

N°2

UNTITLED
(A PUBLIC ART ZINE)

THE TRAVEL ISSUE



Bar Paniek, Kattendijkdok, Antwerp

"A boat has no business to be
on the roof of a house..."



Zaha Hadid, The Port Authority Building, Antwerp

...but may form a poetical phrase of the
greatest beauty and significance"

- Sigmund Freud, Interpretation of Dreams

NOT JUST A WALK IN THE PARK

It was a cool but sunny April 4th in Antwerp. After our morning coffee, Andrea and I rented bikes and rode out along wide bike lanes to the outskirts of the city to explore the Middelheim Museum, 30-acres of land and private residences that were transformed into a public park in 1910. A collection of over 250 sculptures was built from a series of exhibitions and biennales beginning in 1950 and has led to a mind-blowing discovery: the range of works and curatorial approach, the sculpture and the landscape reinforcing each other to create a special experience. Smaller, more fragile pieces are stored and exhibited in one of two important buildings: Renaat Braem's curved, white pavilion from 1971 nestled perfectly in the landscape and Stephane Beel's collection pavilion (2000). Originally intended to be a closed storage space and workshop, in 2016 it was converted into an open depot, where visitors can walk among the stored sculptures, some of which are curated into a display. (This small building, together with the famous Depot in Rotterdam, are clearly signaling the future of museum storage.) Last year, work began on an open-air repository where trees and bushes will define the storage spaces instead of walls. There were sculptures and architectural structures by Auguste Rodin, Aristide Maillol, Jean Arp, Constantin Meunier, Luciano Fabro, Erwin Wurm, Ai Weiwei, Thomas Schütte, Peter Rogiers, Per Kirkeby, Bruce Nauman...Gorgeous, meticulously maintained landscapes where visitors could walk or cycle. The museum also curates public art exhibitions in urban settings, like the one of Canadian artist Ken Lum's work along the Scheldt River Promenade in Antwerp in 2021.

Walking through the park I was surprised to come across two sculptures by the Hungarian artist Imre Varga: *Prometheus* (1965, cast steel) and *Professor* (1969, cast bronze). You will find statues by Varga in the U.K.,

Germany, Norway, Israel, even in the Vatican. In Hungary, he also created several public monuments—now removed—portraying some of history's monstrous figures like Lenin or his communist contemporary Bela Kun. It was at that moment, while standing in this fantastic park, that I began to recall newspaper headlines and TV reports about the many recent statue demolitions, removals, burnings and decapitations of unsavoury historical characters in cities around the world, including in Toronto and across Canada. Where do these contested monuments end up? In the landfill? We all know that every public monument has an expiration date. Let us follow the history of two statues to see if there is an alternative solution, or if we are missing out on a major opportunity.

Bela Kun was one of the leaders of the very short lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. He was an evil, internationalist communist radical, responsible for thousands of deaths in Hungary and later in the Crimea (1920-21). Imre Varga's statue *Bela Kun* was erected in Budapest in 1986. By 1992, the new democratic government, offended by its presence in the public realm, had it transported to the newly built Memento Sculpture Park in South Buda. Memento Park is a comprehensive educational attraction, including a cinema and photo exhibition that displays Hungary's communist-era statues in a way that re-contextualizes them for a contemporary audience. A place where you can respond to these long-gone, now comical antiheroes as you like. Instead of disposing of these monuments, the country saw an opportunity to "keep (their) historical memory alive and to strengthen citizen's sense of responsibility and commitment to sustain democracy" according to political figure Zoltan Pokorni. While there are other similar parks (Grutas Park in Lithuania; Park of the Fallen Heroes, Moscow...) Memento Park in Budapest is the most unique because of the size of the collection and its emphasis on education.

Belgian artist Jacques Ducaju's cast bronze statue of King Leopold II was erected in central Antwerp in 1873. Leopold was a quintessential archetype of the colonialist butcher. He was the founder and sole owner of the "Congo Free State" and terrorized the Congolese from 1885 to 1908 with his exceptionally brutal mercenary army the Force Publique. By 2007, the statue had been vandalized numerous times with red paint and swastikas so in 2018 the city installed an explanatory sign. In 2020 the statue was once again severely vandalized by fire, so it was removed and taken into storage at Middelheim. To visit and read about this story on the museum website is fascinating. A few quotations from the text draw attention to the language used and in particular the attitude:

"The statue is part of Antwerp's cultural heritage and belongs to the municipal public art collection, which is managed, studied, and made publicly accessible through the museum..."

