

A Conversation Between Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal

Van Houwelingen's Atelier, July 4, 2011

In 2009, visual artist Hans van Houwelingen was commissioned to realize a Monument to the Guest Worker in Rotterdam. The project had been initiated in 2007 by the Turkish Social Democratic Federation, directed by Labour Party representative Zeki Baran. The commission implied a design for a monument recognizing the role of the first generation of migrants in the post-war reconstruction of Rotterdam.

In a furious reaction to the support of Labour Party for the monument to the guest worker, the populist party Leefbaar Rotterdam proposed in 2008, in a newspaper article in *Algemeen Dagblad Rotterdam*, the realization of a Monument for the Chased-Off Citizen of Rotterdam, symbolizing the 'autochthonous' citizen of Rotterdam, dispossessed of his city and fleeing the immigrant. Visual artist Jonas Staal contacted Leefbaar Rotterdam to obtain specification about the sculpture, thus acquiring the commission to realize a design sketch of the statue.

This double monumental practice occurs against the backdrop of the location where both sculptures would have to be placed: the Afrikaander neighbourhood, already for decades the most important immigrant neighbourhood, and a politically charged area in the history of Rotterdam, owing to the race riots that it saw in 1972.

In February 2010, Van Houwelingen's clients unanimously approved of his submission, but withdrew the commission by the end of the same year. His proposal to have guest workers restore the constructivist sculpture made in 1957 by Naum Gabo standing in front of the Bijenkorf in the city centre, which is currently in a deplorable physical condition, in order officially to declare it the National Monument to the Guest Worker, was deemed too controversial. Formally speaking, the future of Staal's sculpture is at the moment of this conversation unknown.

Jonas Staal: We have cooperated actively for the past two years. But without being aware of it, already in 2008 we were related to the same project by means of two commissions.

Hans van Houwelingen: I don't envy you. (laughs)

JS: (laughs) If you would consider the nature of these two commissions from a distance, you would suppose that we occupy extreme poles of the political spectrum.

HvH: We have become friends, though we might as well have become enemies. Some confrontations during debates would have been enough to pitch us against each other.

JS: How would you describe those two monuments which symbolize this struggle in relation to each other? Have we actually been working on the same project?

HvH: In any case they are connected by the fact that neither of them will be realized. We have occupied extreme poles of the spectrum, but both perspectives are extreme to such an extent that they turned out to be politically unacceptable. But if I would have to make a choice between the two commissions, I wouldn't want to realize the *Monument for the Chased-Off Citizen* of Rotterdam. This commission is a frustrated, demagogical reaction to the guest worker monument; no citizens of Rotterdam are truly being chased off. Though the political conflict that is giving rise to this question is interesting - I understand your interest - I doubt whether the answer should have the shape of a monument. By contrast, I think that the input for the guest worker monument is honest, genuine. I feel connected to the issue. I think that guest workers may lay a certain claim to history which

currently for political reasons is denied,. I don't think that the citizens of Rotterdam can claim the idea that they are being 'chased off,' that's a lie.

JS: The commission you received for the monument to the guest worker has been directed by the social-democrats. Do you interpret your own work also within this politico-ideological tradition?

HvH: One could say that there is a certain group - in this case the families of the first generations of guest workers - which uses social-democracy as an instrument to reach a certain goal. That is different from a supposed social-democratic origin of the monument. What I am more concerned about is that the commission includes certain issues that I find important myself and that I want to dedicate myself to. It concerns the question of how history is written and how certain groups are 'thought away' by political systems. And therefore also the influence of globalization and its impact on cities.

JS: But don't you think that the idea that any minority or majority needs to be recognized in the way in which we organize society is of much more importance to the social-democrats than for example the liberals?

HvH: It's true that everyone should have the same rights. Although that in itself is not a motivation to make a monument.

JS: There is a paradoxical aspect to your reasoning. The guest workers' possibility of publicly voicing their opinion at all depends on a governmental system that is in its turn acknowledging their voice. That is clearly a politically marked condition - and ideological component to which you relate.

