

Moving from Statue to Monument

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Translated to English by Willem Kramer

Occasionally, a statue comes to life – literally. This is attested to, for example, in the slim novella *Het beeld en de klok* ('The Statue and the Clock', 1989) by Harry Mulisch, one of the key post-war writers in the Dutch-speaking regions. This 'fable' centres on the statue of a certain Laurens Janszoon Coster. It is located on the Grote Markt in Haarlem, between the Gothic cathedral and the medieval town hall. According to Mulisch, a statue like that of Coster is more than just the image of the person it represents. What this bronze man on the Grote Markt represents is precisely the image that his maker has made of him. After all, a statue's model is generally no longer with us. And if by chance, he or she is still alive, the difference between statue and reality becomes even clearer. There are also people who have been honoured with more than one statue: consider the thousands of statues of Lenin (wherever they may be). Therefore Mulisch would prefer to compare a statue to an actor. In the case of the statue representing Laurens Janszoon Coster, its maker, the Flemish sculptor Louis Royer, had no idea what his model had looked like. That is why he ended up using his own face for the head. In this sense, the statue is clearly a self-portrait of the maker. There's another awkward detail. The pedestal alleges that Coster invented movable type. Over five hundred years before, he is supposed to have cut a letter from a piece of beech bark in the Haarlemmer Hout that subsequently fell on the ground. When he picked it up, he discovered it had left an impression in the sand. A fine story, though an apocryphal one. The invention of modern book printing has to be attributed to someone else.

In his novella *Het beeld en de klok*, Mulisch allows the statue of Laurens Janszoon Coster to come to life – letting it speak in the first person, for instance. As a result, the 'autobiographical fantasy', as the author himself characterized the story, is told from the perspective of the statue. For example, he recounts the moment when 'the master' – evidently the figure of Mulisch himself – appeared at his feet one sunny Friday afternoon, briefly looked up at him and gave him a wink. This wink entices the statue to step down off his pedestal. Together, the master and the statue take a walk through town, leaving behind the empty pedestal. During their rambles, 'that curious couple' also arrive at the spot where it is rumoured the piece of bark with the letter had dropped in the sand. This site is marked by a memorial in the shape of a cube, surrounded by a square iron enclosure. The inscription, which is 'encircled by a sculpted laurel wreath', states that the memorial was erected 'in honour of lourens ianszoon koster inventor of book printing by the mayor and council of the city of haarlem on the fourth centenary mdcccxxiii'. In the vicinity of this object, which was designed by the garden architect Jan David Zoicher, the strolling statue thinks to itself: 'I looked with disgust at the ungainly block, which resembled an empty pedestal and marked a spot where nothing had happened – a cenotaph for a non-event, to which I owed my existence, albeit an absurd existence that became more and more ludicrous with every passing day.'

This may well be the most beautiful moment in Mulisch's novella: the statue of the purported inventor of modern book printing, standing between two empty pedestals. At the one pedestal, on the market square, he has at least left behind a few attributes: a book and the letter 'A'. At the other, in the city park, there is nothing to be found. Nevertheless, reading Mulisch's novella, you can clearly picture the scene – the statue not sure for a moment which of the two pedestals it would ultimately prefer to mount: the real plinth in the city centre or the impostor in the woods.

At the end of the story, the two 'protagonists' arrive back at the Grote Markt and the master allows the statue to once again return to its place on the pedestal: 'I positioned myself near the tree stump, tucked the book under my arm, placed my left foot before my right in a striding position, the way Louis Royer had wanted it, and with the sense of tears springing to my eyes, I raised the "A".' After which the master exits the square, turns a corner and leaves the statue behind.

In his novella *De beeld en de klok*, Mulisch has done something special with the statue of Laurens Janszoon Coster. In a manner of speaking, he has turned it into a monument, precisely by giving the statue a voice of its own and allowing it to step down from its pedestal. For the same reason, the memorial for the alleged inventor of movable type in the city park is also a monument – precisely because the cube does not support a statue. Mulisch's fable invites further thought about statues, empty pedestals and monuments. The Coster statue can be considered a typical example of early nineteenth-century nationalism and hero worship, attached to a particular city. By awakening the statue and inviting it to a walk, Mulisch enables the figure of Coster to bring up and brush up its past. The writer already announces this at the very beginning of his novella: 'Of course, statues have come down from their pedestals before – every child knows that – but the last time that happened was probably long ago. It no longer fits the times.' Alas, poor author: could he not have foreseen that after the novella's publication in 1989 – when historic events were already casting their shadows in advance of their own occurrence – the times would change radically? How many statues have since vacated their pedestals?

