

## 'Making the Personal Political'

Art by Hans van Houwelingen in the Public Domain

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[ DAVID STROBAND ]

Forty bronze lizards play the leading part in an early work, from 1994, by the artist Hans van Houwelingen (Harlingen, 1957). This now familiar work is called *Blauw Jan* (Blue John) and refers to the fine collection of animals and birds owned by Jan Westerhof in seventeenth-century Amsterdam; it is located on Kleine Gartmanplantsoen, a green extension of Leidseplein in Amsterdam. These forty creatures, near the renowned municipal theatre, the De Balie debating centre and countless shops and hotel and catering businesses, seem to have been frozen in mid-movement and, scattered amongst the greenery, look at passers-by with curiosity. A pit amongst the vegetation most likely refers to the way they came to the surface and to their possible escape route.

*Blauw Jan* (Blue John) is characteristic of Van Houwelingen's work. The alienating presence of these creatures adds a tension to this public space. They give the impression of having thoroughly churned up the solid ground beneath this public garden. Van Houwelingen trained as a sculptor at the Minerva Academy in Groningen and the State Academy of Fine Art in Amsterdam; he is an artist who always questions public space and, more specifically, the way we think about it, thereby putting it into sharper focus. Max Bruinsma has come up with several definitions concerning Van Houwelingen's work:

'Since time immemorial, art has been seen as a means of "uplifting" people, making them better. So the idea is that art starts you thinking about the meaning of the work of art; about the relationship between it and yourself; about how you and the work relate to the space you both occupy'.<sup>1</sup>

Van Houwelingen mainly operates in the public domain and whenever he is invited to make a work he makes it clear that art cannot function in isolation, but must actually be a relevant element in our society. Art cannot exist without historical awareness, politics, economics, philosophy and ethics. It is connected to all these things and must relate to them critically. The artist and society are able to establish a meaningful relationship when both are, or become, aware of historical, political and/or ethical contexts.



*Blue John, Leidseplein,  
Amsterdam, 1994*

## **A Roman triumphal column**

In the early 1990s, there were varying social and cultural tensions between original and immigrant inhabitants in the district of Utrecht where the Amerhof square is located. The responsibility the inhabitants felt for public space also turned out to be in increasing decline. Van Houwelingen tried to create social awareness on the basis of a varied historical-cultural perspective. He asked the Moroccan artist Hamid Oujaha to create a paving design for an Islamic (Persian) tapestry 'to be laid out on Dutch territory'. This carpet, with its repetitive pattern in Dutch brick of three colours, has since 1994 lain diagonally opposite the longitudinal axis of the Amerhof. It incorporates street furniture and, on the playground of an adjacent nursery school, which is also part of the carpet, seven bronze Christian lambs by Van Houwelingen function as play



*The Tapestry*, Amerhof,  
Utrecht, 1994

objects. He observes that countless Dutch people have a Persian rug in their homes without knowing anything about its cultural origins. The tension between public space and the private domain, which in recent decades has been increasing in complexity, is one of Van Houwelingen's main points of focus.

Lelystad was designed in the 1960s by the Dutch modernist architect Cornelis van Eesteren. It was designed on the basis of a highly rational grid; functionality to the fore. In the 1990s, Adriaan Geuze's West 8 firm developed plans to restructure the town, which had a great many socio-economic problems and would benefit from a new identity. Van Houwelingen was asked to contribute and proposed giving a more radical status to an existing monument created by Piet Esser (1914-2004) in 1984. Esser had made a sculpted portrait of the engineer Cornelius Lely based on classical principles. Lely was the brain behind the draining of part of the Zuiderzee (now the IJsselmeer) and so was at the genesis of the reclaimed land and therefore of Lelystad too. Van Houwelingen designed a 32-metre basalt column, one metre for every kilometre of the Afsluitdijk – the dam enclosing the IJsselmeer – whose form further referenced Roman triumphal columns such as those of emperors Trajan and Marcus Aurelius in Rome. The three-metre-high sculpture of the man who had made the creation of Lelystad possible, and who had also given it its name,

