, 97e, 895.
6. Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby; or, the formula', *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998) 87.
7. D.H. Lawrence, 'Whitman', final version [1923], *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 161.
8. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Complete Works*, 275e, 552.
9. Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy' [1968], *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981) 144.
10. José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* [1984], trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: The Harvill Press, 1999) 309-10.
11. Baruch Spinoza, 'Political Treatise' [1677], *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002) 750.
12. *Les Statues meurent aussi* [Statues also die], directed by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, France, 1953.
13. Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality, justice and responsibility: A dialogue with Jacques Derrida', Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999) 73.
14. Jacques Rancière, 'The monument and its confidences; or Deleuze and art's capacity of "resistance"', *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010) 183.
15. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* [1991], trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994) 176.