



Hans van Houwelingen
Until it stops resembling itself

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September 3 till December 11, 2011
Stroom Den Haag, Hogewal 1-9, The Hague

Image front cover: Workshop Thorbecke: Spinoza en route
to Amsterdam and Thorbecke en route to The Hague.
Courtesy Hans van Houwelingen.

Monuments, art and public Space

During the Museum Night Stroom Den Haag will inaugurate a solo exhibition by Hans van Houwelingen, one of the leading contemporary artists explicitly engaged in the field of art and public space. His thought-provoking designs and proposals reflect a novel, and markedly critical, view on the contemporary monument. Within walking distance of the centre of Dutch political power, Van Houwelingen will address the way we think about art, public space and the power structures that impact both.

The exhibition is curated by Mihnea Mircan, artistic director of Extra City - Kunsthal Antwerp. In 2008 he curated *Since we last spoke about monuments* at Stroom Den Haag.

Until it stops resembling itself forms a diptych with a new book on Van Houwelingen's recent projects, titled *Undone*. The publication is realized in collaboration with Extra City. Extra City will also host an exhibition by Hans van Houwelingen together with Jonas Staal, from 18/11/2011 to 8/1/2012. The book *Undone* will be launched autumn 2011 at Stroom.

The exhibition by Van Houwelingen is a continuation of Stroom's *nu monument* program (2007 - 2010), about the (im)possibility of contemporary monuments. This exhibition is also the second in a series of exhibitions called Reference Points, dedicated to artists and artists' collectives who play a directive role in the debate about art and the public domain. The first

exhibition, by Het Observatorium, took place in 2009.

Until it stops resembling itself

The exhibition space of Stroom is fairly empty; we only see projected videos showing us images of two sculptures in public space and two empty pedestals. During the day, images are streamed to Stroom from different cameras pointed at the sculptures or their empty pedestals. We see the daily life around the statues, people walking by, looking at the sculptures or maybe wondering why the pedestals are empty. The four works that are the protagonists of the show are not all by Van Houwelingen, only one of them is actually made by him. With the other sculptures he has a strong relationship, he has given them new meaning by venturing his own vision on to them.

Characteristic for the work of Van Houwelingen is an approach to the monumental genre whereby the artist insists that new monuments need not be built, but that existing statues and markers can be looked at again, de-familiarized, engaged together with the histories they represent or rearranged in a new urban syntax and a new critical configuration.

The two works in public space that we can follow via de projections are *Secret Path Along Which Death Escaped* from 2007/2009 and installed at Kunstfort bij Vijhuizen and the Monument for foreign workers in Rotterdam by Naum Gabo (1957). The empty pedestals belong to the Thorbecke statue by Ferdinand Leenhoff from 1876 that is normally installed at the Thorbecke square in Amsterdam and the Spinoza statue by Frédéric Hexamer from 1880 that is situated at the Paviljoensgracht in The

Hague. The video projections make tangible the spatial embedding, social effect and dynamic surroundings of the monuments.

The pedestals are empty for a special reason, not because the sculptures are being renovated, but because they are standing in the reception area of Stroom. Statues, who normally belong to public space, are displaced by this move to the inside. This feels a bit unreal and strange because the sculptures are too big for an indoor space and without their pedestal, you can suddenly get much closer to them. The position from which you look at the sculptures – the frog perspective – is also estranging. You experience the sculptures differently from this position than when they are standing in public space where you can look at them from a distance.

Apart from this physical alienation, it is unusual to move monuments. By physically moving them out of their context, it seems as if we affect the monumentality of these statues. The questioning of the monument by displacing it (physically and contextually), is exactly what Van Houwelingen aims for.

The exhibition takes into account the impossibility of removing such works from the contexts for which they were designed, of fully 'representing' them in an art institution. Instead of direct representation, the exhibition proposes a reflection, through the video projections and the displaced monuments, on temporal or social distance, on the passage of time and the ownership of symbols, reverting the gaze that

monuments cast upon us.