"The Middelheim Museum deems vandalism an ill-founded basis for debate..."

"We think there is a need for debate on the shifting significance of such statues, employing the nuanced vocabulary of simultaneous or conflicting heritage values..."

"The museum will investigate the current condition of the statue, taking as a guideline the conviction that the material state and the symbolic meaning of the work are one and indivisible..."

In 2021, Middelheim Museum organized a contemporary exhibition and forum titled *Congoville: Contemporary Artists Tracing Colonial Tracks*. Fifteen international artists attended. The museum published an exhibition catalogue, including interviews with the artists and numerous academics and experts.

Besides the auspicious fate of the two statues mentioned above, there are many less fortunate ones in Hungary, Belgium and more recently across Europe and North America, which do not end up preserved for further study.

I understand the rage that leads people to destroy images of these figures. Those who enable any kind of genocide with their ideas do not deserve monuments in the public realm. But to disappear these artworks forever is a mistake. As a European immigrant, I hate to see statues and monuments broken into pieces, burning, hanging by the neck, people marching around with a severed bronze head. I hate to see swastikas and nooses, and I especially hate to see our symbolic national flag turned upside down. Furthermore, this destruction is occasionally misplaced. On Church Street in Toronto the artist Del Newbigging's bronze tribute to gay pioneer Alexander Wood (one of only a few gay-focused monuments in the world) was broken into pieces and ended up in the dumpster. According to numerous researchers, the subject of the sculpture was innocent.

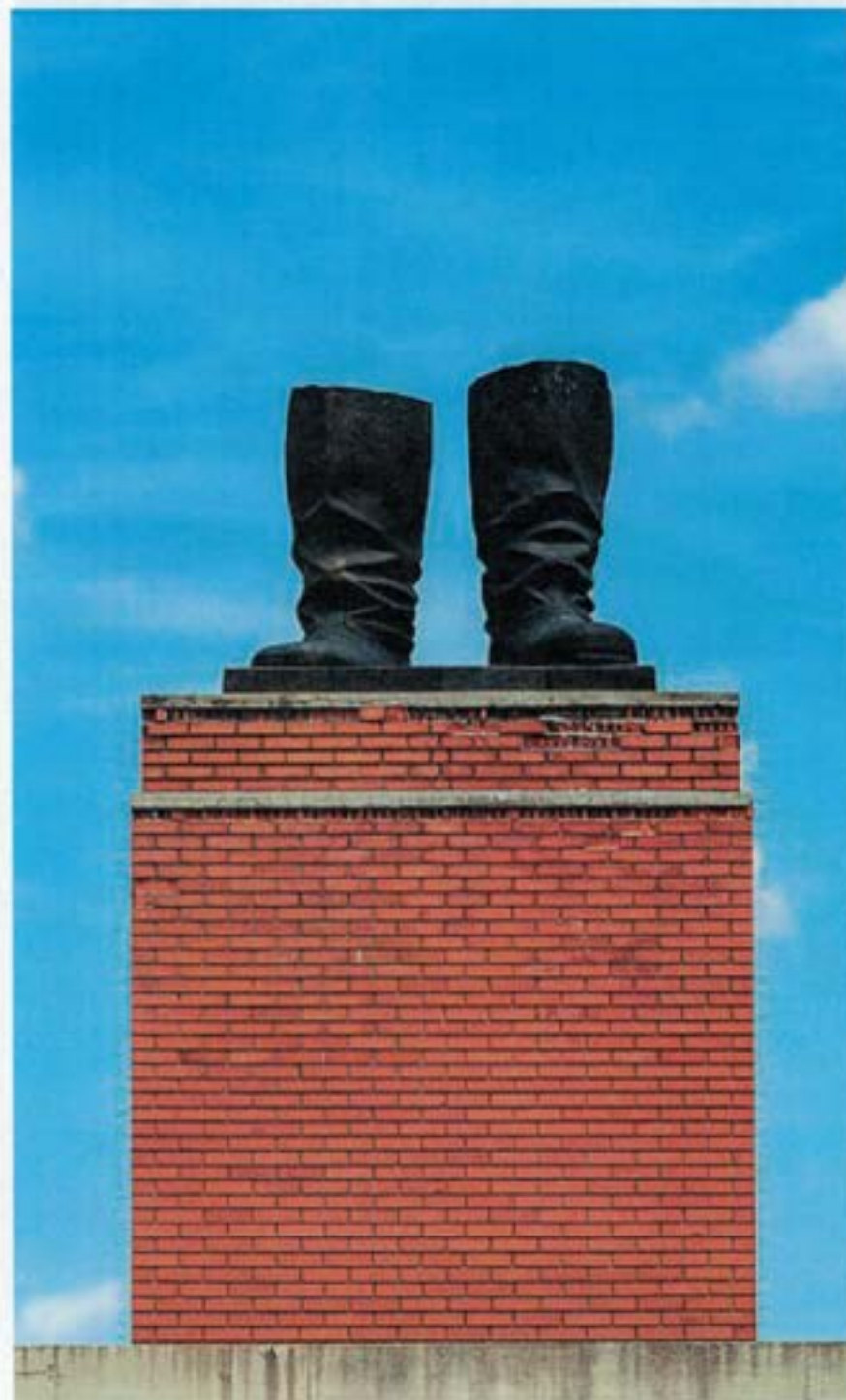
If we continue to dispose of these historic and often highly offensive monuments too hastily, we will lose the chance to have a conversation about their out-of-date message. We will lose an excellent tool. Instead, we should consider keeping them, using them to promote the truth, to teach about both the character and the socio-political context in which the monuments were erected. These pieces show us the values of the time in which they were created. They are time-machines. If we don't save these pieces of art history, we will all lose. It is valid to make the point that some of these statues are quality art? Most certainly. Hamilton MacCarthy was one of the earliest Canadian masters of monumental bronzes, whose subjects included John A MacDonald and Egerton Ryerson among other figures. It may now be offensive to keep these figures standing in our midst. Nonetheless, MacCarthy's work remains an important part of our country's art history. Interestingly enough, he spent a short period of time studying in Antwerp.