HvH: I count on the fact that there is always a political system in power. Additionally one may ask whether the ideological program is actually the motivation for the way in which political power manifests itself. I think that's increasingly less the case, ideology is effortlessly squandered for power. I rather consider party political ideology to be a mendacious construction, which I may either try to use or abuse - there is much potential in political incorrectness to bring the things that I find important into the limelight. From my point of view ideology doesn't necessarily move parallel to party politics, but manifests itself somewhere undefined in between governmental systems. As a result any governmental system is potentially an ideological vehicle. I think that a monument to the guest worker moves outside the ideological framework of party politics, or, if you like, it may profit from all kinds of party politics. This doesn't imply that it is separated from the construction of power and any attempt to influence it, it only follows another trajectory.

JS: You actually surpass Leefbaar Rotterdam's criticism of the recognition of guest workers, by stressing that the guest workers have been contracted here for economical reasons and that their descendants are still over-represented in unemployment figures and low-educated work. You only give them a place in the monument based on their economical status. During their renovation of the Naum Gabo sculpture they are directed by you - someone who isn't a guest worker himself - which first of all reaffirms them as guest workers.

HvH: You mean that by focusing on labour I confirm the stigma of the unemployed migrant and the dogma of the 'hardworking Dutchman.'¹ You may say that the work ethic should be less prominently featured, but labour is a fluid substance in this monument; labour is thematized on multiple levels. Moreover it is important that a generation of children of the guest workers want to have the labour of their parents and grandparents recognized. The labour during the post-war phase, at the time the sculpture was placed, and the labour that is currently required to restore the monument occupy a central position in this plan. I felt no need to suggest a different model for society. It is more important that our current society recognize that the period of the reconstruction of Rotterdam is one of the triggers of globalization, and that denying this is based on nationalist sentiments. Within this context, labour is a key concept.

JS: In a certain way you are displaying the guest worker in the way desired by Leefbaar Rotterdam, like people working on an artwork that is costing too much money, that nobody even understands, and

which nevertheless just has to be patched up because of the risk of collapse. From the perspective of Leefbaar Rotterdam your monument focuses on the ideal role of the guest worker - as the one scraping off the chewing gum, so to say.

HvH: Maybe they find it satisfying that guest workers are renovating the object, but they'll have some second thoughts with the idea that this sculpture represents the post-war reconstruction. Besides, euphemistically speaking, I haven't at all noticed serving them.

JS: Indeed the sculpture as you are proposing it doesn't answer to Leefbaar Rotterdam's understanding of monumental practice. Therefore it undermines their idea of opposing the Monument to the Guest Worker with the Monument for the Chased-Off Citizen. Your proposal addresses both the ideal representation of the guest worker from the perspective of Leefbaar Rotterdam, that is, in terms of labour, as well as their exclusion from history. Because you defined the monument so ambiguously, a simple counter-monument is ineffective. I mean, imagine the monument for the chased-off citizens of Rotterdam running away from the Naum Gabo sculpture! Your proposal makes it the ultimate *Monument for the Chased-Off Citizen of Rotterdam*, because even the monument itself no longer belongs anywhere.

HvH: According to your logic the monument would be a retrospective monument to the guest worker and a prospective monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam. I think that many citizens of Rotterdam would scratch their heads at the moment this reconstruction monument would be broadly recognized as guest worker monument. The sculpture of the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam, who simply stayed in Rotterdam, is thus disrupted. The idea that the guest worker too has been a hardworking Dutchman undermines their idealized history. In that sense, the monument reminds of another type of chasing off, not physically, but from the place in history that they picked for themselves.

JS: How do you position yourself toward these 'chased-off' citizens?

HvH: That they can get lost, their contempt is presumptuous. What I like about my plan is that it distances itself from communality, from multiculturalism. Claiming Gabo's an icon of reconstruction as the monument to the guest worker is a bold gesture. I think that is justified. The full title - National Monument to the Guest Worker - of course contains this paradox. I consider it desirable that the guest worker, who is, as far as I'm concerned, the modern pioneer of globalization, is somehow irritating to his national context. His history isn't granted to him, he recaptures it.