Art in public space is a tricky art form. Tricky because it is marked by constantly changing governments and their changing preferences, conventions and ideas regarding the role and function of art in public space. This has not always led to the best art and certainly not to a cohesive collection of art in public space. The eclectic and diverse number of sculptures in public space in the Netherlands is often overwhelming and difficult to interpret.

In discussions about art in public space two key questions, next to the aesthetic one, play a central role: who is the power that speaks and who is the audience that watches? In the work by Van Houwelingen and in this exhibition “power” and “the public” play a crucial role. Both concepts are placed between quotation marks because they are complex containers. Our current power structure consists of an assembled power composed of government, public and private parties and the public is no homogenous mass either.

In the recently published Fonds BKVB essay *Wild Park. Het onverwachte als opdracht*, Jeroen Boomgaard states that works of art in public space are a kind of mirror of the health of our democracy. “A poorly functioning democracy brings bloodless images on behalf of those in power who do not want to take responsibility and who pass their lack of ideas on to civilians in half-hearted participation without any real chance of change” (2011, p. 90). Strong sculptures on the other hand “show a government that is willing to

provide space for experimentation and deviation and who sees exactly that space as a representation of her presence” (p. 90).

Besides a complex, fragmented, sometimes dysfunctional power structure, there is also the audience to take into account. Artworks in public space are always seen by people; sometimes consciously, often accidentally and occasionally even unintentionally. The audience for art in public space is “always present but can never be pinpointed” writes Boomgaard (p. 40). It is therefore an ungrateful public and an uncertain, difficult factor to take into account.

Van Houwelingen pushes the complex relationship between art in public space, power structures and its audience to an extreme by bringing us, the visitors at the same time very close to and far away from the sculptures. We see them now, perhaps for the first time consciously, but as filmed images. We can come closer than ever before to the two physically present monuments. On a pedestal, the statues are unapproachable, in a sense even inaccessible. Now they are suddenly on the same level as the viewer.

The exhibition *Until it stops resembling itself* forms a unity with the publication *Undone*. In both exhibition and publication, the central works are *National Monument to the Guest Worker*, *Secret Path Along Which Death Escaped* and the proposal for the Thorbecke monument: *What's done ... can be undone!*.

The publication complements the scarcity of visual information with a multiplicity of critical perspectives on the three projects. It aims to inscribe Van Houwelingen's work in an international debate about memory and communality, with the generous help of eminent authors such as Julia Bryan-Wilson, Mark Jarzombek, Brian Dillon, John Heijmans, Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, Gerald Raunig, David Riff, Jonas Staal and Marina Vishmidt.

Secret Path Along Which Death Escaped

For the work *Secret Path Along Which Death Escaped* Hans Van Houwelingen asked people to donate their old tombstones. Of the more than two hundred recycled tombstones he received, he made a winding path of about 250 meters long around the Fort Vijfhuizen.

On the occasion of the work van Houwelingen wrote the following in *Undone*:

“Death, that profound mystery and inexhaustible source of inspiration for life and for art, has become a commodity in a ruthless market economy. Being dead is expensive. So death usually does not last long. ‘Rest In Peace’ is not to be taken too literally. Death is no longer one of life’s certainties. What will it be like when death ceases to exist altogether? No death is certain. What meaning is held in the moment death ceases to exist? It is in the light of thoughts such as these that I embarked on the laying of a secret secret path along which death escaped.

The ramparts that form the external defense of the nineteenth century Art Fort at Vijfhuizen now contains a path made up of hundred and tombstones from exhumed graves -- tombstones have a longer life than death. Surviving relatives made the gravestones available for this purpose over the past two years. Each of them had given up their claim to a personal monument so that the stones could be recycled to create a single, large work of art – a work that calls attention not only to death but also to its absence. Countless individual life stories have been fused into the secret path as

a way of giving death a tangible identity. The cemetery is equipped for processing private grief, but my intention was to create some room for death himself.”



