

# 1:1

Nr.5/2011

## Hans van Houwelingen & Jonas Staal



## 1:1 – An Introduction

Mihnea Mircan

The exhibition introduces two remarkable artistic practices concerned with the dilemmas of public art, in The Netherlands and beyond. Although belonging to different generations, and conceiving the political responsibility of the artist in distinct ways, the practices of Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal are bound by a sustained polemic with the monumental genre: they unravel the political desires and anxieties that monuments thread together and ‘set in stone’, and reopen the debates about recent history that monuments seek to terminate. The artists engage the question of the monument overtly — without taking recourse to the negative prefix and ironic foil of an ‘anti-’, or ‘counter-monument’ — in a critical scrutiny of paradigms of consensus, modes of commemoration and their political instrumentality.

Both artists present three recent works, with one point of continuity: the context in which the project of a *National Monument for the Guest Workers* in Rotterdam was proposed, vocally disputed and gradually abandoned. Van Houwelingen’s and Staal’s responses to this uncomfortable commission chart the full extent of a political spectrum animated by ongoing debates about the demise of the multicultural model in Northern Europe. These responses — Van Houwelingen’s proposal to restore a landmark of Rotterdam public art from its dismally poor technical condition and re-script the narrative of its origin and ownership, and Staal’s converse glorification of the ‘real Rotterdammer’, dispossessed of his or her city by successive waves of immigration — sit in opposition but also in a disquieting complementarity. They articulate the contradictory monument of a political discourse premised on ideological disjunction and the rapacious calculation of votes.

Hans van Houwelingen’s proposal interweaves the narrative of the guest workers and the politically agnostic metaphors of the Naum Gabo sculpture for the Bijenkorf department store. The project departs from ideas of reconstruction after World War II, manifested simultaneously in modern, abstract art and in the political decision of inviting foreign workers to assist in the Northern European economic boom. The first step in Van Houwelingen’s proposal is that skilled technicians who are descendants of first-generation immigrant workers restore the sculpture by Gabo to pristine condition: the work of restoration produces history, a non-ritualistic re-enactment of a historical situation. As Gabo’s sculpture coincides chronologically with the arrival of the first waves of guest workers, the project assumes the latter may have been involved in erecting the statue, or were at least part of the same ideological give-and-take. Reading the two events as each other’s pendant, Van Houwelingen posits a problematic symmetry between ‘then’ and ‘now’, as if old footage were played backwards, with the multitude of guest workers moving around — and working on — the same object in the opposite direction. When repaired, the sculpture is to be handed to the descendants of the migrants in the form of a *National Monument*. The monumental latency of the Gabo sculpture and the incompletely acknowledged history of the guest workers nudge each other into presence — two perspectives converge in a single image.

And as the same image accommodates distinct historical vanishing points, disparate subjects, modes of alienation and invisibility, Van Houwelingen's project appears as a monumental anamorphosis of recent history.

Jonas Staal deliberately misinterprets the irate reaction of a Rotterdam political party to the initiative of building a *Monument to the Guest Workers* — its populist appeal to the sacrifices, humiliation and alienation of the 'real Rotterdammers' — as a detailed brief for a monument: a sculptural riposte to a sculpture not yet made, hijacking and distorting a message before it is formulated. The second step the artist takes is to assign himself the task of executing this commission as faithfully as possible, a decision continuous with a mode of engagement that pursues the ultimate, most troubling and impure consequences of its own embeddedness, of its alliance with the political life to which it responds. Instead of putting forward the promise of an 'outside' beyond ideological deformities, Jonas Staal executes something that only served a metaphorical purpose, however brutal — he takes a fragment of political rhetoric seriously and literally, setting into motion a process in which the politician is offered the immediate materialization of political speech, and notions of artistic and political responsibility reach a point of explosive difficulty. The disturbing, vaguely Stalinist image of a 'real Rotterdam' family fleeing in horror a city that is no longer theirs and is colonized by the political Other, is gleefully embraced by its unwitting commissioners. In the exhibition, the two proposals are complemented by a recent undertaking by the two artists: a filmed conversation between the politicians whose statements had been at the origin of the two projects, rehearsing once again their ideological divergences. Yet something seems to happen with the reality quotient of these ideological differences, in the wake of the artistic projects that had translated and reinterpreted them. Filtered through the two projects, the stringency or pertinence of ideological posturing is suspended or turned into a theatrical version of itself.

Hans van Houwelingen also presents *Sluipweg*, a footpath made of over 300 unearthed tombstones, circling the ramparts of Fort bij Vijfhuizen — a defence outpost where no war was fought, rendered obsolete by advancements in military technology at the very moment it was to be inaugurated. The place of a history that never came is now traversed by the material traces of hundreds of anonymous destinies consumed elsewhere and vanquished in other battles. *Sluipweg* confronts the visitor with the haunting feel of a war memorial, yet here the trauma does not precede the memorial — they coincide in the same timeframe, disrupting the metaphysical armature of the discourses that make sense of death: that allegorize and elevate death so that it is fully separated from life. *Sluipweg* internalizes the relationship between monument and death, and conflates elements on whose distinction the efficacy of this sculptural genre relies. The operation here seems to be one of memorial equivalence, whereby death is simultaneous with the monument, and the memorial 'comes alive'. The hundreds of deaths made visible and tangible at Vijfhuizen as deaths having occurred somewhere else, are conjoined in empty equivalence and circular trajectory, in which the first cause becomes identical to the last effect. By donating the tombstones to the project, the inheritors, relatives or

friends of the departed agree to renounce the equivalence of death to a body and a biography and enter a network of transfers, in which each stone further encrypts the collective, anticlimactic point of the memorial, suggesting an infinite community of the vulnerable.