JS: With the guest worker monument as you describe it, you state that politics needs to make courageous, principled choices about the way in which a people is defined. And you take the responsibility of forcing politics to make that choice.

HvH: I think that it's important that people have been able to choose for a certain way of living and have found a place to do so. This territorial claim I consider to be legitimate. Consequently, I find it legitimate that a claim is laid to a part of the history of the post-war reconstruction. I also don't mind if somebody is saying that the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam ought to have a monument too, but I'm not going to make it. Nevertheless I think that my own ideological considerations are rather on the background.

JS: I fully disagree, especially considering your earlier statements. You force the political force field and other clients of the monument to adopt a political position that is much more explicit than they initially intended.

HvH: Do I force them to make a political choice or do I hold up a political mirror? I think the latter.

JS: In the end you held up a mirror to them because they didn't want to realize the monument and therefore didn't need to adopt an essential political position. Hence, unfortunately, your proposal loses momentum. However, this gives rise to an interesting new situation. Earlier on in this

conversation you said that both our monuments won't be realized, but because your monument to the guest worker has been - unfortunately - dropped, there is a considerable chance that they will still erect a traditional monument to the guest worker. I'm imagining a family cast in bronze on a pedestal on the Afrikaanderplein, because you can count on it that after having worked with you they will opt for a predictable trajectory with a traditional artist. In that case, Leefbaar Rotterdam will still suggest my proposal for their monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam in the municipal council. The sculpture that they are imagining is an oppositional monument. It is my idea that these two sculptures together, in opposition, not so much represent the guest worker or the autochthonous citizen of Rotterdam, but two symbolical political positions, which are hijacking our current thinking about society and politics. For me this was the reason to accept the commission.

HvH: You will face the difficult question whether you actually want to realize the monument for Leefbaar Rotterdam.

JS: I would do it immediately of course.

HvH: I have some difficulties with that though. Though I do believe in your conceptualization of the question, I don't believe that you also believe in what is represented by it. And the question is whether you ought to make a monument for something in which you don't believe yourself.

JS: Of course I don't believe in the monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam. But I also don't believe in a monument to the guest worker. I think that both monuments and the tradition that they stem from are incorrect. In the case of the social-democrats I oppose the presupposition that if everybody is just sufficiently represented nobody will engage in a truly political resistance, and in the case of Leefbaar Rotterdam I resist the idea that there is only one point of reference, the white hardworking Dutchman in the old popular neighbourhoods. I recognize myself in neither of the two positions, even though I have lived in the south of Rotterdam for six years. They are purely political constructions that only exist within a representative democracy, in which the idea of the people is first of all a politico-ideological construction. And you can notice this from the way in which the current political debate has been shaped. Nobody knew the concept of a 'leftist hobby' until Geert Wilders² took a few years to point out the leftist elite and the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism. The essential indignation was already there, the anger about the changes in the neighbourhood and the lack of a political recognition of this process. But the affirmation and design of these sentiments as they are manifested in the current political debate is shaped by an ideological construction that has not derived from those neighbourhoods.

HvH: Although I understand your analysis of the outsourcing of responsibility in monumental practice, I don't consider it to be a valid point of departure for the realization of a monument, as you are arguing in the case of the monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam.

JS: What's at stake is to show how ideological struggle in our times - times that want to present themselves emphatically as anti-ideological - is indeed taking place. It is a question about the meaning of the concept of ideology in a society that we are calling democratic. How is this manifested and what means of exercising power are deployed within the process? These monuments are two of those means, and vis-à-vis each other they would have to show the discrepancy between the way in which the people manifest themselves within the neighbourhoods and its politically opportunist representation, from the side of social-democrats as well as from the side of the conservatives.

HvH: But the question remains whether you have to want to make that monument? You draw out a context in which this monument would stand, but that in itself is no criterion to make it. Such a monument fails if it is a mere representation of a political construction in which it operates. For sure that is important, but it has to be capable of more. The monument should be able to create its own culture around it, to incorporate a new thought, and new political thought. It needs to have and make time. It needs to be able to stand in the city and produce urbanity.

