

MONUMENT  
OF  
SHAME

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The Witte de With Square in Amsterdam-West – which I was commissioned to design in 2013 – gets its name from the former Witte de With Street, whose single row of houses gave way for a new building and square. The architect of this new building first presented it as a computer simulation, including a sun-drenched square with an imposing green tree and a terrace filled with white people dressed in summer clothes. I Photoshop-ed every lie from this idyllic picture, after which a measly, leafless tree on a dismal Monday morning remained, on a square that was populated only by a few young immigrant loiterers. I got away with this by emphasizing the fact this new little square had to be inaugurated in a truthful way, not with fabrications. History is already suffering enough, being constantly remodelled in the forms that suit best.

In spite of my keen interest in socio-political issues, I also associate the name of the art institute Witte de With in Rotterdam with that of the street it is located in Rotterdam, rather than with Witte de With the historical seafaring hero, and the stories of his crimes. The institute Witte de With wishes to change its name in order to dissociate itself from the colonial violence for which the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Admiral Witte de With was in part responsible. While his heroic battles are well documented, as is his role, alongside Piet Hein, in capturing the *silver fleet* from the Spanish, he is not so well known for his cruelty and involvement in the slave trade and incineration of clove plantations.

At its foundation in 1990, Witte de With was named deliberately after the street on which it was located and went on to become a stronghold of contemporary art and social engagement. Neither its first director, Chris Dercon, nor his successors Catherine David or Nicolaus Schafhausen, seem to have been aware of or interested in this historical blind spot, as it is currently referred to. The fact that the institution now is expanding its historical consciousness and self-reflection is a progressive step forward. It perfectly fits with the *Zeitgeist* in which issues of emancipation and identity circulate in cultural agendas and research projects underpinned by post-colonial studies. Some art institute closely review their own history and attempt to remove any colonial blind spots from their practice. This is a noble, yet at the same time fraught endeavour, because it inevitably enfolds itself within a white doctrine and re-affirms it. This self-cleansing does clearly not include abandoning the art collection or quitting one's curatorial job in favour of those on the other side of the colonial divide. Yet, in theory, that would be both simple and consistent act. The decolonization of the art institute still is dressed in a white uniform and dons a pith helmet. Moreover, the anxiously formulated new rhetoric also does not contribute to extending the debate much further than the institute itself. In that mismatched situation, the

issue is discussed most of time in a reproachful atmosphere. It is often 'others' that are being judged, an approach whose counter-productivity is proportional.

The name change envisioned by Witte de With fits squarely with a slowly self-consolidating mini-iconoclasm. Colonial texts and titles are expurgated, as was recently the case in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The Tropenmuseum, the ethnology museum, is in the process of removing its ethnographic collection out of sight. In the USA, 'pro-slavery era' memorials commemorating the Confederate states are pulled from their pedestals or removed as a precaution. Even artists are in trouble! Jimmy Durham's work became embroiled in a confusing debate about his own Cherokee ancestry, that he has both claimed and denied, and his 'right' to speak to and from a Native American perspective. Sam Durant - head lowered - set fire to his own artwork Scaffold (2012) which, whilst critical of a form of jurisdiction that executed its verdicts by public hangings, right up to the hanging of Saddam Hussein, infuriates the Dakota descendants of those hung in 1862 by such a scaffold as it tampers with a history they regard as their own.

We are fighting one battle after another, armed with amputated bits of history. One chooses the narrative that fits and fires at will. We indeed can play around with history, but what we cannot do is rid ourselves of it - history is both malleable and omnipresent. Colonial history is in the mix, whether one likes it or not - it is a fact that the 'western art institute' has its colonial history too. The art institute Witte de With wishes to disentangle its history from the biography of Witte de With, but what this boils down to, is that the institute wants to put its own house in order and present itself against a background of an impossible historiographic neutrality. Wouldn't it be more consistent to engage the colonial past, rather than elude it? A grating consequence of the proposed name change is also that residents of the Witte de With Street who do not take the same stand as the institute implicitly are labelled as being complicitous with brutal colonial practices; the same old song we intoned collectively in relation to Zwarte Piet/ Black Peter.<sup>1</sup> In itself it does not seem particularly problematic that the art institution changes its name, but it would be unfortunate if in doing so it forgets its past and the reason why its former name came to be considered unacceptable. It would be regrettable if the reckless maritime hero is both equated with and expelled as colonial guilt, sparing the art centre the

1 On his birthday on 5<sup>th</sup> December, Saint Nicholas gives presents to Dutch children. Zwarte Piet is the black servant of the saint, a topic which for several years has been triggering intense debate about racism.

necessity of any further self-reflection, as it ignorantly steams forward to the next trend. In a Brussels gallery, I recently saw an installation by the French-Cameroonian artist Dimitri Fagbohoun who described his work as NEGERKUNST (nigger art), with large sculptural letters on the wall. According to the artist, who identifies himself as being 'transcultural', it is crucial to refer to the 1932 book 'Negerkunst' by Max Bill: it comes with much toxic baggage, but it has shaped, overtly or insidiously, the artist's sense of belonging and the perception of 'blackness' by Western audiences. In my opinion, it would better for Witte de With to keep its name for the time being, because it may help to remind us that there is still some way to go in this revisionist genre.