*What's done... can be undone!* was proposed by Van Houwelingen in response to a commission from the city of The Hague for a monument to Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, founder of Dutch parliamentarism. At roughly the same time, and possibly as a consequence of roughly similar processes of political or cultural branding, the municipality of Amsterdam was discussing a monument to Baruch Spinoza, purported founder of the city's image of freedom and individualism. Hans van Houwelingen proposed a trade-off, as each city held the statue the other desired. The historical motivations for the exchange of position, whereby Thorbecke would be relocated to Spinoza's plinth in The Hague and vice versa, the refusal of a 'contemporary homage' that would update decrepit forms of veneration to their postmodern equivalents, apparently disengaged but equally charged politically, the mathematical precision and symbolic resonance of the reciprocal displacement: all these outline an economy of the monumental genre in the artist's practice. Nothing needs to be built, all the elements necessary to enact the scenario of remembrance exist, and only need to be reconnected in a different equation, or rearranged like pieces of the same puzzle. Van Houwelingen behaves curatorially in political space: he re-hangs the permanent collection in a museum of political history. Retaining their historical accuracy, the 'exhibits' lose something in an interchange that happens between cities but also between regimes of representation. Thorbecke and Spinoza place each other precisely halfway between art and politics, and, becoming each other's term of comparison, invalidate the other's monumental status.

Jonas Staal shows a project commissioned by the residents of the Maastrichtsestraat in The Hague, to commemorate the deportation of sixteen Jewish families that had lived on the street during World War II. As opposed to a conventional scenario where the task of remembrance would be delegated to, or externalized into a marker that remembers in our place, Jonas Staal proposed the change of the name of the street into 'Deportation of Sixteen Jewish Families Street'. This was not to be just a switch of a street sign, but was to span from correspondence and billing addresses to the residents' efforts to modify accordingly all entries relating to the street in the archival filing systems of the municipality: an act of commemoration that translates into a long-term, demanding process of bureaucratic readjustment, inscribing the past into the present via a debt of permanent remembrance. If, according to Robert Musil, "nothing is more invisible than a monument", nothing here is more intricate, uncomfortable and protracted. As is the case throughout the exhibition, the installation of the project — consisting of the street sign and a collection of letters and documents bearing the new street name — is contrasted with an oversized title card, perturbing scalar relationships between the physical and symbolic dimensions of objects belonging in art galleries or in public space, and engaging persons and communities in isolated or collective rituals of

subservience or disobedience. The disproportionate title cards, the objects they name and the size of the Extra City space coproduce an uncertain, in-between territory, a breach between interior and exterior coordinates, between the condition of the document and that of the monument.

Staal also presents the third episode in a research project titled *Art, Property of Politics*, which surveys the relation between art and politics 'at the other end', investigating forms of artistic behavior within the Dutch political class. This wryly reversed museology has delved on the art collections of Rotterdam political parties, examining the convergences between ideological positions and the artifacts collected, or on the 'Freethinkers' Space', an improvised exhibition space set up in the Dutch Parliament, to demonstrate through art the democratic coexistence of opposed political views. If politicians as collectors or curators were the subjects of the first episodes, the project *Art, Property of Politics III. Closed Architecture* consists of a model based on a text by Fleur Agema, architecture graduate and prominent member of the Freedom Party. The 350-page Master's degree dissertation by Fleur Agema describes — in mostly textual terms — the project of a prison, a complex facility for reinserting inmates into society through an elaborate sequence of disciplinary spaces and norms. Once again, the artist took it on himself to flesh out this vision from a text that reflects on punitive and re-educational strategies, with ample implications for ideas of the health of the social body and at the boundaries at which normality needs to be defended. The prison is gradually visualized as a route 'towards the light', between units functioning as a dungeon, a military camp, a commune and a simulation of real life under heavy electronic surveillance, with any wrong step risking to send the convict all the way to the bottom of the process of atonement. Working through this composite image of incarceration, the artist inquires into social mutations in The Netherlands, invoking the tropes of exclusion, crisis and adversary-spotting that fuel current political discourse in this part of Europe.

National Monument to the Guest Worker, 2009–2010

Hans van Houwelingen, in cooperation with Mohammed Benzakour  
Artist's statement

'The tyrant wants us to be in fear of him and the artist's task is not to perpetuate that fear, but rather to encourage resistance.'

— Naum Gabo

The Turkish Social-Democratic Federation, an organization with representation in the Municipal Council of Rotterdam, took an initiative in 2007 towards establishing a monument to the city's first generation of guest workers. The descendants of these foreign workers wished to pay them a tribute for their contribution to society while members of that first generation were still alive. The initiating group expanded to include members of immigrant organizations from guest worker countries other than Turkey, and united with arts organizations to form a foundation. In 2009, a committee was established to commission a monument which would express the significance of guest workers to Rotterdam. They chose Mohammed Benzakour, son of one of the first Moroccan guest workers, and artist Hans van Houwelingen.

The industrial countries of Western Europe began to employ foreign workers during the 1950s. There was above all demand for people who were prepared to take on the heavy, irregular, dirty and relatively poorly paid jobs which were disdained by the generally better educated national populations. The latter profited from the labour shortage and opted for the better paid jobs. The industries of Rotterdam initially turned to the surrounding region and other parts of the Netherlands to supplement their workforces. From the mid fifties onwards the search for manpower spread outside the Netherlands and especially towards the Mediterranean region. The first large contingents of foreign migrant workers came mainly from Italy followed a little later by Spain. Their numbers declined strongly after 1975 as they returned to their homelands. By this time Turkish and Yugoslavian workers formed the largest immigrant workforce, while the numbers of guest workers from Morocco was rising.