JS: I would say that my project, comprising two monuments, is not a monument itself. My project concerns the creation of a situation in which these two monuments will confront each other. In the end, my project aims for opposition. It stimulates indignation and anger about a political system which forces us into ideological frameworks that have nothing to do with the urban reality.

HvH: I think you're making a mistake. In your proposal, meaning is assigned following the dynamic of an artwork rather than that of a monument.

JS: I don't think so. You could say that in my project I appropriate an artistic aspect of monumental practice itself. But in essence I'm trying to create a political situation, thus forcing an opposition of bureaucratic politics against the politics of the streets. It is not a reflection on the political process, it is an attempt to direct the political process.

HvH: In your proposal the monuments are objects without their own substance and that's a problem. You suggest to deploy the monument as a political instrument, in duplicate, and to place the monuments in real opposition, facing each other on the Afrikaanderplein, so that both reveal their demagogical foundations, which will stimulate collective popular resistance against them. That is a theoretically feasible, albeit unpractical thought, that is why I call it a work of art. The actual placement on the Afrikaanderplein demands cooperation and money, which might be provided by Leefbaar Rotterdam, but not in order to ridicule their own party political program. You will have to suppress that aspect. Moreover, Leefbaar Rotterdam realizes that they will never find a majority for their plan. In our project Allegories of Good and Bad Government we have experienced first hand how this plan was hypothetically valued by politicians, but rejected by their sense of reality. This also implies that there is no way that Leefbaar Rotterdam actually wants you to realize a monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam. Rather, it is satisfied that you express the idea within an artistic context, as your work of art. As long as you don't actually realize the work, your actual intention is not addressed, while you are venting Leefbaar Rotterdam's message.

Art-critical proposition that are impossible to implement in practice are susceptible of being hijacked for political ends. How often does it happen that artists are asked to develop visions and theories, to camouflage the mundane, opportunist choices that are made after; already this year it happened to me three times. That's why a monument that can only exist as idea within an art institutional framework is not a presentation of what could exist in practice, but it has its own, different, politics. Your attempt to place governmental politics and the politics of the street against each other takes place within the politics of 'the art work.' That's what makes it a work different from a work which actually could situate itself within reality.

JS: In my own practice I don't recognize the difference that you're making between the work of art on one side and a political situation on the other. As I said before, I don't believe in the premise of either monument, but I do believe in the platform they may create in relation to each other. A platform that facilitates visualizing the difference between what we consider to be politics, which is a concept that we are currently addressing too univocally. The differentiation of this concept by creating an actually political, public situation doesn't tolerate a differentiation between the artistic, monumental, and political. It creates the conditions to rethink those concepts in relation to one another, to facilitate true opposition, which in its turn gives meaning to the democratic promise in the public sense of the word. There is no difference between theory and practice, such as you mention in your definition of the work of art.

Of course my design of this political situation is undesirable for Leefbaar Rotterdam, and, as you suggest, they will see no additional value at all in the monument's actual realization. But I think that you're making a faulty assessment by presupposing that that's the end of the process, because I will still force them to execute their proposal as consistently as possible. Whether with their cooperation or without it, I have it in writing that they intend to realize the sculpture. And if Leefbaar Rotterdam still bails out in the end, I will ask the representatives of the former guest workers to support the execution of the monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam. I will try to convince them that

their guest worker monument only acquires its value when the whole of political constructions from which the discussion about true and false Dutch citizens emanates is recognized.

Or I will find another form. I believe in the interaction between theory and practice and the role of my art as a form of directing movements in the public sphere. I will continue to find an entrance to shape my research, with or without the actual realization of the monument for the chased-off citizen of Rotterdam.

HvH: Apparently we agree that the actual realization of this work is key to the success of its concept. Or you try to find an entrance somewhere else where it is equally crucial truly to realize your design. Assuming that both these monuments will soon stand in the Afrikaander neighbourhood, the next issue is whether people will get involved with it. How do you imagine this process?