The Dutch artist Hans van Houwelingen has exceptional flair for thinking and acting in relation to statues, empty pedestals and monuments. An important share of his oeuvre is made up of works of art that explore the role of monuments in the public space.

A fine example is his *Update* of the Monument dedicated to the memory of Hendrik Antoon Lorentz, which the artist executed in the context of the international art exhibition *Sonsbeek* 2008 in Arnhem. The original monument, which was designed by Oswald Wenckebach, consists of a number of geometric sections of limestone. The centre section features a conventional statue of Lorentz, one of the Netherlands' most important physicists and winner of the 1902 Nobel Prize. Standing on a pedestal, he seems to peer intensely into an invisible world. Six limestone slabs positioned on opposite sides of the statue feature the images and names in relief of six other physicists. To the left, one finds three scientists who have influenced Lorentz: the Dutch mathematician, physicist and astronomer Christiaan Huygens, the French physicist-engineer Augustin-Jean Fresnel and the Scottish mathematician and physician James Clerk Maxwell. To the right of the statue, one finds three of the most important twentieth-century quantum physicists, each heavily influenced by Lorentz: the German Max Planck, the Swiss Albert Einstein and the Dane Niels Bohr. Incidentally, when the monument was unveiled in 1931, these three physicists were still alive, so it emphasized the accurateness of those depictions then.

The monument to the memory of Lorentz is more than just a statue. It is precisely the grouping of simple pedestal-shaped sections of limestone, one of which is adorned by the statue, that makes it a true monument. Contrary to the Coster statue, the Lorentz monument is an example of early twentieth century internationalism. In his work *Update*, Van Houwelingen has expanded the Wenckebach monument into a structure that reflects a dizzying network of quantum mechanical formulations and discoveries. To the six existing reliefs, the artist added 142 names of major physicists – 71 on each side – who have continued Lorentz's groundbreaking scientific work in some form or other. In other words, he 'transferred' Lorentz's statue to a new sculptural environment. In doing so, he transformed the already existing monument in public space in a new one. The old monument is pushed – and opened up – towards the future, by incorporating 'more scientific history' than it initially commemorated, turning the piece into another kind of monument, memorising actual considerations as a condition to commemorate. The monument of one historical scientist memorizes its need of hundreds present alive.

Van Houwelingen's massive oeuvre contains all kinds of – realized and unrealized – proposals for transforming old monuments into new, converting existing and worn-out art in the public space into up-to-date monuments, but the remainder of this text will not be reflecting on these interventions. From this point on, we will primarily focus on how he uses existing statues to realize contemporary monuments.

In 2000, Van Houwelingen produced the work *Lenin* in Groningen. In his work for the manifestation *10 in het groen, 20 onder dak*, the artist installed in the Noorderplantsoen (Northern Park) a nine-metre high bronze statue of a militant Lenin, an example of socialistic hero worship, designed by an anonymous state-sanctioned sculptor in the former German Democratic Republic. He ordered forty tonnes of potatoes to be dumped at the feet of this statue. One could say that those potatoes had become the statue's new pedestal. Viewers of the work responded in a variety of ways to what they saw. Many stuffed the potatoes lying at Lenin's feet in shopping bags to take them home. Others pelted Lenin's statue with the potatoes, expressing their opinion of Communist ideology after the fall of the Wall. Such actions, and all other references evoked by the statue standing in a mound of potatoes, are all part of the monument envisioned by Van Houwelingen. In this contemporary monument he has connected the collapse of the Groningen potato industry, in which the Communist Party of the Netherlands had always had a strong foothold, with an ambivalent denunciation of Marxism-Leninism. The monument automatically calls to mind all those empty pedestals in the former Eastern bloc. Where, for example, might we find the empty pedestal of the statue that ended up in the Northern Park? Van Houwelingen has provided a Lenin statue with such an emotionally charged new pedestal that the temporary monument this creates evokes a complex network of poignant memories and social historical references.