Most of the foreign guest workers who migrated to Rotterdam in the first period were brought to the Netherlands on the basis of recruitment agreements concluded between two Dutch Ministries (Social Affairs and Justice) and countries in the Mediterranean region. From the mid 1960s onwards, many guest workers also arrived in Rotterdam under their own steam; a relatively large proportion of these were Turks seeking relief from the depression in the Turkish mining and textile industries, and young Moroccans coming largely from the impoverished Rif mountains of their homeland. The Netherlands declared an end to official guest worker status during the Oil Crisis and slump of 1974. From then onwards, nearly all immigration from the former guest worker countries took place under a government family reunification scheme. Now, several generations later, a substantial portion of Rotterdam's population consists of descendants of the first generation of guest workers. Immigration has since become a controversial topic in the Netherlands, and in particular in Rotterdam. People rarely see a connection between the immi-

grant communities and the work carried out by the guest workers, let alone recognize the heavy work and the sacrifices they made.

Rotterdam rose from the ashes following the massive bombardment of World War II to become what is today the most modern city of the Netherlands. The city's name personifies rebuilding; the individual dedication of those who carried out that work is nowadays largely forgotten, with the result that portrayals of them tend to be politically tinged and adapted to today's perceptions.

The 'hard-working Dutchman' is a widely-heard slogan in contemporary politics. Political parties suggest that the country was rebuilt by the industrious Dutchmen. The exact respect and proportions in which different groups contributed to the prosperity of the country is not discussed, so that 'hard-working' becomes a convenient political slogan which appeals to an electorate that thinks of itself as hard working. The unspoken identification of hard work with Dutchness makes even an unemployed Dutch citizen feel proud of his or her input to 'creating' the Netherlands as it is today. Anyone of non-Dutch origins has, by implication, no part in that input however hard he or she works. The portrayal of a history of Rotterdam as the united achievement of hard-working Dutchmen serves the political rhetoric of the Netherlands. Campaigns to clamp down on immigration feed on a historical narrative devoid of migrant workers. Guest workers are attributed no role whatsoever in the conventional reading of Rotterdam's history of 'hard-working' citizens. Everyone has heard of the Phoenix of Rotterdam, risen from the ashes, but who has really seen it?

The first guest workers who arrived in the second half of the 1950s to work and build a future in Rotterdam are now elderly or have passed away. Their descendants call for recognition, by the majority, of guest working, and seek a way of showing appreciation for their ancestors. A monument is supposed to be the most cultivated, cultured, and eloquent instrument visualizing these wishes; it is a useful, glorifying tool in society's toolbox. The monument is supposed to recognize disparity and conveys a suggestion to think about it for a while. From a political viewpoint, on the other hand, a monument can be a device for maintaining the status quo and dispensing with the question, for the monument serves to advocate the cause instead. In the best case, a traditional monument placed here would say that it is unjust to exclude guest workers from the history of Rotterdam. Meanwhile, the hard-working Dutchman continues to embody 'the spirit of people in Rotterdam and the miracle of a modern city rising from the rubble' remaining the sole protagonist of history. This is exactly where the focus of our design lies. The monument we propose distrusts the rhetorical function of the traditional monument; it refuses to bolster a history that denies the role of the guest worker and it does not aim to be an emblem of an injustice. What it does do is to reexamine and memorialize history from a different perspective, to let history exist in a different frame of reference.

On Afrikaanderplein in South Rotterdam, a suburb where large numbers of guest workers were housed, the guest workers monument will be announced by a text in nine languages on windows in a closed fence around the park on

the square. Here, on the periphery of Rotterdam, the author Mohammed Benzakour, son of a Moroccan guest worker, will place a poem about the longings of the guest workers who, in the periphery of Europe, dreamed of a future in the industrialized West. The result of that dream is to be found in the centre of the city, in the Constructivist sculpture by Naum Gabo which stands in front of the Bijenkorf department store on Coolsingel, which has absorbed the history of Rotterdam for the last fifty-three years, a site that will henceforth be inhabited by the National Monument to the Guest Worker.

The time when Naum Gabo's sculpture was erected in 1957 coincided with the arrival of the first generation of foreign guest workers. The sculpture bears witness to that era; from that point onwards it oversaw the reconstruction work from its own, unconventional but nonetheless true perspective. It bore witness to those guest workers who came to Rotterdam to realize their ideals by performing the work the city needed to be done. Half a century later, Gabo's sculpture will break its silence by speaking out about a world in the throes of globalization, a process in which the guest workers were pioneers. Contemporary guest workers — highly skilled technicians — will restore the sculpture, which is now in a deplorable condition; once that is achieved, the sculpture will accommodate the National Monument to the Guest Worker within it.

Gabo's intention that the sculpture would symbolize a modern city risen from the rubble and the spirit of its people, will be actualized over half a century later through a symbiotic conjunction with the guest workers. The rusting sculpture will be restored by guest workers to its former glory and the sculpture will in turn declare its historical testimony to the guest worker history.

