

Monument Momentum

Julia Bryan-Wilson

'So-called immobile objects exist only in movement.'
- Jean Tinguely, 1961

Two monuments – one of politician Johan Rudolf Thorbecke that is presently located in Amsterdam, one of philosopher Baruch Spinoza currently in The Hague – are suddenly becoming mobile. They are loaded onto the backs of flatbed trucks in order to travel at great speeds on the highways of the Netherlands. At some moment, the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke pass on the road, continuing to travel in opposite directions, to finally be re-planted in each other's original locations – an unprecedented municipal monument switch choreographed by artist Hans van Houwelingen. For Van Houwelingen's project, *What's Done... Can Be Undone*, commissioned by Stroom Den Haag, this uprooting and unmooring of two previously fixed monuments is key to its purposes.

Made during the late-nineteenth-century vogue for figural bronze statuary, these commemorative works were erected within four years of each other (Thorbecke, by Ferdinand Leenhoff in 1876; Spinoza, designed by Frédéric Hexamer in 1880). Spinoza is depicted seated in a contemplative pose that suggests a pause in the midst of writing. Perched high atop a pedestal inscribed with his last name, he gazes out towards the Jewish quarter of The Hague where he lived in the last years of his life [fig. 1]. Thorbecke, by contrast, stands upright in a square in Amsterdam that now bears his name, just a stone's throw from a statue of artist Rembrandt [fig. 2].

In Rosalind Krauss's influential discussion of 'sculpture in the expanded field,' she posited that that "logic of the monument" requires that the work 'sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolic tongue about the meaning of use of that place.'¹ According to Krauss, this logic began to fade or be dismantled in the late nineteenth century, just at the moment of the creation of the Spinoza and Thorbecke monuments, proof of a last gasp of commissions for conventional representational works. What gradually took the place of these traditional figurative statues, states Krauss, was a 'negative condition' of the monument as 'a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place.'²

Van Houwelingen, however, sounds a different note, as he treats Spinoza and Thorbecke as exiles from their respective cities: Spinoza (1632-1677) was born in Amsterdam; Thorbecke (1789-1872) hailed from The Hague, and the swap the artist is coordinating is therefore approached as an act of cultural repatriation. This move, however, is intentionally ambivalent – it could also be seen as an act of aggression or violence; migration is sometimes voluntary, sometimes coerced. This is not a gesture to affirm sitelessness or nomadism, but a return of historical figures back to their home of origin, resettling bodies that have been displaced. Against assumptions of civic monuments as stable or immobile, Van Houwelingen introduces velocity, directionality, travel, and migration. He rejects the presumed stasis of monuments in order to reanimate their histories and propel them forward into the present. In doing so, he asks questions about the temporality of monuments – how these objects, which are seemingly trapped in their own era, also bear the registrations of the passing years as they unfold, as well as speak to a speculative future. The relentless momentum of time changes monuments as they evolve, mutate, or fade. But political tides shift, and long-neglected figures are sometimes resurrected, the cobwebs brushed off their statues as they are hailed as freshly relevant. Switching these monuments in space thereby forces us to acknowledge their ultimate malleability as they become ideologically resignified over the ages.

Van Houwelingen is equally interested in the revival of the legacies of both figures within the current political climate. Thorbecke was the chairman of the Constitutional Committee that scripted a new constitution in 1848, assuring direct elections and thus solidifying parliamentary democracy in the Netherlands. Spinoza's writings on ethics are undergoing something of a popular renaissance within

the art world, including a Spinoza ‘festival’ in the Bijlmer neighbourhood of Amsterdam organized by artist Thomas Hirschhorn in 2009. A decade earlier, Hirschhorn constructed a temporary Spinoza monument made from distinctly non-monumental materials in the city’s red light district [fig. 3], the first in his series of homages to influential theorists, including ones to Deleuze and Bataille.³ With its rickety wood, plastic tarps, and hazard tape, Hirschhorn’s sidewalk installation of Spinoza had the look of a cordoned-off construction project or crime scene, emphasizing that it was not authorized by any governmental body.

