

Until It Stops Resembling Itself Mihnea Mircan

The aim of this exhibition is two-fold: to introduce three projects, in different stages of conceptualization or realization, that Hans van Houwelingen is at work on, and to re-articulate, while questioning the terms of a retrospective, one of the most remarkable and thought-provoking discourses on public art in The Netherlands and beyond. Hans van Houwelingen's sustained polemic with the monumental and counter-monumental genres, which marks the most part of his oeuvre, is first visualized via the three 'protagonists' of the exhibition: *Sluipweg*, realized at Kunstfort Vijfhuizen, and whose second, ampler version at Museumplein Amsterdam is under discussion with city authorities, the *Gastarbeider Monument*, commissioned by the City of Rotterdam, and *Thorbecke/ Spinoza*, made by van Houwelingen in response to an invitation from Stroom Den Haag to imagine a monument that engages Thorbecke's political relevance for today.

Sluipweg is a resonant meditation on death, history and their respective 'post-'s, as well as an interrogation of contemporary practices of commemoration. A few hundred tombstones that were, for pecuniary or affective reasons, evacuated from Dutch cemeteries, have been donated to the project, and installed as a footpath that circles Fort Vijfhuizen. The location is poignantly significant, as the history of this place 'never came', and its role in a defense strategy of flooding The Netherlands against enemy troops was rendered obsolete, right after completion, by the military use of aviation. *Sluipweg* interlocks private and collective invisibility, or unconsummated destinies, in a piece that unmistakably suggests the rhetoric of a war memorial and displaces the war from a battlefield to the plural sites across which contemporary lives are scripted, made sense of, and articulated in an infrapolitics of solidarity and remembrance.

The Gastarbeider Monument reflects on multiculturalism and the ownership of symbols, proposing to write a future history – one with weighty political undertones – for the Naum Gabo sculpture at the Bijenkorf commercial center in Rotterdam. Gabo's construction was to signal the resurgence of the city from the rubble of World War II, and to embody the vitality and optimism of reconstruction. Forgotten and decrepit, virtually indistinguishable from the world of commerce around it, 'invisible' – as Robert Musil famously characterized the condition of the traditional monument, Gabo's work is to regain life and symbolic function in the scenario proposed by Hans van Houwelingen. It is to be restored by descendants of the guest workers, who were brought to Northern Europe as cheap labor throughout the '50s, and who subsequently made the political decision of not returning home – a decision that is fundamental to modern politics in its refusal of 'origin' and rupture of history. When restored, the sculpture is to become theirs, to be used in collective performances that express their cultural aspirations, their claims to public representation. The project stands apart from conventional scenarios seeking to empower immigrants. It equates 'work' and 'worth', the guest workers' contribution to erecting the original sculpture with ownership of it, and of the fragment of history it materializes. Instead of a new monument to the guest workers, van Houwelingen locates and defines the monument as having been almost-already there. It shifts or replaces two construction blocks at the foundation of post-war Dutch identity, so that they take over each other's supportive function. Two historical timelines are made to converge, that of modern art and its identity projections, and that of immigration, border-crossing, anxiety and invisibility.

The same refusal to add another object to an already dense texture of commemoration surfaces in van Houwelingen's proposal for the Thorbecke monument in The Hague. Amsterdam has a Thorbecke monument, The Hague has a Spinoza monument, Amsterdam wants a Spinoza monument to illustrate its cultural diversity and The Hague needs Thorbecke as reinforcement of its political status. The artist proposed 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'. As the artist notes: "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."

In curatorial terms, this exhibition would rely on a viewing device normally incompatible with the solemnity of the monument, or at least belonging to another sphere of experience and discourse: the internet live-feed. As central element in the show, there would be large-scale projections of a video stream, broadcast via webcams, from Vijfhuizen/ Museumplein Amsterdam, Bijenkorf Rotterdam, and the current locations of the Thorbecke and Spinoza statues, in Amsterdam and The Hague respectively. At a first level of interpretation, the conceptual effect of this curatorial choice is an inversion of the gaze of surveillance, the possibility of filming the Panopticon. This interprets monuments as instruments of social control and reverts their symbolic grip in an ironic counter-surveillance, by which statues and the political statements they stand for are held accountable. It also asks an indirect question about the destination of surveillance images, the databases they create and their different rules of archiving material and establishing continuities and correspondences within it, about archives, inscription and erasure in general. What are the time lapses after which the images of surveillance are destroyed, when are cause and effect, suspicion and crime dissociated? How do our ghostly doubles, made of electronic traces and half-images, take shape via the mechanisms of social control? Conversely, what database would images from exhibitions of contemporary art want to be inscribed in, and what form can an archive of all exhibitions take? What claims to eternity can be made today: those traditionally made by the monument, for which the future has been decided by a past victory, so redoubtable it materializes in stone or bronze, or the perpetually expanding, contracting and ramifying corpus of digital information, traversed by shadows and secrecy, and perpetually relocating the subtler centers of power?

Yet the strategy is not confined to a study of our collective move away from analogy – a reading perhaps more attuned to van Houwelingen's oeuvre would reveal it as an investigation of concomitance, of how 'the contemporary' – what is held to be significant in our age and for our condition – is extracted from the contemporaneous, from a disjunctive yet continuous horizon of belonging to the same time, of the spectral co-presence of subjects, objects and the questions linking them within the same historical moment. The argument begins by admitting the impossibility of bringing monuments into exhibition spaces. Galleries and cityscape never fully overlap, any equivalence between them – one that a discourse of institutional critique might seek to establish – is bound to miss both targets. Hans van Houwelingen's proposal is to use the gallery as a site where the simultaneity of monument and visitor is made as clear as technologically possible. In a sense, visitors are pushed away: not out of the gallery, but towards a reflection of citizenship and political engagement that the gallery cannot accommodate. Internet live feeds are normally connected to a mode of eventfulness, to the idea that something might occur, or that a process is unfolding towards its conclusion. In the present case, the live feed indirectly points to the fact that the gallery is not the site of a (future) event, that its apparition will happen elsewhere, in another political territory.

This curatorial mechanism will be extended to include more instances of Hans van Houwelingen's reflection on the assumptions and strategies of the monumental genre, engaging the hypocrisies and fantasies of political predominance evinced by the current memorial culture. The selection will video-document works and models, realized, refused or awaiting realization, such as *Solidarity Area* (Sittard), *De Resident* (The Hague), *Bijlmermonument* (Amsterdam), *Olympic Wintergames Monument* (Turin), *Das Dritte Denkmal* (Hamburg). In all these cases, the monument is used as a vantage point to survey recent history, the forces that traverse and reshape social space, the changing ideologies of democratic exercise and the formulations of communality. The continuous feed of non-eventful, inconclusive footage, linking the exhibition space with, for instance, a museum storage in Turin, a busy square in The Hague or the space between contradictory monuments in Hamburg, not 'adding up' to the epiphanic intensity generally sought by public sculpture, will invite a reflection on forms of participation articulated from the individual positions and individual truths of visitors, in the

emphatically explicit absence of a conclusion. The gallery contains the visual traces, simultaneous yet powerless, of processes happening at a (political and cultural) remove from it.