deserved a truly high-placed monumental location on the pillar and would be able to look out over the town and the surrounding countryside from a square in the centre. The inhabitants would be able to look up to and at him. By means of this work (2002), Van Houwelingen put the notion of the 'monument' into an historical perspective. Many twentieth-century monuments are modern in nature; they use an abstract visual idiom and in this sense do not tell a story in the traditional sense. What they do present, rather, is a 'meaningful' void into which every individual can project what he wishes. By contrast, Van Houwelingen considers the monument important as an object that generates meaning and awareness and believes in its traditional narrative function. At the same time, he would like to awaken Lelystad from its modern, functionalist slumber and grant it the identity of a true metropolis. And the traditional metropolis possesses monuments that are able to condition the public space, public in both the physical and the mental sense. However, Piet Esser's sculpture only remained on its column for half a year. The sculptor was not happy with the changed status of his work. A number of parties discussed the matter in an open correspondence, and this controversy came to form a substantial part of Van Houwelingen's project. Lelystad town council gave him the freedom to examine other possible ways of installing the monument and he was given permission to make a recast of the sculpture of Lely located at the southern end of the Afsluitdijk made by Mari Andriessen (1897-1979) in the 1950s and to put this new version on top of his column. With *De Zuil van Lely* (Lely's Column) Van Houwelingen raises interesting questions about the position of 'iconic' items of cultural expression in our secularised and individualised society.

In 2009, Van Houwelingen made another interesting proposal, this time to Rotterdam city council. He and the writer Mohammed Benzakour were given the task of thinking about the creation of a monument to the first generation



*Lely's Column,*  
Lelystad, 2002



'National Monument to the Guest Worker', Rotterdam, 2010

of guest workers to arrive in the Netherlands in the mid-1950s, who came in particular to Rotterdam. Next to the De Bijenkorf department store, there is a large sculpture by the Russian constructivist artist Naum Gabo (1890-1977), which he made on commission to the store in 1956-57. It has no title. Gabo wanted to express the reconstruction of the city from the rubble of war, and the energy of its inhabitants, but deliberately employed a non-figurative, organic idiom that was intended to leave room for free interpretation. The inhabitants of Rotterdam have never wanted to attach any significance to the work and so by 2009 it was in a lamentable state. Van Houwelingen and Benzakour propose having Gabo's work restored by craftsmen of ethnic minority background (descendants of the first generation of guest workers). And then it would be proclaimed as the *Nationaal Gastarbeidermonument* (National Monument to the Guest Worker). Since the 1950s, guest workers have made a substantial contribution to the development of the Dutch welfare state, but this has so far been barely acknowledged. The monument would be the location for a symbolic annual reception for guest workers, with speeches by politicians and thinkers. These plans led to much heated debate. There were many supporters and opponents both in the political and art worlds. In the end, the 'National Monument to the Guest Worker' was not carried out. One argument against, from the Rotterdam art world, was that it was not wise to attach new meaning to a work of art that was conceived with no specific interpretation. So the monument was not created.

### Allegories of good and bad government

Van Houwelingen continues to take a committed view of relations between politics and art. In 1848, King William II commissioned the liberal politician Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798-1872) to write a new Dutch constitution.<sup>2</sup> Power was removed from the king and given to parliament. This is still the basis of the present Dutch constitution. This constitution also laid down that politics should never interfere in the arts. Thorbecke's idea was that the arts had to fulfil an

independent role in Dutch society and if politics were to become involved, it would have a corrupting effect. This notion remained in force until very recently and was a guiding principle in Dutch political and cultural debate. Politics and art respected each other and their complementary but opposing values. However, since populist powers gained ground in politics at the start of the twenty-first century, these distinct positions have become decreasingly easy to maintain. The cabinet in office in the Netherlands from 2010 and 2012 received parliamentary support from the populist Party for Freedom (PVV). The consequence was serious cuts in art and culture, and people did not shrink from calling them senseless hobbies that cost a great deal of money. Van Houwelingen has always been critical of what in his view is an artificial separation of politics and art. He considers that the two should come into contact with each other more often, whereby art would become much less divorced from society thus more interwoven with the organisation of that society. From 1 to 4 May 2011 inclusive, together with the artist Jonas Staal (also an ardent advocate of the political role the artist can play) and Carolien Gehrels, the then councillor responsible for culture in Amsterdam, he organised a marathon debate lasting three days and nights at the W139 artists' initiative in that city. Four artists and four politicians from different sides of politics tried to re-inject meaning and substance into the worn-out relationship between politics and the arts. They made an inventory of the past, but also looked ahead to see how politics and the arts could once again move on together in order to continue giving meaningful form to free and democratic values. The title of this marathon debate was 'Allegories of Good and Bad Government'. This refers to the series of expressive frescoes created by the Italian painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1290-1348) in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena.<sup>3</sup>