JS: I imagine both sculptures being destroyed, together and at the same time, so that we may put an end to this political disaster story.

HvH: Now you're stating the problem yourself.

JS: I think that you're underestimating the necessary point of departure that becomes possible once these statues are destroyed. And I would say that the weak point of your monument is that there's nothing to pull from its pedestal.

HvH: (grins) Erecting and overthrowing monuments belongs to the monumental practice. But to erect a monument under the presupposition that it will soon be pulled from its pedestal...

JS: (interrupts) I don't suppose so, I hope so.

HvH: I've come to know you as someone with a strong ideological drive, I know if you don't get it your way you're able to screw up the entire situation. (laughs)

Earlier on in this conversation you said that the confirmation and design of the people's sentiments that we are dealing with is shaped by an ideological construction that didn't originate from the neighbourhoods themselves. Nevertheless, Leefbaar Rotterdam did their demagogical job, there are many frustrations and the atmosphere is tense. Suppose that the monumental project would actually cause the anger in the neighbourhood to erupt, then this would be instigated by Leefbaar Rotterdam. Not for the reason you want, but precisely because of that which makes you feel taken hostage. The chance that the event between these two monuments, which both are an immediate and charged representation of the people, will lead to a political unmasking forcing everyone to an essential choice is a lot smaller than the chance of a scuffle which both Leefbaar and the social-democrats will hawk about as they like.

JS: I acknowledge that risk, not only in this work but also in many other projects. What connects our work is that we both believe in political situations as our material. That we don't want to be commentators at a distance, making all kinds of artistic proposals for a different world and politics, but in doing so never seek the actual confrontation with their subject. But indeed the danger of that practice is that it can be hijacked, that there's a risk to be politically held hostage, that we fail. But if we deploy art as a full-fledged power this may be not the case. There might be a possibility for progress and I won't surrender that political potential because of a possible failure.

I think that searching for alliances with governmental politics is necessary. To gain insight into the way in which we are currently governed and by opposing it with another view of the future, to recalibrate politics ideologically. In my work I attempt to force coherence between an ideological basis and action. I'm aware that this may never reach an absolute form, but that people constantly need to be forced to be ideologically responsible I consider a fact. That is the inevitable commitment that I feel toward my role as artist.

HvH: I don't believe in the political ideal as such. It's easier for me to operate in a deceitful situation, I even find that somewhat pleasurable. As an artist I don't feel the need to convince politics of some new ideology, I'd rather seize the opportunity to push things over. That's our difference - I don't believe in politics, that's what it is. I don't believe a politics exists having the best intentions with the world. It's just the wrapping paper for all sorts of processes without any direction whatsoever. Rhetoric to keep everything together. In practice everything is too complex, paradoxical, and schizophrenic to speak of a direction or an ideology. For me, the artist's power does not reside in formulation of political targets, but in the dynamics in between. In making progress possible. I like it that there is space for my meddlesomeness and I enjoy creating new spaces. That's not apolitical, the power of culture doesn't reside in the fact that it presents itself but in the power with which it manifests itself. In the case of a monument, politics and art approach each other very closely, they are on each other's backs, rely on each other, dig holes and set traps for one another. It's a battle for direction, seeking the language of monumentality, determining the mode of signification. The monument, the counter-monument, the anti-monument, they swiftly become models in which the old division of roles returns. The hijacker is hijacked and vice versa in an arena that is attractive to both. Artists and politicians consider the monument to be the magical tool to actualize their influence on the other's domain. He who is most alert holds the power, that's the type of dynamic that we're talking about.

I am happy that preceding this bizarre exercise we became friends and had this conversation. For centuries there has been battle with monuments in the political arena, but I've got the feeling that this has never happened so closely to the frontline.

Notes

- 1.[Ed.] Term coined by the current Christian-Conservative government to designate their preferred political subject.
- 2.[Ed.] The leader of the extreme-nationalist Freedom Party (PVV), currently supporting the minority Christian-Conservative government.