There are in fact several Spinoza statues in Amsterdam, including one initiated by the Spinoza Monument Foundation; created in 2008 by local artist Nicolas Dings, the statue displays modernist tendencies [fig. 4]. Distinct from Hexamer’s seated figure, here the philosopher stands erect as a towering figure, his schematized body covered by a cloak that is decorated with parakeets, sparrows, and roses – chosen, according to Dings’s website, to represent ‘cultural diversity.’⁴ Both Hirschhorn’s unofficial intervention and Dings’s sanctioned version were unveiled after Van Houwelingen made his proposal to exchange the already existing nineteenth century monuments; his idea thus foreshadowed later attempts to bring Spinoza more visibility within Amsterdam. But Van Houwelingen is not interested in simply generating more depictions or refreshing passé forms with a contemporary style; instead he means to reconsider how the nineteenth century statues might be seen anew given ongoing debates about immigration, human rights, and democracy in Holland.

According to the artist, ‘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. Considering the course of history, there is justification enough for an exchange. If Amsterdam and The Hague were to decide on a statue swap, the present desire to revive attention for national history could be satisfied in a contemporary way.’ It is interesting to consider what is meant by ‘belonging’ or being ‘at home,’ especially in light of anti-immigration “go back home to where you belong” rhetoric. The entire project parodies this logic, stretching it until it unravels. The artist’s suggestive phrases play with the determinative power of ‘the course of history’ while also asking what might ‘justify’ its pointed revision.

Other projects of Van Houwelingen directly address questions of immigration, and include unrealized plans for a *National Monument to the Guest Worker* (2010), co-authored with Mohammed Benzakour, that involves the restoration of an existing Naum Gabo sculpture from 1957. Pulling the constructivist object from the past into the present, this restoration has the effect of reclaiming or re-attributing the sculpture in the name of guest workers, some of whom would perform the painstaking work of restoration. In such works, Van Houwelingen attests to the fact that monuments are not simply ossified in time, but can be transformed, altered, and updated.

Indeed: why erect new monuments? Why not use the ones we have? This economy of re-use ties into ecological arguments about not-building, but rather repurposing and recycling. It also recalls conceptual art’s use of appropriation, in which an image from one context is excised and used within a different framework, often to levy a critique. In particular, it harks back to signature works of Institutional Critique that pay close attention to the way that location structures our categorization and perception of objects, such as Michael Asher’s 1979 work *George Washington*. For this piece, his contribution to the *73rd American Exhibition*, Asher displaced a bronze cast of Jean-Antoine Houdon’s statue of Washington from the front steps of the Art Institute of Chicago to inside its eighteenth century galleries [fig. 5]. Originally made of marble and designed by Houdon in 1784-1791, the bronze version was cast in 1917 at the request of the museum, where it stood exposed to the elements for over sixty years. By placing the nineteenth century cast amongst carefully preserved objects from the historical moment of its initial creation a century earlier, Asher redirected the statue away from its memorial purpose towards a consideration of its aesthetic value.⁵ The spatial shift of this weathered cast from outside the museum (where it functioned symbolically) to inside the galleries (where its formal aspects and its authorship by Houdon were thrust into consideration) underscores how objects are viewed, classified, and valued, and how the physical sites of institutions organize and govern such valuation. Like Van Houwelingen, Asher also gestures towards temporality, as he calls attention to the statue’s various iterations and reclassifications over time. In a related vein, *What’s Done... Can Be*

Undone allows us to think through how traditional bronze statues (often derided for their petrified conservatism) might be disrupted and re-appropriated – even, as the title indicates, reversed or ‘undone.’

Residents of Amsterdam and The Hague, accustomed to their own familiar monuments, might be so used to them that they have become part of the overlooked furniture of everyday life – what Robert Musil calls ‘conspicuously inconspicuous.’ As Musil has famously commented, ‘There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen – to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off.’⁶ Musil is not alone in this grim assessment. Lewis Mumford deemed them ‘completely irrelevant’, elaborating that “the notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument.”⁷ These dismissals of monuments have further escalated in recent years as they have increasingly fallen out of favour – ‘monumental’ has become something of a bad word in an age of capitalist impermanence, one that signals needless gigantism, excess, waste, inflated egos, regressive traditionalism, and dangerous dictators. From the post-Soviet toppling of statues of Lenin to the 2001 destruction of the sixth-century Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, much of the history of the last few decades can be distilled into a slideshow of destroyed monuments.