The people of Rotterdam never ascribed a meaning to Gabo's abstract work (unlike the sculpture by Zadkine). It merely attracted nicknames such as 'the thing', 'the flower', 'the tree' or "the banana." Gabo was blamed for his failure to invest the sculpture with the meaning it promised. Gabo's work was rooted in Modernism, in the ideal of a new, better world, but his "Bijenkorf construction" never gained widespread public acceptance. Things started going wrong even as the sculpture was being erected. Gabo received the commission because it was necessary to resolve a conflict between the city planner Van Traa, who favored the continuation of the existing building line of Coolsingel, and the architect Breuer, who refused to modify his design to meet that requirement. The general public, however, did not accept that as a good reason for placing a work of art at the location. In the eyes of many Rotterdammers, Gabo's sculpture was a pragmatic object without meaning or content — "a monument to the fashion trade," as some said. Few people believed in the 1950s that an abstract work of art could have a specific meaning. Critics held that a work of art either had to be clearly representational or had to represent its subject metaphorically. The Constructivist movement that arose in Russia around 1913 through the work of Tatlin, Rodchenko, Pevsner and Gabo was regarded in intellectual circles as a politically misguided ideology. Gabo, the critics declared, would do better to leave his modernist Russian views at home. In this respect he experienced what it was like to be a guest worker in Rotterdam. His intention that the totally abstract sculpture should

symbolize the spirit of postwar reconstruction was not shared by others and remained hidden in the steel. Perhaps this is why the work has been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent. The sculpture remained anonymous, so people felt little motivation to maintain it properly. Gabo used novel materials, but the combination of bronze with steel proved an unfortunate choice. The sculpture began corroding within a few years of its placing and required a round of restoration as early as 1960. Today, one of the most important postwar works of art in Rotterdam's public arena is in a pitiable state. The present owners of the sculpture offered it to the City of Rotterdam but the latter refused the gift on account of its dilapidated condition.

Mohammed Benzakour and Hans van Houwelingen request the City of Rotterdam to engage guest workers once more: 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 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 glorious 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 unorthodox course of action will lead to a monument that denies the history that denies the guest worker. A monument that is not a lament about an injustice, but a manifesto for the preservation for this important piece of Rotterdam heritage: the monument to the guest worker will be contained within Gabo's sculpture, invisible, but essential to that sculpture's continued existence. It is not a monument that puts the guest worker history into words, but which lets the guest worker have his say. Restoration of Naum Gabo's dilapidated sculpture is the Monument to the Guest Worker.

This action will ultimately be to everyone's benefit. The monument will not leave a visual impression on the Gabo sculpture but will be integrated with it in the most radical way possible. It will itself be invisible, for the sculpture was already there. Unlike Zadkine's monument, which symbolizes the reconstruction era in relation to the War and the enemy, the symbolism of the Monument to the Guest Worker is wholly abstract. The "better world" implicit in this monument has no opposite pole, no counterpoint or enemy; it relates, rather, to society in a wider sense, and literally visualizes an end to prejudice. Gabo himself described his sculpture as organic, and therefore open to future interpretations. The debate that will follow the publication of this plan will show whether the Netherlands is prepared to welcome the monument to the guest worker, and ascribe monumental status to Gabo's world-renowned work of art. An annual symbolic reception of 'guests' at the National Monument to the Guest Worker in Coolsingel, with speeches by politicians, thinkers, and others would fulfill the dream of the first generation of guest workers as described by Mohammed Benzakour.

In our plan, the comfortably ordered deck of cards — of history, of the reconstruction of Rotterdam, of postwar art in the public domain and of the function of a “monument” — will be politically reshuffled. The result will be a disruption, to a greater or lesser extent, of historical continuity. This reshuffling, this reanimation, will shed light on the role of guest workers in the postwar reconstruction and couple it with the history and meaning of Gabo's sculpture. Guest workers will restore the sculpture in what could be seen as an uncomfortably generous gesture. It will be generous as a contribution to preservation of this important piece of cultural heritage. It will be an uncomfortable reminder of their history in this monument, and of the present politico-historical consensus — immigration and reconstruction make poor bedfellows in the present political climate —, which is thereby challenged. For history is always composed as a result of the present and a guarantee for the future.

A critique was voiced by Sculpture International Rotterdam, that the sculpture will be altered (although corrosion has been doing that for decades), and that others will be excluded if the work is labeled as a monument to the guest worker and that Rotterdam will be saddled with a political burden. This is understandable but unreasonable, considering that this design will have to extend beyond the comfort zone of its initiators if the city honestly wishes to house a monument to the guest worker. Our proposal is not a matter of consensus or of multicultural rhetoric, as one might too easily expect with this subject matter, but it discloses a machinery of inclusion and exclusion that exists in the present by literally re-memorializing the past. The aim is to prevent the Monument to the Guest Worker being devalued by a kind of ‘they plus we equals us’ politics; the historical wrinkle in the face of the past would be smoothed away and history would resume its secure course. We have to avoid a marriage of convenience with our co-nationals, and instead depict a changed, globalized world in which guest workers were the pioneers, as prickly as that realization may be. It is after all a proclamation of a discontinuity, even if it breaches the sense of identity. The Monument to the Guest Worker claims its place in the history of the postwar reconstruction era and in a world that rose from the ruins of war.

Monument to the Chased-off Citizens of Rotterdam, 2008

Jonas Staal, based on a concept by Ronald Sørensen,  
Artist's Statement

In 2007, politician Zeki Baran of the PvdA, the Dutch Labour party, proposed to erect a 'National Monument for the Guest Worker'. The monument was to be placed in the Afrikaanderplein neighbourhood in Rotterdam, one of the areas where the first generation of guest workers were housed, which resulted in intense conflict with 'autochthonous' residents leading to a three-day race riot in 1972, with many guest workers being evicted from their homes. Baran's proposal was to acknowledge both the role of the guest workers in the rebuilding of Rotterdam, as well as the difficulties and tension that their presence had generated. In short, one could say that the monument was intended to be used as a political instrument in a heavily polarised debate on the 'real' Dutchman, attempting to once and for all show the former migrant worker as a fully integrated part of Dutch society.