Several years after the Lenin monument in Groningen, Van Houwelingen once again realized a remarkable work of public art in which an old statue was placed on a new pedestal. In the context of a master plan for the centre of Lelystad – once a utopian city in newly reclaimed land – the artist planned a monument for the politician and hydraulic engineer Cornelis Lely. As the Minister of Public Works, Trade and Industry, in 1891, Lely had designed a plan for closing off the Zuiderzee. In 1932, the last basalt rocks were dumped from the Afsluitdijk causeway in the waters of the inland sea. This created the IJsselmeer – a feat that Lely did not live to see. A statue designed by Mari Andriessen was erected to commemorate Lely's hundredth birthday. It was installed at the head of the Afsluitdijk near Den Oever. In addition, the initiator of the Zuiderzee enclosure project received a second statue in Lelystad, designed by Piet Esser. Both Lely statues can be considered homages to one of these great men, a notion which fuelled the historical narratives of the nineteenth century. Although Esser's statue was the immediate inspiration for Van Houwelingen's decision to design a new Lely monument, he eventually proceeded with Andriessen's work. The artist proposed wresting Esser's classicist statue of Lely from its modernist surroundings and positioning it on top of a 32-metre tall, equally classicist pillar made of basalt. This would leave behind an empty pedestal in a modernist setting. Unfortunately, after six months, Esser retracted his promise to Van Houwelingen. He no longer wanted his statue to be 'sampled' as part of a monument designed by someone else. This Lely statue needed to be returned to its former site. Van Houwelingen gained permission to make a certified cast of the other statue designed by Andriessen. This cast has adorned the *Zuil van Lely* ever since. But this did not end the wanderings of the Esser statue. It was now too close to the new Lely monument. And it was back on the road again – this time to its final destination: Nieuwland Poldermuseum. With his proposal to realize the *Zuil van Lely*, Van Houwelingen unleashed a local *Bilderstorm* at a variety of levels. Statues started wandering around, occasionally leaving behind an empty pedestal, and numerous articles as well as hundreds of readers' letters were devoted to the issue in the regional press. Eventually, the artist was able to realize his Lely monument in Lelystad, but this not only comprises the cast of a statue installed on a basalt pillar. Everything that has happened beforehand and the numerous responses during the realization phase are also part of the work.

Whatever their nature, all debates and considerations play a decisive role in the progression of a work of public art from its very first draft to its final unveiling. Particularly in the case of Van Houwelingen's works, this path often has some fairly unpredictable hairpin bends. In this sense, the creation of a work of public art as pursued by Van Houwelingen strongly resembles the production of an artefact or technical object. One could analyse the entire genesis of such a work with the aid of the social constructivist approach developed by the French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour.

Van Houwelingen is often reproached for lending too much agency to the statues that he 'samples' in his works. But this is precisely what Latour argues for in his so-called Actor Network Theory. Not for nothing, the preceding text occasionally includes the term 'network'. People and things – like works of

art – are actors who relate to one another within networks. Latour claims that his theory is ‘symmetrical’ in nature, since it does not intend to make any *a priori* distinctions between humans and things or non-humans. He aims to remove the division, so to speak, between object and subject that Descartes has introduced with such finality in our world. Since the word ‘actors’ refers too strongly to human beings, he prefers to speak of ‘actants’. These actants should not be interpreted as fixed entities: they only emerge as actants in relationship to one another. Humans and non-humans can only become ‘emergent’ within the networks that exist between them. Things like works of public art are therefore far from neutral: they influence all sorts of programmes of action – the desire to erect a statue, for instance.

The events surrounding the erection of the *Zuil van Lely* are a good example. Van Houwelingen’s original programme of action involved more or less the following: the desire to install an existing statue of Lely on a basalt pillar in the heart of a modernist city. Most of the local residents objected. They adopted an anti-programme: no Lely statue on a basalt pillar. Van Houwelingen made a concession and convinced Esser, the maker of the statue, to install the statue on the pillar only temporarily – a so-called substitution, in Latour’s wording. This somewhat reduced the number of people who adhered to the anti-programme, starting with Esser himself. But of all people, it was the latter who changed his mind during the ‘trial period’. In doing so, he created a new anti-programme: a ban on the permanent placement of his statue on the pillar. The threat of an empty pillar forced Van Houwelingen to once again adapt his programme of action, which had already been changed once before, and translate it to the new situation. The artist and the empty pillar could be said to converge into a new actant – an association, in the terminology of Latour. Guided by the vacant pillar, Van Houwelingen decided to ask permission to make a cast of Andriessen’s Lely statue. This once again reduced the number of adherents of the anti-programme, etc. The longer people encounter the *Zuil van Lely* in their daily surroundings, the further their support for the anti-programme will decline. The described process of association and substitution in relation to programmes of action quickly gains complexity if other actants like municipal guidelines and the results of public debate are included in the mix.