To get closer to the solution, it is worthwhile studying a very recent project, *re:mancipation* at the Chazen Museum of Art in Wisconsin. Over two years, artists, professors, students, dancers, musicians and even community members led by the artist Sanford Biggers collaborated, studied and artistically reinterpreted Thomas Ball's marble statue *The Emancipation Group* from the museum's collection. The sculpture depicts Abraham Lincoln standing over a kneeling freedman figure representing enslaved people (the bronze version unfortunately still stands in Lincoln Park, Washington D.C.) This educational, artistic project has a website and a YouTube channel. Here is a quote from an interview with Sanford Biggers: "For art to do what it does, we have to make sure that those avenues of communication are open, that we do not censor things that we don't like, but we provide environments where contentious conversations can happen in a constructive manner, not a destructive manner."

The solution for what to do with contentious public artworks may lie in taking elements from places like the Middelheim Museum, Budapest's Memento Park and others to create monumental size "Aware Houses" as proposed by esteemed museum consultant Gail Lord. Not in a prominent downtown location, but somewhere on the outskirts of cities like Toronto in a warehouse, perhaps with an adjacent park. Store these mementoes, make them accessible to researchers, artists and for any member of the public who wants to learn.

Janos Kereszturi Toth

RIGHT: Stalin's Boots, Memento Park, Budapest







STATUE OF LIBERTY

We were in our Uber, having arrived in Rotterdam central station, en route to our Airbnb and passing a quaint public square when Janos glanced out the window and said mildly: "That's kind of an unusual statue..." to which the driver quickly replied "Yes, and many people ask me about it. I never know what to tell them."

Intrigued, I craned my neck around to get a look. I had never seen it before, but I knew right away that it was by the California artist Paul McCarthy. I had seen his monumental installation *WS White Snow*, an aggressively debauched, backwards, quasi-pornographic interpretation of the fairytale at New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2013. That show had so thoroughly destroyed any of the warm fuzzy associations I had with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, that I knew he was the only one who would create this piece. I told the driver a bit about McCarthy so that he could enlighten future passengers. The sculpture? A 20-foot-high bronze of a jolly-looking Santa Claus holding a bell in one hand, and in the other, not a pine tree, no....he's holding a gigantic butt plug.

The work wasn't without controversy when it was commissioned by the city in 2001. The sculpture of Santa holding a sex toy was rejected from several of its proposed sites and only after seven years did it settle in Eendrachtsplein, right in the centre of Rotterdam. Perhaps because it's a large bronze sculpture in a

public square, or perhaps because butt plugs aren't exactly mainstream, it may not immediately register that it's a bit obscene. It's fun to observe children and middle-aged tourists pose in front of it, happily and often obliviously taking selfies.

