

Voice Over
Anne Reijnders & Rob Jacobs

An elephant on a boulder throws its head back in a park in Geraardsbergen, Belgium. The animal seems proud. Its feet rest on a bas-relief: a star is looked upon from the left by a white man wearing a pith helmet, and from the right by three black men without helmets. The sign accompanying the images is made of the same material as the skin of the elephant. It reads "Fallen in Service of Civilization", before listing nine names. On the website of a newspaper, I read that two month ago someone requested an additional sign, informing visitors about the atrocities of colonialism. The city decided not to respond to the request.

Not that long ago Anne and I were in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We made images and collected stories, departing from our interest in a statue of king Leopold II. Two identical copies of the statue were made. One was placed in Brussels in 1926, the other was shipped to Kinshasa not much later. Today, the colonial monuments of Kinshasa are, in contrast with Brussels, no longer spread across the public squares of the city, but gathered in the garden of the Musée Nationale. What used to be Mobutu's private property, is a museum today. On top of the hill where the building rests, you can see the Congo River accelerating down below. Precolonial artefacts are exhibited behind glass displays inside the building, sculptures dating from the colonial era are standing outside. I remember the director of the museum sitting in his office, pointing towards the statue of Leopold II. 'Il devient objet entre des objets'. We thought it was interesting that an object can obtain a different meaning when it is placed in a new context. For a week, we made daily trips to the museum. We talked to guides and administrative personnel. We wanted to find out what the trajectories of the monuments had been before their arrival in the museum, how the scenography of the park had changed over the past years, what routes the guides use when directing groups through the garden.



There weren't many people visiting the museum. In a bar in the district of Gombe, we talked about ethno-centrism; about our focus on European objects in a crowded African city. The following days we mainly had conversations outside the museum walls. Someone told us that the Musée National is not an attractive place, because the same domain houses a military base. Visitors are not willing to pay the soldiers who guard the access gateway. Someone else told us that people have better things to do than looking at old statues. Yet someone else claimed that the present government does not want signs of a successful revolution in its streets. According to him, the only reason the sculptures are no longer present in the city is to preclude the population from thinking about the possibility of overturning a regime.

We were meeting a lot of people. Perhaps the film should be more about our meetings.

What to do with all these colonial monuments? Should the elephant be torn down to the ground? Can we store the monuments in museums? Or, perhaps they can stay where they are, if they're properly contextualized. But how does one do that? Does an explanatory sign weigh enough to outbalance the concrete, the marble, the mass, the detail? And is it enough to provide subtitles for old images, without claiming spaces for new images that fit the projects of the contemporary city?

I can understand that people say they have better things to do than looking at old statues.

In December 2015, the Brussels' alderman of Urban Development and Heritage sent out a card. It was an invitation to a ceremony, a celebra-



tion of king Leopold II and his architectural achievements. The homage would have taken place at Place du Trône, a central square that accommodates a statue of the king. Under loud protest the event was cancelled, however, and a commemorative wake for victims of colonialism was organized at the same spot where the celebration was planned. Out of the gathering, a movement of people with different backgrounds and horizons was born. I moved along. We want to "prolong" this spontaneous, temporary action. We want to distribute a call for proposals, an invitation to answer to the omnipresent pro-colonial imagery of Brussels with an intervention in the city's public space. Whoever wants can make a suggestion. In a later stage, we hope to realize at least one of those proposals.

I don't know what such an answer could look like, but I think it is important to go beyond the statues. The relevance of addressing old images is in the continuation of old structures. Through the colonial monument we can talk about racism, about cultural imperialism, about contemporary global economic and political relations. It is important that we don't get bored arguing over the images, before addressing the structures they're symptoms of. It is interesting to discuss an elephant, if we can steer the discussion somewhere else soon enough. The form of that conversation is not evident. It is difficult to sense when a gradual change can be accelerated, and what is the most appropriate language to instigate that acceleration. I have the feeling that the initiatives that wanted to accelerate the debate on Black Pete last year, did not find an adequate language to do so. Their actions were read as unnecessary, their position as elitist, so that in the end the conversation was no longer about racial stereotypes, but rather about political correctness. A concrete and comprehensible starting point for a complex discussion is temporarily lost.

For me, an appropriate answer is not one that responds to the omnipresent monuments with an equally static counter-image, but one that uses the monument as a medium to address the struggles of the contemporary city. One that breaks the monuments untouchability, steers its meaning in a certain direction, but simultaneously invites others to take it somewhere else. A friend of mine organized an arts festival that aimed at 'opening up a larger



space'. I wonder what he means. What does that larger space look like?

Within the collective, that originated from December's protests, we are having a conversation about what it would mean to fail. Not so much about what to do if the project fails, but what we would consider "failure". I say that, even if none of the proposals are feasible, our call can still lead to interesting outcomes. "We can exhibit scale models displaying possible and impossible proposals. We can learn from the reactions the models provoke. It is not so much about electing the best idea, but about letting different ideas together create a tension that triggers thinking." Not everyone agrees. "We cannot be satisfied with a thought exercise for visitors of an exhibition."

An article entitled "I am disgusted by our indifference", floats by on my Facebook wall. For about a week now, a friend of mine has been posting an article daily. In the header he writes "we are looking away". Then he repeats 'we' in capital letters. I think about the protesters on the main shopping street of the city where I live, accusing the shoppers of being mindless consumers. I think about my mother on the shopping street who does not listen to people who yell through megaphones.

We need spaces of exchange, I don't think that the stream of shared articles on social media creates those spaces, I don't think that theaters where the like-minded meet create those spaces, I don't think that condemning passers-by on busy streets creates those spaces. The only moments I have mid-length conversations with people who have outspokenly different political viewpoints take place at family celebrations and reunions with childhood friends. From that perspective, the larger space looks perhaps more like a bus stop than a series of lectures.



I don't know what to do with all those colonial monuments. I don't want to overestimate them. What once was a convincing image of power, seems to have lost its representational potential. Even though sometimes power still makes use of monumentality, and the distance it creates, it rather tries to look warm and informal nowadays. Big companies prefer to invest in personalized advertisements, rather than sculptures. The monument is an outdated medium, a relic in a city where people now speak another language.

The monument only becomes visible again, when someone puts it in motion. When its silent continuation is threatened, it seems to regain its voice. In its activated form the monument is flexible. The image of a Belgian king on a horse comes to represent violence against women in present-day Congo, the statue of a sitting British colonizer becomes a symbol of Eurocentric education at South-African universities. The transformed image does seem capable of turning heads.

I don't know what to do with all those colonial monuments. But what interests me even more than the answer is the way in which we can ask the question with as many people as possible. I wonder if we can use the emerging tension between a new reading and an old reputation to open up a space for conversation, a conversation that departs from the question of what to do with all those colonial monuments, but soon moves towards the cities that carry those monuments.

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