With respect to the realization of the *Zuil van Lely*, it should however be clear that the enrichment of a programme of action with a number of subtle translations comes at a price. Consider the funds available to the artist, for instance. Of course, after a number of translations of his programme of action, these will be considerably depleted. Maybe this also applies to his energy and creative elbowroom, although by now, experience has taught us that an artist like Van Houwelingen has unparalleled stamina and strong powers of persuasion, directed to both decision makers and his audience’s imagination.

Some time ago, Van Houwelingen made another design for a work of public art in which statues are removed from their pedestals. In this original proposal, the artist argues for the erection of a Thorbecke monument in The Hague, and a Spinoza monument in Amsterdam. As far as he is concerned, this should have been done a century ago – yet a peculiar, even paradoxical, confluence of events thwarted that course of action. This confluence started with the death of the liberal politician Johan Rudolf Thorbecke in 1872. On the strength of his chairmanship of the 1848 Constitutional Committee, Thorbecke is viewed by friend and foe as the father of Dutch parliamentary democracy. Following his demise, people of various political persuasions called for the erection of a statue in his honour. And what location could be more suitable than The Hague, the seat of Dutch political power? Yet, in 1876, the municipal council of The Hague declined to honour this initiative, after which the site was shifted to Amsterdam. However, what has that Thorbecke statue, designed by Ferdinand Leenhoff, actually to do with the capital of the Netherlands?

Researching the case, Van Houwelingen made the surprising discovery that four years after its controversial decision on the Thorbecke statue, The Hague’s municipal council had taken another curious decision with regard to a statue. After the necessary political squabbling, the council gave permission to erect a statue of the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza in The Hague, namely on Paviljoensgracht, near to the house where he had lived for the last years of his life. Nevertheless, this is quite a feeble premise for erecting a statue somewhere. Spinoza is known as one of the great

thinkers of the Modern Age, a trailblazer for the Enlightenment who is quite difficult to understand, but he also still had one foot in the Middle Ages. As recorded in his two main works, he tried to reconcile scholastic morals on the one hand with the changing requirements of the Modern Age on the other. His best-known work is *Ethica, Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata (Ethics)*, published posthumously by his friends in the year of his death, 1677. What makes Spinoza's *Ethics* so remarkable is that it adopts a strictly axiomatic argument in its treatment of the Universe's structure and Man's place in it. Like Descartes, Spinoza believed in the mathematical power of philosophy. At the end of the *Ethics*, he focuses on the human spirit's relation to God. According to Spinoza, the intellectual love of God is the very pinnacle of what Man can achieve: the 'amor dei intellectualis', which at the same time is an 'amor fati', a love of one's immutable fate. From this insight, Spinoza arrived at a statement that truly enchanted Goethe: 'He who loves God cannot endeavour that God should love him in return.' His second principal work is *Tractatus theologico-politicus (Theologico-Political Treatise)*, published anonymously in 1670, in which he argues for absolute freedom of religion and freedom of speech. This is expressed, among other things, in the frequently quoted fragment: 'Thus the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom.'

While the erection of Spinoza's statue, designed by the French sculptor Frédéric Hexamer, may be justified on political-philosophical grounds, there is also a good case to be made for moving it to Amsterdam. This is where the philosopher was born in 1632 and raised. But in 1656, he was expelled from the Sephardic Jewish community – and for some time even from Amsterdam, at the insistence of the rabbis and Calvinist preachers. Four years on, he left the turbulent capital definitively. For this reason alone, Spinoza deserves a generous rehabilitation in Amsterdam, particularly now that tolerance has come somewhat under pressure in the multicultural and secular society.

Studying the history of the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke in the respective urban surroundings, Van Houwelingen realizes that both bronzes represent great men, according to the nineteenth century notion, but they are located at the wrong spot. He got the brilliant idea of a monumental intervention: he proposed to make the statues switch towns. Chance would have it that Spinoza lived eight years of his life in The Hague, just as Thorbecke spent an equally long period in Amsterdam. In his proposal the artist offers a number of substantive reasons to switch the statues: 'By exchanging the monuments for Spinoza and Thorbecke, The Hague and Amsterdam will be able to spotlight their heritage down to the minutest detail. Redressing historical political blunders in the commemoration of these two great Dutchmen would help place them in a contemporary light. Moving these authentic nineteenth century monument attaches their meaning to the current events, without harming their historical appearance in public. The new locations of their memorials actualizes the intellectual legacies of Thorbecke and Spinoza, accepting them as they are.'