The widespread recoiling from monumental forms was institutionalized in 2007, in a major exhibition at New York’s New Museum entitled *Unmonumental* that celebrated sculpture made from ‘low’, found, or ephemeral materials. Massimiliano Gioni, one of the curators for the show, wrote in the catalogue: ‘We might conclude that we have come to live in an age that defines itself by the disappearance of monuments and the erasure of symbols – a headless century. Thus, it should come as no surprise that this first decade of the twenty-first century produced a sculpture of fragments, a debased, precarious, trembling form that we have called unmonumental.’⁸

At the same time, artists such as Van Houwelingen continue to critically investigate how monuments both hold and distort history. Others working through these subjects include Polish-born Krzysztof Wodiczko, US-based Sam Durant, and Estonian artist Kristina Norman. In his well-known public installations, Wodiczko projects temporary images onto existing architecture, including monuments, statues, and memorials to reveal erased pasts or repressed present conditions. Such pieces include *Projection on South Africa House, Trafalgar Square, London* (1985), in which Wodiczko projected a swastika on the façade of the South African embassy, calling attention to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s approval of a donation to the apartheid-based government of South Africa. The projection stayed in place for two hours before the police interrupted it. Durant’s *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, DC* (2005) dares to imagine relocating to the Washington Mall monuments from around the country that commemorate massacres of native peoples; in this, he exposes how the culture of memorialisation in the United States is based on conquest and violence rather than the vaunted ideals of freedom.

Norman, in her piece *After-War* (2009), dove into the contested history of Soviet occupation in the town Tallinn. In 2007, the Tallinn government removed a statue honouring those who fought for the Red Army; seen by Estonians as a reminder of Soviet oppression, the monument was placed 2.5 kilometres away in a cemetery. This led to two nights of rioting by the Russian population of the town, who had seen the statue as a reminder of victory over Nazism and their own cultural identity. The artist, interested to explore and problematize the whitewashing of this history given the separate Russian and Estonian communities that live in Tallinn (and her own mixed Russian/Estonian heritage), made a full-size replica of the statue, painted it gold, and – controversially – placed it in the statue’s original location, where it stood for less than an hour until the police forcibly removed it [fig. 6].

As these examples demonstrate, the question of where monuments ‘belong’ is often fraught. For instance, a storm of debate erupted when American actor Sylvester Stallone commissioned a nearly 10-foot tall bronze statue of Rocky, the fictional character he played in several movies. The statue was placed at the top of the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of the filming of *Rocky III* in 1982; the actor then left it there as a gift, but officials objected to this cinematic prop marring the

museum's neo-classical entrance, raising issues—as did Asher's piece in 1979—about the boundaries of art and what the 'appropriate' locations for other cultural artefacts might be, especially those that are, for whatever reason, deemed to be unsuitable for museum display. After much public discussion and rancour, the statue was removed and placed near a sports arena, where it lived for several decades, until it was returned in 2006, this time permanently, to a spot near the museum entrance - but not at its top.

Monuments, rather than embodying fixity or stasis, hence catalyze transformation as they provoke discussion about the value and use of public space. They are imprinted by the location they exist within, but as much as the city changes around them, they also change the face and character of the city. It has been argued that Rotterdam's World War II monument by Ossip Zadkine, *The Destroyed City* (1946-1953), was not designed with that bombed town specifically in mind, though it has come to be seen that way.⁹ Critic John Berger claims: 'Its function and not just its appearance depends on the hours. It engages time. And the reason for this is that its whole conception as a work is based on an awareness of development and change.'¹⁰ The expressive, fragmented bronze figure has recast the affective nature of the town, not only reflecting but actively shaping Rotterdam's post-war identity, one haunted by the ordeal of destruction but also marked by an embrace of progress and rebuilding.

