

Models for Consensus

A conversation with Mihnea Mircan

At the last Biennale in Venice the Romanian curator Mihnea Mircan collaborated with Metahaven to present a subtle meditation on monumental art in the Romanian pavilion. Now Mircan has made a follow-up to that project for Stroom Den Haag: the exhibition *Since we last spoke about monuments*.

By Domeniek Ruyters

DOMENIEK RUYTERS

When did your interest in the monumental start?

What do you find interesting about this subject?

MIHNEA MIRCAN 'This preoccupation with monuments came about through two chance encounters and an arthistorical reflex. At roughly the same time, I was thinking of two completely different artworks, Plamen Dejanoff's *Planets of Comparison* and Philippe Meste's *Spermcube*. I felt I needed an arthistorical category against which to evaluate the amplitude of these projects, their symbolic or physical bigness.

Dejanoff has bought seven houses in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, which he converts into spaces for exhibiting contemporary art, to be used by museums with global aspirations as project spaces or branches for their collections. Museums are used as instruments in enacting liberalism and producing a

life-size version of globalization. There is an important connection to institutional critique here, but I am not sure whether this is in the sense of initiating its third wave [coming after those of the late sixties and eighties - ed.] or laying its colossal tombstone. Meste's *Spermcube* will ultimately be a ton of sperm, displayed like a frozen Minimalist cube. A truly universal work, or perhaps the world's largest synecdoche. It is absolute agglomeration; it resembles a world whose every fold is examined by a surveillance camera, as well as the complementary drive to make intimacy public.

Both pieces activate new ideas of what the monument could be, of what collectivity it could describe or address. Others artists participate in this process of rethinking the monument, pushing it away not only from traditional forms, where the monument is a site for ideological brutality and collective Freudian slips, but also from the counter-monumental deadlock, the rhetoric of irresolution in which the monument is always someone else's (powers) and to be hidden, mocked, slowly destroyed, etc. My own interest in the subject is twofold. Reframing the monument is important from an arthistorical perspective, as important as the contemporary avatars

of any other traditional genre. But there might be some political resonance to this collective project as well, in the sense of thinking other generative mechanisms for monuments and exploring other forms of communality than those activated when artists interview immigrants or give out free tea in galleries.'

DR Does the subject have a certain sense of urgency?

MM 'The only context where I can distinguish urgency from commotion is the Romanian one. In Bucharest we have a monument for a revolution that we actually know almost nothing about, except for the number of victims. It looks as if it were made by Paul McCarthy on a lesser day. Right next to it they plan to install an inexact replica of a destroyed equestrian statue to a king no one remembers, engendering, if nothing else, a good image for how monuments normally oscillate between the offensive and the futile, and a good place to start a discussion about their relevance today. I suppose this could be extended to Eastern Europe as a whole; recently the Latvian Ministry of Culture published an advertisement in *frieze*, calling for proposals for a 'Memorial to Soviet Occupation' that would 'repay the debt' for decades of political aggression, disregarding that this would only replicate the symbolic ravage that monuments have performed throughout history. Hans van Houwelingen made a proposal that dealt with the relation between Latvians and Russians *today*, and lost.'

DR In a text on monuments, written as curator of the Romanian Pavilion in last Venice Biennial, you describe the complex double bind of public monuments. They should stay away from old ideologies that have lost their meaning, but still they should search for a mean-

ing which can be shared by new audiences. How do you think artists cope with this problem?

MM 'The pivotal point in both situations is how art defines and engages the "community". The successes and failures of relational aesthetics indicate that artists do not engage the social sphere as if it were a sociological chart, or a community as if that community were waiting for artistic engagement. That there is always a preliminary definition - artistic, critical - of what the social sphere is and how the community is structured. In a sense, the monumental always lurks at the end of this critical process, as a possibility that can be instigated. It can be defined as the limit of an imagination of engagement, of counter-sovereignty, as manifested by contemporary art.

Rather than clever solutions, I would mention two extremes in portraying the "community". Near Lima in 2002 Francis Alÿs had one hundred volunteers take up shovels and move an entire sand dune a few centimetres. *When Faith Moves Mountains* creates and employs a collectivity with a borderline relation to ideology, divested from a collective sense of purpose, yet vulnerable to populist politics, to initiatives that would reactivate the very loss of communality and shared ideals. *When Faith...* erects a phantom monument and sketches a dark sociology of monumentality, far from the exclamations of restored hope the work has been greeted with. At the other margin stands *Them* by Artur Żmijewski, a film that quite relentlessly deconstructs the possibility of a monument in/to contemporary Poland. In their interaction, the groups of Catholics, nationalists, democrats and freedom fighters fail to enact the agonistic scenario, to reach a discordant accord about what Poland is. Each ridicule and destroy each other's symbols and all

evince an ideological fervour – and a depth of trauma – that posits the monument as a mark of separation between winners and losers in the game of history.'

DR What defines the monumental? And how can art be monumental without obeying certain identities? Can you explain in relation to your plans in The Hague?

MM 'Size and communal reflection, elision and epiphany, a complicated relationship to our own forgetfulness – all these factors make the apparatus of the monumental as we know it. But what would define the polemic monument, disconnected from this history yet still effective as a monument? That is what this research project sets out to discern. The traditional monument commemorates or promises a victory; it is a metaphor of political adversity. I would reframe the monument in the stylistic category of the synecdoche: a synecdoche for social or political process, a scale model for the collective task of consensus. Linking this back to our discussion about communities, this is perhaps a good point to define the community as an ideological minority. The complex operations through which an ideological minority recalibrates its relation to the other minorities and majorities could constitute the monument: a monument to counteraction. The project in The Hague aims to prick the notion of the monumental, to irritate it, to keep it suspended, as a possibility for artistic and intellectual dialogue.'

DR Can you explain a bit more about the exhibition in The Hague?

MM 'The critical reflection that came from Stroom was invaluable in formulating the exhibition. Additionally, it was through them that I met Hans van Houwelingen and Jonas Staal, and learnt about Sam Durant's impressive archive of defaced monuments.'

The concept is quite simply an exhibition that groups the artists' views on the possibility of a new kind of monument, and parallels them to an investigation of our ideological unrest. Azra Aksamija shows a wall carpet that recounts, in the traditional language of the kilim, the destruction of mosques during the war in Bosnia. Jonas Staal and Vincent van Gerven Oei present an extreme case of over-identification – a monument to the "alienated Rotterdammer" that one politician demanded in an inflamed nationalist address.'

Since we last spoke about monuments
Stroom Den Haag
September 14 – November 9