### Tough but vulnerable Friesland

Between 2010 and 2012, Van Houwelingen worked on a triptych for the new extension to the administrative centre of the province of Friesland in Leeuwarden under the title *Mecenaat Provinsje Fryslân* (Patronage Provinsje Fryslân). The triptych was unveiled when the renovated and extended building was inaugurated. In the Netherlands, the 'province' is an intermediate administrative layer that, although it does have a number of administrative responsibilities, actually

*Allegories of Good and  
Bad Government,  
Amsterdam, 2011*



plays a more or less symbolic role. As part of the Netherlands, the province of Friesland occupies a very specific position because it has its own language and thereby also a slightly more distinct culture compared with many other provinces. In a certain sense, the middle panel of the triptych, with its subtitle *Archief Mecenaat Provinsje Fryslân* (Archive Patronage Provinsje Fryslân) embroiders on the content of 'Allegories of Good and Bad Government' and offers suggestions for a new relationship between politics and art that gives priority not to pragmatism but to merit. Van Houwelingen points out the rich cultural tradition of Friesland and a big-hearted citizenship that has always been found there. In light of the abovementioned substantial cuts in art and culture implemented by the government in 2011 and the increasing role it proposed that private patronage should play, politics and art appear to be moving further apart than was already the case in previous decades. It seems that the main reason politics wants to introduce private patronage is to be freed from the funding of and the accompanying responsibility for the arts. But the American style of patronage that is so much commended in this context does not imply that politics can simply set aside its responsibility for art and culture. Van Houwelingen describes it as follows in his concept:

'To make patronage a workable new model, it is essential to give shape to the political meaning of private merit in the cultural field. A model that revolves around cultural and political morality, which stimulate each other and become a source for a richer culture. A political signal has to be given that stimulates private cultural enterprise, but also clearly appreciates it. To use the words of the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, a natural climate should take shape for "homo politicus" in which one can present oneself in a Thymotic setting as a being that wants to give what he has or thinks he has. ... Anyone who is well disposed towards urban cultures must want towns and cities to continue functioning as platforms for an open-hearted citizenship'.<sup>4</sup>

Political recognition and appreciation is an essential part of this. Van Houwelingen presents the sixteenth-century Leeuwarden tower (Oldehove) as a meaningful symbol of the determination, obstinacy, overconfidence and disappointment of the Frisians. In the sixteenth century, they wanted to express their pride in their culture by building a tower higher than the Martinitoren (Martini Tower) that had just been completed in the city of Groningen, sixty kilometres away. To fund the construction, an appeal was made to the public, who then donated generously so as to make it possible. However, when the tower was only ten metres high it started to sag and, as a leaning stump, never reached higher than forty metres. It is however still a visual landmark in Leeuwarden. Van Houwelingen considers that the Oldehove outdid the Martini Tower brilliantly. 'Not in height, but in its soul':

'With each glance at the Oldehove, the tragedy of this cultural epic takes place all over again, an absolute beauty that would have been completely lacking from a straight and completed tower. Thus, taking this view of the Oldehove, the rest of the world, including the Martini tower, is at an angle. My principle is to make use of this Frisian character to constantly continue setting the world straight'.<sup>5</sup>



*Patronage Provisnje Fryslân, Leeuwarden, 2012*

The artist had a monumental oak cabinet made which, on the fifth floor of the Leeuwarden Provinciehuis, stands 2 degrees off the vertical on a console projecting from the wall. The oval frame on the front contains an illustration of the Oldehove in which it stands proudly vertical. *Mecenaat Provisnje Fryslân* is intended to put art and culture on the agenda of the Friesland Provincial Council every year for the next century. The cabinet is meant to act as an archive for the next 100 years and so the Provincial Council will have to take the responsibility of devoting an annual meeting to relations between art and politics at that moment in time. Effective Frisian patronage can only thrive in the provincial administration when the council feels it is a true ambassador, approaches businesses and sponsors or establishes links between art and the business world. Van Houwelingen also made two other works as part of this same assignment. The 'left-hand panel' of the *Mecenaat Provisnje Fryslân* triptych, which has the subtitle *Âlvestêden* (Eleven Towns) is in the new section of the Provinciehuis and is historically oriented. On eleven consoles high up on the wall in the new public area stand eleven white porcelain suits of armour with closed visors. Van Houwelingen describes these eleven monumental figures as follows: 'Stately, conservative, overconfident and fragile – each has the coat of arms of a Frisian town on its cuirass'.<sup>6</sup> These porcelain suits of armour are like Frisian tradition: both sturdy and fragile. Tradition can on the one hand be a protection, but it can also be a society's Achilles heel. At such times, conserva-