Politician Ronald Sørensen from the right-wing populist party Leefbaar Rotterdam ('liveable Rotterdam') responded with anger to Baran's proposal, and stated that "in balance, immigrants from Turkey and Morocco have cost Dutch society more than they have contributed to it." He continued by saying that it would be better to erect a statue for the citizens of Rotterdam who had rebuilt the city after World War II with 'a natural work ethic': "A bronze statue of a dockworker and his family, alienated, looking at the surroundings from which they have been chased off." With this last remark Sørensen indicated an actual existing 'migratory' movement of autochthonous residents to the 'white' outskirts of the city.

Interestingly enough, Sørensen's detailed proposal for a 'Monument for the Chased-off Citizens of Rotterdam' refers directly to the sculptural style of socialist realism, and the central role this allotted to the (dock) worker. Even though Sørensen's party criticises socialism (and also Islam) as a 'fascist' ideology, when it comes to monumental practice it is exactly the mode of socialist representation that defines the frame of reference. This is not as contradictory as it seems; Sørensen himself was an active Labour party member until the 1970s when he concluded that the worker was no longer represented by the 'elitist' social-democrats. He was especially concerned with the growing number of migrant communities in Rotterdam, a city whose population today consists of almost fifty per cent non-native residents. As a response to this disappointment he established the Leefbaar party which in 2001 defeated the Labour party in elections, with help from populist politician Pim Fortuyn.

Based on these statements and further specifications provided by Sørensen in an interview with him and Anton Molenaar, Leefbaar Rotterdam's spokesman for youth, education and culture, the design for the monument was realised and discussed with the two party representatives. When confronted with the image that Sørensen himself had proposed, they both approved of the design and suggested that this sculpture should be placed in opposition to the *National Monument for the Guest Worker*: having the 'native' dock worker run

away from the migrant worker for eternity.

It is exactly this situation that Staal claims as the actual monument. The two sculptures in opposition to each other do not so much represent either the guest worker or the alienated citizens of Rotterdam, but rather two symbolic positions through which the debate on Dutch identity has been taken hostage over the last decade. Both sculptures represent an opportunistic and forced conception of the 'People'. By placing the monuments in opposition to each other within the same square they expose each other as political instruments. Together they monumentalise two ideological constructions that represent two sides of the same coin, as in this case the populist party represents nothing more than the dark side of social-democracy.

3D animation and editing by Sjoerd Oudman, Interview by Staal and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Editing interview by Michel Lichtenbarg

A Secret Path Along Which Death Made Its Escape, 2007–2009

Artist's statement by Hans van Houwelingen

Fort Vijfhuizen was built at the turn of the twentieth century as part of the Defence Line of Amsterdam that surrounds the Dutch capital. This military system made it possible to flood the countryside surrounding the ring of 45 forts if an enemy attempted to capture the capital. The forts were to control all access roads along the dykes. Fort Vijfhuizen itself was built, 'to block and defend access provided by the orbital canal system of the Haarlemmer Lake and its dykes and quaysides, together with the Spieringweg and the western edge of the permanently dry areas of the reclaimed land at Haarlemmer Lake.'

Any visitor to the fort is bound to be impressed by the starkness and monumental scale of the concrete construction. Everything here suggests a history of conflict and countless deaths in battle. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, because not one of these forts ever saw military conflict, not a single enemy appeared and not a drop of blood was spilt. The arrival of the age of aviation coincided with the completion of the fort; its strategic purpose was lost and the forts were rendered militarily obsolete. The ring of forts was left in peace and in 1996 the defence system was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Fort Vijfhuizen became a contemporary art museum. A century ago, it was 'the enemy' that justified its existence; now it is art that must bear the burden of responsibility for its present and future.

This hardy nineteenth century fort in its romantic setting, with ramparts that never sheltered soldiers from artillery fire, now confronts the visitor, paradoxically, with death. Obviously no one fell in battle here and no one was buried at this place, but on my visits there, it was this very absence of death that brought about a keen awareness of its existence. The fort is brimming with death's absence — something that is as remarkable as it is intangible. In this setting, the meaning of death finds a striking parallel in the fort's own unheralded non-existence. Now, recycled to serve a contemporary production of meaning, I wondered where death had gone.

A few years ago, I was confronted with the efficiency of death. First, at the care home that so quickly and effectively dispatched my mother to the afterlife, and then by my subsequent encounters with the Dutch economy of death, which only allows temporary use of a grave; for ten or twenty-year rental periods. Eternal rest comes to an early and irrevocable end if you cannot come up with the next payment. 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 is the meaning of the moment when death ceases to exist? With these thoughts in mind I set out to draw *A Secret Path Along Which Death Made Its Escape*.

The ramparts that form the external defence of the nineteenth century art fort at Vijfhuizen are now traversed by a path made up of hundreds of 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 work of art — a work that calls attention not only to death, but also to its absence. Countless individual life stories have been fused together into the secret path as a way of giving death a tangible identity. The cemetery accommodates the processing of private grief, but my intention was to create room for death itself.

*A Secret Path Along Which Death Made Its Escape* took over two years to complete and was inaugurated on 10 May 2009. This was marked with an afternoon of events and the opening of an exhibition entitled *Ruhezeit Abgelaufen* (The time to rest is over). This title comes from a notice placed on graves in Germany to indicate that the grave rental period is over and that it is time for the departed to depart. The inscription has something almost cheerful about it, as though the occupant's overextended lunch break has ended and there's still an afternoon of work to come. It typifies the paradoxical circumstances that beset death nowadays: apparently a point must come when we have to take leave of death.

Street of the Deportation of Sixteen Jewish Families, 2009 ongoing  
Artist's statement by Jonas Staal,

In 2006, during a yearly street party, inhabitants of the Maastrichtsestraat in The Hague discovered that, during the occupation of The Netherlands by Nazi Germany, sixteen Jewish families had been deported from their street and killed. As a result of this discovery, the common need for a monument memorialising this event became clear. A group of four residents formed a committee to investigate what kind of monument would be appropriate: the wish was expressed for it to be 'organic', so that it would find a place in the day-to-day life of the street, instead of being a piece of marble or stone that would 'outsource' the event to nothing more than a yearly commemoration.