The patriots of Leefbaar Rotterdam (the local ultra-right political party) however could also display a modicum of self-reflection. In their response to this re-naming issue, they demanded the immediate termination of the subsidy for Witte de With: "The institution shows no respect whatsoever to our national history, and therefore is taking illicit advantage of taxpayers' money". After all, at the opening of the Witte de With year in 2008, the Mayor Ivo Opstelten referred to Witte de With as a 'Rotterdammer to be proud of', who ought to be "elevated in the national consciousness for his role in Dutch history – a history that is permanently remodelled to generate new, tourist-attracting stories and anecdotes." To a political party that is so caught up in nationalistic fervour, it should be inadmissible to let the figure of the old captain Witte de With float around, adrift in Peter Pan-like adverts of our past. Whenever Dubbelwit (Double White, as he was nicknamed in his time) is observed in a more serious light, that is as being important to Dutch national history, you will also spot the blots on his escutcheon, a kind of Rorschach test for all sorts of problematic relations with 'identity'. Now that we are attributing more worth than ever to our national history, we should have the courage to confront it in an open and head-on way. This gets more difficult however when history becomes mutilated by commercial fairy tales or erased by controversies over political correctness.

It is a strange paradox that whilst we are increasingly engaging with history, we are less and less open to what we find in this engagement. Where should we look, in a museum that conceals its historical entanglement behind a smoke screen of political correctness? When colonial texts and titles are expurgated and controversial objects removed from sight, what else is left by which the public can share the sense of guilt with the curatorial team. If street names and statues are removed, there is little in the public space to remind us of the colonial past which we indeed do should not forget.

A major problem here is that street names and statues are placed in honour of historical figures. These signs of honour, erected and arranged to evoke a sense of belonging, are based on a manipulative rhetoric. As ideas change and the moral tide turns against particular people or events, honouring them becomes increasingly problematic, but remembering who they really were becomes ever more important. The seemingly impregnable stone and bronze memorials scattered around our cities are unanimously set on being revered - they seem to exude a way of thinking without tolerance. When a memorial becomes morally out of place and respect turns to anger and aggression, iconoclasm seems to be the only way out. The removal or destruction of the monument is often the result.

Traditional commemorative practice - that is of elevating and then pulling down monuments - is taking its toll on notions of history and urban aesthetics and should be emancipated. New commemorative concepts, with a different mind-set towards evaluating controversial monuments - nonuments - might be helpful in preserving history and historical aesthetics, even in adding a contemporary dimension to these. The reintroduction of the pillory might offer a solution here, as a pendant to a statue, a counterweight within a memorial. Not literally, but as a concept, as a model for thinking, talking and writing - a mental tool or aid to dishonour. Between honour and dishonour there is a space from which to observe history in an unprejudiced manner. In essence, the pillory is the equivalent to the statue to that which has fallen out of favour: if we believe a monument is no longer capable of suitably embodying changing historical views, reframing it as a pillory enables it to endure, and to sustain our critical inquiry. Historical pillories share comparable aesthetics and an urban presence with monumental statues, and it often turns out that with time, a statue and pillory become interchangeable, formally and semantically. Memorials are indeed erected to direct people's thoughts towards a particular person or an event in a reverential way, but it is ultimately the people who decide what and how to think. There is a consensus about what we commemorate, and stone or bronze don't play a great part in this. In the Netherlands, the Nationale Dodenherdenking (National Commemoration of the Dead) held every year on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May initially commemorated the Dutch victims of WWII. In 1961, it was decided to extend those commemorated to include all Dutch war victims after WWII. Recently the proposal was rejected of commemorating on this day the victims of the latest wars who were trying to flee to Europe. "Those who want to commemorate everything, commemorate nothing!" the committee in charge argued. The statue itself, the object in the centre of the ceremony, wasn't changed at all, but







VAN HEUTSZ

1851-1924



the type and numbers of those commemorated varied according to changes to the collective memory. This peculiar example shows the malleability of our seemingly rock-hard monuments.

I regularly look with embarrassment at the Indië-Nederland Monument (Dutch East Indies-Netherlands monument) at the Olympiaplein in Amsterdam. This beautiful monument was built in 1935 and originally dedicated to Governor-General Joannes Benedictus van Heutsz (1851-1924). In 2004 Van Heutsz's name and portrait were officially erased from it and the monument was re-signified to remind us of the 'good' relationship between The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies between 1596 and 1949. But the ghost of the Governor-General always looms over this historic idyll and continues to haunt the site. Although a small plaque at the back of the structure reveals how it was once dedicated to him, the monument insistently disables the possibility of any associations with a colonial history in which Van Heutsz caused much more misery than Witte de With, and for which he was nevertheless honoured for more than half a century.

But I do indeed wish to remember the history of Van Heutsz (the Slaughterer of Aceh, as he was called by the public, rephrasing his 'official' nickname: Pacificator of Aceh) and hence I need the appropriate conditions in order to dishonour him. Once it will be publicly recognised as a monument of shame, it will become the perfect place to memorialise Van Heutsz's current disrepute and the painful memory of his atrocities within the context of Dutch colonialism. I therefore call for a reinstating of Van Heutsz's name and his portrait to their original positions, re-orienting or re-framing the monument so it serves as a pillory, a national monument of shame, and to recall an abhorrent episode in colonial history... for emancipatory reasons. After the Van Heutsz Monument of Shame nestles itself in the national consciousness as the concept of the dual functioning of commemoration, an explanatory bronze plaque at its rear will not even be necessary. Needless to say, I hope this proposal will be supported by the Witte de With art centre.