tism and rigidity are not far off. The 'right-hand panel' with its subtitle *Vista Fryslân* (View of Friesland) is future-oriented and is in the provincial council chamber in the historical part of the building. Van Houwelingen commissioned the young Chinese artist Mu Xue to do six large drawings that will replace six baroque paintings in the eighteenth-century frames that form part of the wall cladding. Mu Xue's drawings consist of irregular patterns of lines that occur in an indefinable empty space. These works are intended to give the province of Friesland the room to open its windows and let the future blow in.

*Mecenaat Provinsje Fryslân* can be interpreted as a meaningful work, but now, in 2016, it seems that its 'middle panel' is in danger of being amputated. Van Houwelingen has had many conversations with the provincial authorities to arrive at an agreement in principle regarding the implementation of the annual meeting where culture and politics will be linked and which will provide the material to fill the monumental cabinet. Unfortunately, at a certain moment the provincial authorities ended the discussions and, with pain in his heart, Van Houwelingen found he was compelled to cancel the completion of his project. In 2018, Friesland's capital city, Leeuwarden, will be a Cultural Capital of Europe. A position that should lead to reflection, contemplation and visionary ideas. This makes it so incomprehensible and shameful that the provincial authorities should be so indifferent to the meaningful body of ideas contained in a work of art.

### **At the service of the public interest**

Van Houwelingen continues to put forward proposals that focus our perceptions of history, freedom and other values. He was commissioned to create a work of art for the 2015 Airborne walk; it involves about thirty thousand participants and has taken place near Arnhem every year since 1944 to commem-



*Death or the Gladioli, Arnhem, 2015*

orate the bloody 'Battle of Arnhem' in that year. The walk calls attention to the freedom that was won at that time. Van Houwelingen takes this opportunity to examine the notion of 'freedom'. In 1944, troops came from far and wide to liberate the Netherlands from the Nazis in the name of freedom. At that time, the notion of freedom appeared to lead to little misunderstanding. Now, in 2016, it is very much open to question and is a matter of debate. Such familiar rights as freedom of expression and freedom of religion are no longer perceived unequivocally. This is something that Van Houwelingen wanted to bring up in his proposal for the work *De Dood of de Gladioli* (Death or the Gladioli); the title refers to classical antiquity, when a victorious gladiator received gladioli and the loser had to die. He proposed inviting seventy-two Muslim women to hand out gladioli to the walkers during the trip. This had the potential to be a moment when many of the participants had to rethink their familiar assumptions concerning the notion of 'freedom'. Van Houwelingen's proposal was not implemented, and this is the fate that many more of his proposals have met. But in the meantime, the debate that is regularly prompted by his plans and ideas makes the familiar ground beneath our feet briefly crumble. Max Bruinsma, already mentioned in this article, attributes to the artist in public space an awareness of being 'a medium at the service of the public cultural interest'. In addition, 'the quality of his work is determined essentially by the degree to which he succeeds in recalling that slogan of the 1960s that has fallen into disuse: "making the personal political"'.<sup>7</sup> May Hans Van Houwelingen long remain capable of doing so. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

## NOTES

- 1 Max Bruinsma, 'Kunst Openbaar Ruimte; Enkele begripsbepalingen bij het werk van Hans Van Houwelingen' (p. 11) in *Stiff; Hans van Houwelingen vs Public Art* (ed. Max Bruinsma). Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004.
- 2 Van Houwelingen made two separate proposals for the installation of a monument to Thorbecke in The Hague. See [www.hansvanhouwelingen.nl](http://www.hansvanhouwelingen.nl): 'Gedane zaken nemen geen keer / The Hague / 2008' and 'Thorbecke Monument / The Hague / 2011'.
- 3 Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegories of Good and Bad Government* consists of three parts and six scenes: *The Allegory of Good Government*, *The Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country*, and *The Allegory of Bad Government*.
- 4 See [www.hansvanhouwelingen.nl](http://www.hansvanhouwelingen.nl): Mecenaat Fryslân. Van Houwelingen quotes from Peter Sloterdijk's piece *Samenlevingsdesign in de open stad/Opmerkingen over de urbane antropologie*, 2009.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See note 1: p. 15.