A group of artists were asked to submit proposals and the design by Jonas Staal was selected. He proposed to change the name 'Maastrichtsestraat' into 'Street of the Deportation of Sixteen Jewish Families', thus bringing back the memory of the tragic event every time a letter was sent, an address written down, or someone asked for directions. Time and time again the changed street name would demand that the past is re-inscribed in the present, in both an oral and written form. Thereby Staal's proposal was an exact answer to the desires of the committee for an 'organic' monument that would become part of the rituals of day-to-day life. But when the committee presented the idea of the monument to the other residents, only a minority agreed with it. The proposal was believed to be too confrontational, not suitable for children, bad for the image of the neighbourhood, undemocratically chosen (even though the committee was open to everyone) and risked devaluing the real estate. Once pressure groups began to send around letters calling to boycott the proposal, the ranks of supporters in the street grew even slimmer, and in the end only the members of the committee themselves were still ready to back the proposal.

The committee put the monument by Staal into practice. Not by changing the street sign physically, but by simply introducing the new street name through address cards and e-mail announcements, for in the Netherlands, officially, only a ZIP code and correct house number are enough for letters to arrive at their destination. From 2010 onwards, an archive began to grow of letters and packages sent to the Street of the Deportation of Sixteen Jewish Families. The monument thus also began to exist as a rumour, from the mailmen to the network around the members of the committee. From the collection of letters and packages, one can witness the difficulty of overcoming Dutch bureaucracy, as many packages and letters went missing, and mailmen often changed the address back to the original street name. But a substantial amount of them arrived, sometimes even sent by residents in the street who were not in favour of changing the street name officially. As such, the monument existed provisionally and was acknowledged as a ritual, as a tacit agreement between a marginal collective of people, pitting the history of the street against the efficient workings of Dutch bureaucracy.

It is said that the incredibly well-organised bureaucracy of the Netherlands explains why such a large percentage of Jews were deported during World War II, compared to other countries. In that sense the form of the monument itself — a disruption of bureaucracy — is a resistance against precisely that infrastructure that made it so easy for the sixteen Jewish families of the Maas-trichtsestraat to be exterminated in the concentration camps.

What's done... can be undone!, 2008–2011

Artist's statement by Hans van Houwelingen

The Hague takes the lead when it comes to memorial statuary in the Netherlands. Most of these monuments were erected in honour of important historical figures. The majority were statesmen, ranging from Count William II of Holland (1228-1256) to former Dutch Prime Minister Willem Drees (1886-1988). These historic figures are emblematic of the Netherlands we live in today: a model state of freedom and democracy. In this light, it is striking that the founder of modern democratic government, Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798-1872), is absent from this succession. Thorbecke was the chairman of the Constitutional Committee, which in 1848 was charged by King William II, who was alarmed by the political upheavals elsewhere in Europe, with the task of formulating a new constitution. In a speech the King stated: 'I have considered it better to give the impression to allow voluntarily that which later I might have been forced to concede.' The new constitution revoked the King's absolute power and the Netherlands became a constitutional monarchy in which power lies with parliament. The results included direct elections and an extension of parliamentary rights. Alongside this, ministerial responsibility and a provision for the dissolution of parliament were also introduced. The new constitution was proclaimed on 3 November 1848, and it propelled the country's transformation into today's modern democratic state.

Shortly after Thorbecke's death, appeals arose in various political quarters for a monument to be erected in his memory. The statue was intended for a site in The Hague. Thorbecke was not only a politician, the founder of our parliamentary system and the architect of the 1848 Constitution, but he had also lived and worked in The Hague for the largest part of his life. There was however a fundamental disagreement and strife in the municipal council of The Hague, which the writer Vosmaer described as 'little feuds, grocers' arguments, nonsensical reasonings.' Behind the scenes the conservative minister J. Heemskerk exerted his influence, seeing no need for a tribute to the liberal frontman. Euphemistically speaking, the conservatives were not entirely pleased with Thorbecke's reforms. To overcome the deadlock, the statue was brought to Amsterdam, where it was placed on the Reguliersplein, which was renamed Thorbeckeplein after the statue was unveiled there on 20 May 1876. That seemed to be the end of the matter, and, in the century that has passed since, nobody voiced concern about whether the statue is located in the right city. However, it is a historical mistake to commemorate Thorbecke's constitution in Amsterdam. A monument to Thorbecke belongs in The Hague; so much is beyond doubt.

It is no coincidence that in The Hague today, 160 years after the introduction of parliamentary democracy, there has been an initiative to erect a Thorbecke monument. After all the intervening years, parliamentary democracy is threatened by parliament itself. Never before have politicians been so susceptible to the wishes of the electorate, and parliamentary populism threatens to undermine Thorbecke's parliamentary system. Politicians are no longer ideological visionaries, but have become electoral wheeler-dealers who parrot the lan-

guage of the street in an effort to win favour from a frustrated and disgruntled society. Who but Thorbecke can bring the Netherlands' public representatives back into line? Who but Thorbecke can reinforce the idea that parliament is meant to represent the people, and not the other way around? Who is better equipped to defend the constitution than its very originator?