Hans van Houwelingen, *Secret Path Along Which Death Escaped*, 2007-2009. Courtesy the artist.



Hans van Houwelingen, *Secret Path Along Which Death Escaped*, 2007-2009. Picture Maaike Lauwaert. Courtesy the artist.

National Monument to the Guest Worker

The Monument for guest workers by Naum Gabo in Rotterdam stands next to the Bijenkorf and dates from 1957. Floor Tinga wrote about Gabo's work that he 'purposefully designed a 'meaningless' abstract work that people could give meaning to themselves. However, a relationship between the local population and the monument didn't work out. In popular parlance it was soon tellingly nicknamed "The Thing" or "The train accident". Next to this, the constructivist sculpture, once a gift to the director of the Bijenkorf, is in a deplorable condition. The situation is so serious that the 27 meters high statue almost threatens to fall.' (Tinga, 2010, www.skor.nl).

The relationship of Van Houwelingen to this monument requires some explanation. In 2009, Van Houwelingen and the writer Mohammed Benzakour received a commission from the Centrum Beeldende Kunst (CBK) Rotterdam, to design a new monument for the first generation of guest workers.

Benzakour wrote a poem in honour of the guest workers and Van Houwelingen and Benzakour proposed that as a Memorial to the immigrant worker, the waning sculpture by Gabo would be restored by guest workers. Van Houwelingen wrote the following about his proposal in *Undone*:

"Skilled people, contemporary specialized guest workers, who will restore the sculpture and return it to peak condition. They will approach the reconstruction of the city as a mirror image. This



Naum Gabo, *Gastarbeider Monument* uit 1957.

time the monument will itself be reconstructed; the sculpture itself will rise again from the rubble and its ruinous state. Contemporary guest workers work, so to speak, in the reverse direction, backwards in time, into history, returning the sculpture to its former glorifying state. That is the moment at which the descendants reach out a hand to their fathers, in a timeless labour contract: that is the moment at which the monument to the guest worker will exist.”

This proposal for a new National Monument to the Guest Worker zooms in on the political motives and implications of a monument paying tribute to the social role of immigrant workers after World War II. The monumental status of the sculpture dislocates from one historical narrative of war and reconstruction, into another narrative beginning with expatriation, post-war cultural and social mutations, and leading all the way to globalization and the current dilemmas of multiculturalism.

The project has not (yet) been realized and has a turbulent history. Leefbaar Rotterdam, for example, in reaction to the plans for a National Monument to the Guest Worker, called in 2008 in a local newspaper for a monument for the Chased-Off Citizen of Rotterdam. Jonas Staal writes about the current state of the monument in *Undone*:

“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 center, 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.”

Dream

To the Guest Worker

In the Beginning was the Dream
Travelled the seas, exchanged skies
His soil remained his soil

Sun on back, eyes clouded
His moon remained his moon

Leg petrified, foot rusted
His soul remained his soul

Then, sweat dried, he placed his hand
His shoulders touched ours
And we built, we built

A tower in the sky
Home in the heavens
A new dream...

In the Beginning was the Dream, and the Dream is
with us

Mohammed Benzakour

What's done ... can be undone!

Finally, there are the videos of the empty pedestals and the two uprooted and displaced monuments.

The Thorbecke statue from Amsterdam and the Spinoza statue from The Hague are connected by a proposal that Hans van Houwelingen did in 2008 under the title *What's done ... can be undone!* to swap the two monuments. Some contextual information is in place. In 2007, the city council of The Hague set into motion a trajectory for a new monument for Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (1798-1872), founder of the Dutch parliamentary democracy.

The commission of the municipality called into question assumptions regarding the alleged inaccessibility of art and the idea of recognizable sculptures. Therefore, Stroom invited, under the title "Workshop Thorbecke", artists who in their work regularly deal with the relations between power and image, monuments, art and public space. They were asked for their views on a contemporary monument for Thorbecke. The artists were Florian Göttke, Hans van Houwelingen, André Kruysen en Gerlinde Schuller / Information Design Studio.