Van Houwelingen already refers to monuments, but the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke will actually only become monuments once they are moved. The artist has visualized the metamorphosis from statue to monument in two composite pictures of trucks with trailers: one drives to the left, transporting the statue of Spinoza, pedestal and all, to Amsterdam. The other drives in the opposite direction, in order to bring the statue of Thorbecke to The Hague. The pictures seal the metamorphosis from statue to monument.

Like Van Houwelingen's previous works of public art that promoted a statue to the status of monument, his proposal to exchange the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke can be gone over with a Latourian comb. However, the political-historical context of the two statues involved make a social constructivistic analysis of the development of the design far more complicated than that of *Lenin* or the *Zuil van Lely*. This complexity is concentrated in at least three chains of combined actants: the existing neighbourhood of the two statues, the position of municipal councils and the statues' new settings. With regard to a statue's current neighbourhood, all kinds of procedures need to be followed in order to temporarily or permanently extract the object from its original environment. The artist can initiate all these procedures, but in his programme of action, he, as actant, will need to offer something in exchange to win over the supporters of the anti-programme – local residents, the officials who guard the municipal procedures and guidelines, you name them. For instance, the actant can propose to install a new object in lieu of the statue that will be disappearing from the

neighbourhood: a different statue. This will definitely reduce the number of proponents of the anti-programme. And that is precisely the ambition of Van Houwelingen's design – all the more so because his programme of action works two ways. With respect to the combined actants of the municipal councils involved, including all their party-political debates and regulations, the case is considerably more complex. After all, leaving aside all those discussions and directives, they simply had to acknowledge that their predecessors in the nineteenth century had made a historic mistake. In this case, Van Houwelingen made a start with the realization of a number of subtle translations of his programme of action, for instance by bringing those two lovely composite images into play. In doing so, he attempted to mobilize a non-human actant. Unfortunately the involved councils proved relatively indifferent to his actions and arguments. Besides all this, Van Houwelingen's proposal also intends to correct erroneous decisions made in the nineteenth century. This involves that the council members from more than a century ago became a kind of opponents to the artist. He could not prevent that the current administrators greeted their nineteenth century predecessors as allies. Therefore both municipal administrations opted for a city centric solution – Amsterdam decided on a new monument for Spinoza that gives off a strong whiff of city branding, and so did The Hague with Thorbecke. This means that both administrations have missed a historic opportunity to gain a work of public – indeed, intermunicipal – art in which past, present and future seamlessly converge.

Van Houwelingen's proposal to exchange the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke between cities is as simple as it is brilliant, comparable to the temporary Lenin monument and the Lely monument, but does it actually give rise to a new monument, and if so: in honour of whom or what? According to Latour's socio-constructivistic approach the artist's intention is still quite naked in the beginning: it simply entails the question how to transform a statue into a monument. This implies that the artist enhances his programme of action with a number of ingenious translations. In this case he attempts to negotiate with all relevant groups in order to move the two statues to other 'artificial spheres of extension', referring to a notion of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. By moving the statues towards more appropriate, reciprocal surroundings simultaneously the artist's intention to transform them into a trans-urban monument has become more real. In the end it is, so to speak, dressed and loaded. Latour's actor network theory fits therefore so nicely to Van Houwelingen's monumental works, because the artist considers the whole public space, including all the people involved and the debates with them, an essential part of his projects and concepts. With unflagging zeal he proposes to transform statues which always 'look like' great men responsible for some kind of heritage, into monuments referring to an update of that heritage itself. Whereas the statues embody the past, the monument rather links to the present and future. It refers more to the cultural or socio-political heritage than to the persons responsible for that legacy.

The ambition to exchange the Spinoza and Thorbecke statues, which was visualized so saliently in both composite photos, is the topical instant that the artist would so strongly like to realize. In fact, the combining of the two composite pictures is a monument in itself. And inevitably, this monument has been erected to pause and reflect on the pursuit of reasonableness and freedom of speech. In this interpretation, it hardly matters whether Van Houwelingen's proposals for works of public art in which statues are assigned a new role are realized or not. They already achieve monumental status on paper.

This is the fate that Mulisch bestowed on the statue of Laurens Janszoon Coster in his novella *Het beeld en de klok*. And in Van Houwelingen's concepts for the public space too, all kinds of statues come to life in order to move to a monument, into which they will merge.