At the same time the question arises whether a monument focusing on Thorbecke's thought can supplement the lack in the monument collection of The Hague. How is that monument supposed to relate to the present when it also wants to take the past into account? Is it supposed to be a posthumous salute to a politician who died nearly 140 years ago, or a living interpretation of his intellectual heritage? And in the latter case, which elements should be stressed? And would a contemporary approach to Thorbecke's intellectual heritage still relate to Thorbecke as a person? Throughout time, Thorbecke's liberalism has repeatedly undergone changes, and any contemporary exegesis of freedom and democracy relating to Thorbecke's original thought cannot be but arbitrary.

The historical blunder by the municipality of The Hague refusing the Thorbecke monument in 1876 offers a possible solution. In fact, in Amsterdam there is a similar situation concerning the most famous and radical Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). This Jewish Amsterdammer, who was later banished from the city where he was born, doesn't have a monument in Amsterdam, but he does have one in The Hague. As a secularist, Spinoza was a passionate advocate of freedom of speech and religion. He argued that there are no God-given laws, and that religion is a work of mankind. He placed human intellect above faith and appealed to the human capacity for love and justice — precisely the qualities which Amsterdam is so keen to recover. A monument to Spinoza belongs in Amsterdam; this is also beyond doubt.

Thorbecke's ability to call the forces of democracy to order is matched by Spinoza's potential to revive respect for freedom of thought. At the same time as The Hague remembered Thorbecke, Amsterdam is contemplating the conditions for a new monument. Even though the underlying discrepancies have been noticed, two monuments have been thought up, for convenience's sake: for the man in the street a bronze Spinoza statue, a mere resemblance devoid of any intellectual content, and for the art lover an artistic location with all kinds of activities in a Spinozist vein. The result is thus form without content plus content without form. The something-for-everyone approach Amsterdam has taken towards branding itself as the Spinoza city is absurd: two monuments are required because one alone cannot fulfil the purpose.

Four years after The Hague refused to erect a statue of Thorbecke, in 1880, the Spinoza monument was unveiled, again after years of political squabbling due to many considering his views as subversive and atheist. Spinoza had lived in The Hague for eight years and died there. Coincidentally, Thorbecke lived for eight years in Amsterdam. These merely formal facts tie them to their current locations. Spinoza has been placed, with difficulty, close to the house where he died. Thorbecke's statue in Amsterdam perhaps has a better location, but

he faces the wrong way, with his back to his square. He has turned his back indignantly on his colleague Rembrandt, whose statue, only a few metres away, has recently been accompanied by a complete *Night Watch* in bronze.

What's done... is done, as the saying goes; but perhaps not in this case. The national heroes of freedom and democracy have to stand in their historical context, in the location where their meaning is best expressed. Thorbecke belongs in The Hague and Spinoza in Amsterdam. A just placement for these monuments honours their meaning. Both their histories make a reasonable case for their exchange. By exchanging the monuments of Spinoza and Thorbecke, The Hague and Amsterdam will be able to spotlight their heritage down to the minutest detail.

Redressing historical and political blunders in the commemoration of these two great Dutchmen would help to place them in a contemporary light. Moving these authentic nineteenth century monuments connects their meaning to current events, without harming their historical appearance in public. The new locations of their memorials would actualise the intellectual legacies of Thorbecke and Spinoza, accepting them as they are.

The actual implementation of this exchange would itself amount to a contemporary work of art without parallel; exchanging memorials is an unknown phenomenon. Just like when they were unveiled in 1876 and 1880, their exchange will cause much uproar. Thorbecke's and Spinoza's intellectual heritage and their contemporary meaning for The Hague and Amsterdam would be explained in many different ways, which clearly shows the forces surrounding these monuments. If the current initiatives in The Hague and Amsterdam are aiming to deploy Thorbecke and Spinoza in the discussion within society about freedom and democracy, the exchange of their monuments will automatically lead to a substantive debate. Thus it satisfies, in a contemporary way, the desire to bring national history to life, which will genuinely and unmistakably contribute to the currently popular quest for national identity.

Art, Property of Politics III: Closed Architecture, 2011

Jonas Staal, based on a concept by Fleur Agema,  
Artist's statement

In his *Art, Property of Politics* series, Jonas Staal investigates the relationship between art, politics and ideology by researching the private art collections of political parties, their use of art as instruments in their campaigns and even the former artistic practices of politicians themselves.

In 2004, current far-right Freedom Party MP Fleur Agema (1976) acquired her Master's Degree in Interior Design at the Utrecht School of the Arts. She graduated with a project titled 'Closed Architecture'; an ambitious model for a new prison, intended to occupy over a hundred acres at the Hembrugterrein in the Zaan area, and aiming to reintegrate convicts into society. The model that Agema developed focuses on the reconditioning of convicts by means of four phases. In the first version these phases are called 'The Bunker', 'The Habituation', 'The Wait', 'The Light', and in the final version 'The Fort', 'The Encampment', 'The Artillery Installation' and 'The Neighborhood'. 'The Fort' is modelled after the ancient design of the dungeon, and is meant to break the convict's resistance; 'The Encampment' is a military-camp-cum-vegetable garden, situating inmates between strict obedience and independence; 'The Artillery Installation' is a type of commune in which the convicts learn to operate collectively; 'The Neighborhood', finally, is essentially a reconstruction of a residential neighbourhood filled with hidden cameras, where the inmates live a simulated life in order to verify whether they are already fully capable of functioning within society.

In Agema's model, inmates have to meet educational objectives in order to reach the next phase, or 'level'. In the case of them failing, they have to 'move back' in the programme, and revisit previous phases. According to the author, 'This phase-based approach is to a great extent comparable with the different phases traversed by man, from childhood to adulthood. It is my objective to change the "passive hanging around" of a certain group of prison inmates into an "active journey toward a newly acquired freedom" and to translate that into a new type of prison architecture.' She has a substantial aversion to the current prison system, which she considers to be a school for crime: 'Original ideals that drown in insane regulations transform the architecture of the prison, especially its interior, into a diseased gym where the contamination of crime is spread around.'