In a somewhat enigmatic passage, Michel de Certeau writes: 'The passing faces in the streets seem, in spite of their vivacious mobility, to multiply the indecipherable and nearby secret of the monument.'¹¹ Perhaps statues have their secrets; perhaps we as spectators are the ones who remain, despite our frantic rushing around, stuck in place. Certeau refuses to accept the totality of Musil's formulation, and links the motion of the passersby to the nearby monument, a monument that is less 'invisible' than it is 'indecipherable'. This is a key turn - for Certeau, the monument is not ignored, but rather unreadable, an obstinate puzzle that infuses its surroundings and all who come near with a special charge. As Rebecca Schneider has observed about this passage, 'Animate and inanimate, moving and stilled, are not in this sense diametrically opposed as much as part and parcel of an inter(in)animation.'¹² The monument is legible not because of what is written upon its own visage—this legibility (or illegibility) is also inscribed on the faces of those who move past it. What sort of new space is activated by Van Houwelingen's Spinoza/Thorbecke monument swap? Does it enliven these relics? Or does it remind us passersby that despite a drastic change in location, we are the ones that usually remain obdurately the same?

By transposing the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke, Van Houwelingen inverts the usual understanding of monuments as resistant to momentum. Who says monuments are fixed in space? They are constantly on the move. In *What is Done...Can Be Undone*, the figures of Spinoza and Thorbecke imaginatively encounter one another, crossing the centuries and the large distance, to meet and exchange glances in their brief instant on the highway [fig. 7]. In some sense, the objects cruise each other, like strangers who with a flicker of recognition catch each other's eyes and make a fleeting connection. In another sense, their stony expressions remain inert throughout the transaction, their heads are forever fixed in one position, and their gazes will never meet.

Many of Van Houwelingen's pieces remain in the realm of the speculative, as unrealized proposals that might be completed at some later point. In this, his works urge us to think about monuments not only as they refer to the past but also as they hurtle towards the future. Modern and contemporary art is filled with unbuilt monuments, from Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919) to Durant's project, the plans for which are the only reminders for what might have been. Van Houwelingen's *What's Done... Can Be Undone* is likewise suspended between times, as the displaced Spinoza and Thorbecke monuments speak their own obsolescence as well as their own resilience, survival, and endurance. After all, they remain, and in doing so, remain open to the re-readings and mis-readings that are perpetually thrown onto them by the ever-changing crowd of passersby.

Van Houwelingen puts Spinoza and Thorbecke into conversation in a time marked by the continual erosion of their principles -- an erosion made visible by the monuments' own worn surfaces. By focusing on dispossession, he speculates about a possible public space that might imagine alternative rituals of commemoration in which civic 'ownership' or 'belonging' is no longer the crucial issue. Van

Houwelingen's 'undoing' does not pretend to reverse the flow of time, but rather asks: What versions of the past do we work to remember? What presents will congeal into history? And, most importantly, what kind of futures do we wish to address?

Notes

1. Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in: *October* 8 (Spring 1979) 33.
2. *Ibid.*, 34.
3. For more on Hirschhorn, see Hal Foster, 'Towards a Grammar of Emergency', in: *New Left Review* 68 (March-April 2011) 105-118.
4. A further statue of Spinoza, designed by Hildo Krop in 1959, stands at some remove from the city centre in front of a school named for the thinker.
5. Asher has since revisited this piece; see Whitney Moeller and Anne Rorimer, *Michael Asher: George Washington at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1979 and 2005* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2006).
6. Robert Musil, 'Monuments', in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* [1933], trans. Peter Wortsman (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006) 64.
7. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1938) 438.
8. Massimiliano Gioni, 'Ask the Dust', in: *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, in association with the New Museum, 2007) 65.
9. See Joan Pachner, 'Zadkine and Gabo in Rotterdam', in: *Art Journal* vol. 53 no. 4 (Winter 1994) 79-85; and Hanneke de Man, 'The Destroyed City', in: Jan van Adrichem, et al., *Sculpture in Rotterdam* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers/Centre for the Arts, 2002) 200-201.
10. John Berger, 'Ossip Zadkine', in: *Permanent Red: Essays in Seeing* (London: Methuen, 1960).
11. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 15.
12. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011) 145.