The proposal of Van Houwelingen existed of a swap between the Thorbecke statue from Amsterdam and the Spinoza statue from The Hague. Because, so argued the artist, Thorbecke actually belongs in The Hague and Spinoza in



Thorbecke statue by Ferdinand Leenhoff (1876) on the Thorbecke square in Amsterdam.



Spinoza statue by Frédéric Hexamer (1880) on the Paviljoensgracht in The Hague.

Amsterdam. One hundred years ago, The Hague thanked for the offer to have the Thorbecke monument in their city and so it was moved to Amsterdam. Now the city wants a monument for Thorbecke. Amsterdam missed a statue of the most famous and radical Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). The Spinoza Circle was founded and they took the initiative for a Spinoza monument.

Van Houwelingen suggested to resolve this dual desire by swapping the monuments of Spinoza and Thorbecke. In *Undone* he explains:

“The national heroes of freedom and democracy have to stand in their historical context, on the location from which their meaning expressed best. Thorbecke belongs in The Hague and Spinoza in Amsterdam. A correct environment for these monuments honors their meaning. Both their histories make a reasonable case for their exchange. By exchanging the monuments for Spinoza and Thorbecke, The Hague and Amsterdam will be able to spotlight their heritage down to the minutest detail.”

Sometimes things that have been done can be undone. The images on the cover of this exhibition guide visualize the two monuments on the move, freed from the urban context where they have been located for so many years, ready for the exchange that never took place. In the exhibition space we see live footage of the two empty pedestals and in the entrance hall are the statues themselves. Not exchanged between the two cities as Van Houweling originally planned but for once together in a single room.

About Hans van Houwelingen

Hans van Houwelingen (1957, Harlingen) studied at the Minerva Academy in Groningen and the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. In 1987 Van Houwelingen won the prestigious Prix de Rome award. The work of Van Houwelingen is mainly located in public space, but he designed, for example, also the wedding coin for Willem-Alexander and Máxima, and the fifty guilders coin from 1998 commemorating the Peace of Westphalia.

Two recent projects and exhibitions that Van Houwelingen participated in are *Allegories of Good and Bad Government* in W139 and *A History of Violence* at Torch Gallery.

In his works, texts and publications, Van Houwelingen is controversial, outspoken and uncompromising. A variety of assumptions and strategies that define the way we conceptualize or relate to monuments come under scrutiny in his work. The artist deconstructs the hypocrisy, fallacies and political control in today's culture of remembrance – the inflation and hidden agendas of gestures of commemoration in public space.

Stroom School

Stroom School is the umbrella term for the side program that Stroom organizes coinciding with exhibitions. In the Stroom School issues are highlighted and deepened in another way than in the exhibitions.

Agenda

Free guided tours on Sundays

Every Sundays at 3 PM there are free guided tours through the exhibition by the team of Stroom or an external guide (except for October 2 till October 16 and December 4).

In addition, on September the 4th at 3PM there is a special guided tour by the curator Mihnea Mircan and the artist Hans van Houwelingen.

The external guides will be announced on our website www.stroom.nl.

Book launch

The exhibition is a diptych with the book *Undone* about Van Houwelingens recent projects. The book is presented at Stroom during an afternoon of lectures and speeches. More information about the date and details of the program will be announced on www.stroom.nl.

10 November: performance Jonathan Dronsfield

Jonathan Dronsfield works at the University of Reading in the UK and is specialized in art theory and philosophy of art. He will give a performance based on the text he wrote for the book *Undone*.

11 December Finissage

The exhibition will be concluded with a guided tour by Arno van Roosmalen, director of Stroom Den Haag.

On www.stroom.nl you can find the most recent information on the Stroom School activities.

The exhibition is made possible by:
City of The Hague, City of Amsterdam, Mondriaan
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(The Hague).

Stroom
Den Haag