Whether or not you appreciate it as an artwork, there's clearly a bit more to this *Santa Claus* as it's passively titled, than first appears. St. Nicholas was a Christian saint in 4th century Turkey, who was revered for a series of kind and generous acts, mainly toward children. Over time his story, via the Dutch nickname 'Sinter Klaas' and some enterprising American illustrators, was transformed into the jolly bearded man in the red suit who looms large in the imaginations of children everywhere. The butt plug, meanwhile, was originally marketed in the late 19th century by doctors to cure constipation among a host of other ailments, and only entered the more mainstream culture when the first sex stores opened (in Germany) in the early 60s. Although it has since gained in popularity, the item still remains enough of a taboo for McCarthy to controversially employ in his artistic practice. Interestingly and presumably on purpose, the bell, which Santa holds in his other hand, while a benign Christmas accessory, is also all about communication, a call to action, a bid to pay attention.

If one does pay attention and examines it closely, one finds a pleasing equality between the blown up scale of the toy-like butt plug and the blown up scale of what looks like a Santa figurine that one might buy in a shop. The sculpture is remarkably well balanced. To my mind, *Santa Claus* embodies this sense of equilibrium

both in form and in concept. It's yin-yang: light and dark, high and low, child-like and very 'adult'. It pushes and pulls. It embodies both a unity and a duality that may be seen to encapsulate how darkness cannot exist without light, goodness without evil, cleanliness without filth. While the plug's shape is vaguely tree-like and echoes the bulbous hand/bell/foot on the opposite side, McCarthy's sex toy is way too phallic to be truly mistaken for a tree. (He used the more common, triangular shape for his 2014 work *Tree*, an enormous green version of which he installed in Paris until it was torn down by an irate public.) Nonetheless, the shape here refers to McCarthy's earlier work, *Chair with Butt Plug*, 1978 which led to his *Brancusi Tree*, 2007, a larger self-inflatable gold or silver mylar balloon sculpture in the same shape

Personally, while I find *Santa Claus* to be a bit kitsch, I respect it enormously. Monumentality, material and specificity has been shown to work brilliantly in public art. Christo & Jeanne-Claude, by wrapping monumental architecture and infrastructure, forced us to 'see' them again. Claes Oldenburg's giant sculptures of bowling pins, cherries and other everyday objects clearly demonstrated how we are dominated by our consumer culture by literally dominating us. McCarthy's butt plug shaped *Tree* in Paris was both monumental and specific-no wonder people couldn't accept it. At a comparatively small 20 feet high, what *Santa Claus* lacks in grand scale he makes up for in both specificity and material. He is bronze and is not going anywhere. He's very clear about who he is and what he's holding. He's even ringing a bell to get our attention. Whether people choose to see it is another question.

The city of Rotterdam must be applauded for keeping it – and embracing it; there are even street signs in the area depicting its likeness!

If art is a language, then as we rounded the corner in our Uber, we got the message loud and clear: Rotterdam is a brave, confident city. It's refreshingly unencumbered. *Santa Claus* succeeds for many reasons, but perhaps most of all because of what it says about the municipal mechanisms that approved it. It is likely that those same mechanisms enabled the wildly exaggerated architectural design (by Dutch firm MVRDV) of the city's best-known market, Markt Binnenrotte, whose entire wall and ceiling surfaces are covered with enormous, vividly colourful photographic closeups of fruits and flowers, and the Depot, another outrageous MVRDV-designed, shiny silver alien spaceship of a building that puts the storage and restoration of the neighbouring museum's collection on public view.

You know what Rotterdam is? It's world-class. Back from our trip, when I told a friend about *Santa Claus*, her immediate response was: "They would NEVER allow something like that in Toronto!" Perhaps that's true.

Andrea Carson Barker

MARKHAM ARTISIAN MARKET

San Sheng Art Space
333 Denison St, Markham, ON



Vendor application available at www.sansheng.ca

COMING UP: THE TORONTO ISSUE



Erwin Wurm "Misconceivable" 2010 Polyester, Wood, Metal, Middelheim Museum

Published by:
Janos Kereszturi Toth & Andrea Carson Barker

Comments? Questions?
GET IN TOUCH:

untitledpublicartzine@yahoo.com

