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## **Steel Stone and Soap**

Three years ago I had the idea to make a video featuring monuments of Dutch colonial "heroes". However, the project got stuck, and I never finished the video. Now, due to the recent revival of the Black Lives Matter protests, these statues are back in the spotlight. Mister Motley asked me to write an essay about my intentions, experiences and ideas regarding this project.

I remember the history lessons about the 'Golden Age' in primary school. I particularly remember the one-sidedness of the stories, and the discernible pride that resounded in those classes. At that time I was living with my mother, my sister, and my grandmother in Noordwijk aan Zee. Raised in multicultural Amsterdam East, born on a houseboat with a Turkish-Bosnian father and a Dutch mother, I had always been surrounded by different cultures and subcultures. In Noordwijk I felt like an alien amongst the polo shirts, and I was bullied accordingly. My brain has somehow linked these two things together: the history lessons about the Golden Age and my experiences in Noordwijk.

Who do we choose to see as heroes? Is there a political purpose behind the veneration of certain figures? Nationalism exists by virtue of (self-) glorification and exclusion. History, of course, is always told from a certain perspective, by necessity at the expense of other perspectives, such as those of colonized peoples, enslaved people, women, or people from lower socio-economic classes. How do you respond, when your perspective is not represented in the dominant version of history?

A few years ago I started working on the video Men of Steel, Men of Stone, a project that took place outside of my comfort zone. I often allow animals, people and natural processes to help me determine the end result of my projects. In the photo essay Coot, for example, I had a couple of coots build a nest of my personal belongings. This way of working is not only a reflection on the creative process - control is an illusion, in my opinion - but also an attempt to break through existing hierarchies in order to investigate possible new perspectives and stories.

In *Men of Steel* I took a different approach. This time I picked three specific statues as my subject: These were the statues of Jan Pieterszoon Coen in Hoorn, Michiel de Ruyter in Vlissingen and Piet Heijn in Rotterdam, who all lived in the 16th and / or 17th century. The statues were placed in the 19th century, when, after the split from Belgium, nationalist ideology gained ground in the Netherlands, and there was an active search for public figures who could fulfill the function of national hero. The heroism of these figures has since often been disputed.

Where Coen was known for his massacres on the Banda Islands, the actions of Michiel de Ruyter and Piet Hein are less markedly gruesome. De Ruyter was involved in the slave trade, but his precise role is unclear. Heijn was probably not active in the slave trade, but he was part of (and made his money within) that same system. In the video I use the images interchangeably, because I was primarily concerned with a feminist perspective: how do I, as a woman, relate to these images of bloodthirsty and authoritarian masculine heroes from a time when women were not seen as fully-fledged citizens?

I previously made a video work about the relationship between hands and images. In *The Radiance of Sensible Heat* I filmed plaster casts of historical sculptures from the depot of the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam with a thermal imaging camera. In the video I touch the sculptures, and the heat transfer from my hand makes the sculptures visible. When I pull away my hand, they slowly disappear from view. In this way they are, as it were, "activated" by my hand.



Philosopher Karen Barad explains that what we perceive is always relational. It is not objective reality, but reality as it comes to us, mediated by specific "devices". Your glasses, or a computer, are examples of such devices that, just like your eyes and brain, convert the wavelength of light into color. But we could also view social constructs as devices that mediate how we perceive the world, like the history lesson described above.

The images I filmed for *Radiance* or *Sensible Heat* were certainly not neutral; there were copies of Roman statues and of Christian figures. But this diversity gave them a certain ambiguity. After this project I wanted to investigate my relationship with images that are actually very much charged with (polarizing) meaning. Sculptures which are not hidden away in a depot, but are displayed openly on the street.

I decided to wash the sculptures of De Ruyter, Coen and Heijn, using absurd amounts of suds. The soap was deployed ironically, to make clear that these sculptures cannot really be washed, but it was also about contrasting an action that is seen as typically feminine with the ruggedness of the images. The soap bubbles distort the images in a rather surrealistic manner, inviting the viewer to relate to the images in a different way than usual.



Thanks to a grant from the Filmfonds, I was able to get started on the project, and, to my surprise, it was not very difficult to get permission from the relevant municipalities to film the statues. However, the filming itself was not an easy job. With cameraman Ben Geraerts I sat at a height of six meters in a pivoting boom lift, balancing on the railing as I attempted to wash the statue without causing the whole thing to shake (which would have rendered the recordings unusable). My original plan, to wash the statues rather more violently, was thus thwarted.