The four-phase approach envisioned by Agema starts with disciplining the detainees, and restoring the norms and regulations that define economic behaviour within the prison complex. In order to effect total discipline, Agema's prison model needs to encompass all aspects of the life and development of the inmates. As she rather cryptically formulates it: 'In this thesis I define the concepts "exclusion" and "inclusion" in more or less similar ways. Thus one could reason that a detainee is excluded from society, but at the same time he is included in a specially designed building, which is a part of society. The one who is excluded is not allowed to partake in the free movement of that

society, for an extended period of time. One could speak of exclusion from the perspective of society, and of inclusion from the perspective of the building.' Therefore, Agema's principle does full justice to the most prominent aspect of the society of control, namely that an 'outside' no longer exists. Everyone is always included, be it in a communal space or in a so-called private space like a home. In her model, everything exists in relation to and at the service of the political system itself.

For one year, Staal — who is of the same generation as Agema and studied at the same art school — worked with a team of architects to realise detailed models of both of Agema's early sketches for the prison and its final design. The early sketches are translated into a film with 3D images and texts by Agema, narrated by Staal. The final version of the model was realised in the form of a two by two metre scale model. This process results in a strange generational dialogue, in which Staal uses Agema's proposition for the prison as a critique against itself while at the same time perfecting it at a level that Agema was never able to attain. By narrating her own texts, he emphasises the aspect of chance in both Agema's and his own personal development, having one artist become a politician and the other a political artist, juxtaposing two very different levels of political and artistic commitment. In the accompanying book, Staal attempts to show the extent to which Agema's model functions as a blueprint for Dutch society today, in which her Freedom party plays an important and influential role as supporter of the current government. A blueprint for a society that has turned into a prison itself.

Film: Text by Fleur Agema, Images and narration by Jonas Staal,  
Editing by Sjoerd Oudman, Translation by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei,  
Text editing by Urok Shirhan

Maquette: Design by Fleur Agema, Production by Jonas Staal,  
Execution by Alexander Hertel and Christopher Tan.

*Art, Property of Politics III: Closed Architecture* has been developed as part of the 'Context is the Message' research program by Stichting Visueel Debat Den Haag, and has been produced by Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen.

# Biographies

## Hans van Houwelingen

Hans van Houwelingen (1957) was educated at the Minerva Art Academy in Groningen (Netherlands) and at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. His work is internationally manifested in the form of interventions in public space, exhibitions, lectures and publications, in which he investigates the relations between art, politics and ideology. He realized various exhibitions and various permanent projects in public space. He publishes regularly in newspapers and magazines. The monograph *STIFF Hans van Houwelingen vs. Public Art* (Artimo, 2004) offers an overview of his projects and texts and an extensive reflection on his work. The publication *Update* describes the permanent update of the Lorentzmonument in Arnhem (NL) during the exhibition Sonsbeek 2008. Recently *Undone* (Jap Sam Books 2011) was published, presenting nine critical reflections on three recent works. Van Houwelingen lives and works in Amsterdam.

[www.hansvanhouwelingen.nl](http://www.hansvanhouwelingen.nl)

## Jonas Staal

Jonas Staal (1981) studied monumental art in Enschede (NL) and Boston. He is currently a PhD researcher in contemporary propaganda at the University of Leiden (NL). His work includes interventions in public space, exhibitions, lectures, and publications, focusing on the relationship between art, politics and ideology. His essay *Post-propaganda* (Fonds BKVB, 2009) and publication *Power?... To Which People?!* (Jap Sam Books, 2010) provides the theoretical basis for this line of work. Staal's latest publication is *Art, Property of Politics III: Closed Architecture* (Onomatopee, 2011) on the architectonic work of the right-wing politician Fleur Agema, co-produced by Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen. His projects were exhibited in among other the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the David Roberts Art Foundation in London. He regularly publishes in newspapers and magazines, such as NRC Handelsblad, de Groene Amsterdammer and Metropolis M. Staal lives and works in Rotterdam.

[www.jonasstaal.nl](http://www.jonasstaal.nl)

### 1:1 – Hans van Houwelingen & Jonas Staal

Curated by:  
Mihnea Mircan

Text editing, proof reading and translations:  
Jesse van Winden, Erik Empson, Teatske Burgerjon, Thomas Ullmann, Koen Sels, Gary Leddington

Graphic design:  
B & R Grafikdesign, Bern

Architecture:  
Kris Kimpe

Courtesies:  
Hans van Houwelingen, Jonas Staal, Stichting Cultureel Erfgoed De Bijenkorf, Sculpture International Rotterdam

### Extra City team

Artistic Director:  
Mihnea Mircan

Managing director:  
Katrien Reist - van Gelder

Production:  
Caroline Van Eccelpoel

General assistance and administration:  
Teatske Burgerjon

Technical assistance:  
Gary Leddington, Jeroen Visser, Thomas Ullmann, Jeroen van Slobbe, Geert Van Hertum

Interns:  
Jesse van Winden, Julia Reist

### the exhibition was supported by



Mondriaan Foundation, SIR (Sculpture International Rotterdam), Koninklijk Bijenkorfarchief, Stichting Cultureel Erfgoed De Bijenkorf and N.V. Hollandia, Research group Context is the message

### Extra City is structurally supported by

Vlaams Ministerie van Cultuur, Jeugd en Sport, Stad Antwerpen, <H>ART, Levis, Koning Boudewijnstichting,

© 2011 Extra City  
All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen  
Tulpstraat 79  
BE-2060 Antwerp  
[www.extracity.org](http://www.extracity.org)