While filming the image of Coen, I was amazed at the influx of people who wanted to be photographed with the images. Some of these day trippers even reacted somewhat annoyed to our presence. I was shocked by the extent to which these figures are still actively venerated.

Someone asked me some questions for a local blog. That's how my name ended up on the internet. The reactions to the blog post were not the subtlest: "If this so called artist with her foreign surname shows her face here again, I'll run her over with my truck", and the like. I was shocked, of course, but I didn't really feel threatened (it's bark is worse, et cetera) It did, however, color my experience of the project. I felt compelled to take a clearer position on

these issues. The question the project had started with, 'How am I going to deal with images that make me feel unrepresented?' changed to `` How does the world in which these images are presented deal with me? "

I was forced to think about the positioning of my work in general. I was convinced that making art is always a political act, after all it is always related to the world, but I also tried to make work that was not explicitly activist. At the same time, I realized that I had taken a path where this position was no longer tenable.

*Flash forward.*

Two years later, the images I filmed are up for discussion again. Statues of, among others, slave traders have been pulled from their pedestals in various places around the world. Seeing Edward Colston's statue being destroyed in Bristol reminded me of other statues I had seen toppled over on video, as well as certain works of art, such as the works of Fernando Sanchez Castillo, who dissected various dictators both physically and metaphorically in sculpture. He made the sculpture "AZOR" for which he bought Franco's personal yacht, and processed it into scrap metal. Isn't every act of creation accompanied by some degree of destruction?

The activist potential of art is well known, but could an activist act unintentionally be art? Our ideas about what constitutes "art" have changed quite a bit throughout the centuries. Where art and design were once one and the same thing (both had a clear purpose or message), during the last century the idea that art should be autonomous took over. Later on, art was increasingly seen as part of a network: a work of art arises in relation to its environment. This is a relationship between artist, artwork, spectator, and situation, all of which contribute to the meaning of the work.



In the case of the overthrown statues, a relationship develops between history, the statue, the overthrowers, and the spectators. Zooming out, we can see all these actors in relation to

other actors. This creates an infinite network of links and meanings that weakens, the further away from the event they occur.

The fact that I, for the sake of convenience, put Coen, de Ruyter and Heijn together in my video, does not mean that I think this should also be done in the broader discussion. A haphazard iconoclasm is just as short-sighted as unquestioningly and indiscriminately maintaining the presence of these statues. What do these specific symbols represent and how do we create new symbols by confronting them? The example above shows that allowing a problematic statue to remain on its pedestal also generates meaning. In Coen's case, there is the relationship of the image to the square, the cafes, the people who worship the image, our current prosperity, the descendants of Coen's victims, and so on. This is a dynamic relationship, always fluctuating. Keeping the statue in place is therefore not a more neutral act than removing it.

You could say that if everything makes its own story in relation to everything, everything is completely subjective. But I don't mean to go down a postmodern rabbit hole here. The reality of the person worshipping the statue and the reality of a descendant of Coen's victims are both "true", but not in the same way. The massacres, slavery, and exploitation actually happened, but the worship of the image stems from the aforementioned political fiction that is nationalism.

We live in a time where political fictions are being created faster than they can be debunked. To counterbalance this, it is not enough to find out the truth, we will have to investigate with which tools we do this: the methods we use, our personal points of view. Do we have to remove some of these statues? Put them in a museum? Cut them into pieces and hang them from a tree? We must also investigate whether and how these images indirectly perpetuate inequality. I heard the argument that removing these statues would be erasing history. If only it were that easy! Or the argument that we shouldn't look at statues from those times from a contemporary vantage point. But to inhabit a centuries old vantage point is impossible. If only we could inhabit multiple vantage points simultaneously, as if we were wearing pairs of imaginary double or multifocal glasses, which would render the entire network of historical resonances visible.

Man relates to the world through stories. History is a collection of competing stories. We could also refer to phenomena such as "money" or "the law" as artificial constructions, things which only exist because we have decided to agree on their existence. Such fictions may not be "real," but their effect on us definitely is real. In the googolplex of information we inhabit, it is important to recognize fictions as such. This allows us to critically analyze stories, and create new perspectives. I think the experiment is more important than its success. My video project has not turned out the way I originally envisioned it. But even if I could have made it work, the world has changed in the meantime, and with it, irrevocably, the work. I made several versions of the video over the years. I no longer have the desire to finish it, although I certainly intend to continue working on it. The work has turned into an endless work in progress, just like history.

