

## Review

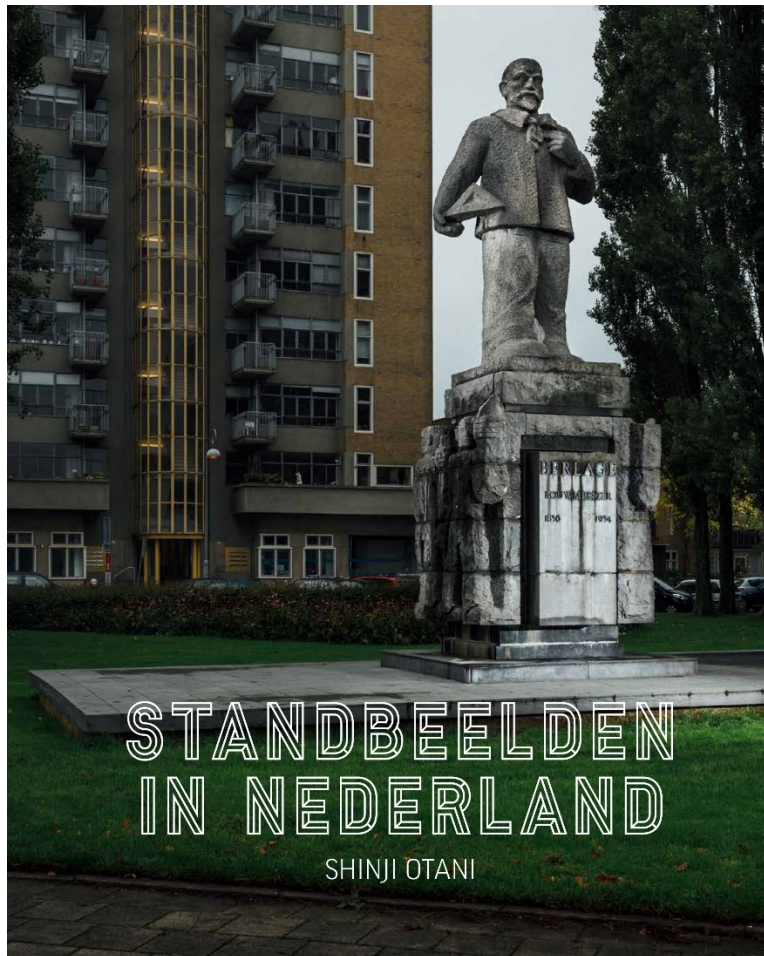
**Shinji Otani (photography), Pepijn Reeser (text):**

### ***Standbeelden in Nederland***

Eindhoven: Lecturis, 2019. 116 p.

ISBN 9789462263062

*Reviewed by Martin Zebracki*



Those in search of a treasure trove of permanent public sculptures that have seen the light of the day in the Dutch public realm since halfway through the 19<sup>th</sup> century may find satisfaction in *Standbeelden in Nederland* ('Sculptures in the Netherlands'). This catalogue was published by the self-named independent publisher of special books Lecturis, in partnership with Vissch+STAM and Harten Fonds. I commend the concerted work carried out by the Amsterdam-based photographer Shinji Otani, of Japanese origin, and Dutch historian Pepijn Reeser. Otani travelled with a camera around the Netherlands to discover and record public sculptures. Reeser has accompanied the ensuing, impressive photographic work with thoughtful, informative textual vignettes. The overall result is a visually appealing, affordable coffee-table book that presents a collection of sculptures of Dutch historic figureheads. It brings out national heroes (depending on one's perspective). Think of Willem van Oranje, who led the Dutch revolt, and the statesman Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, founder of the revised Constitution for the Kingdom of the Netherlands, shifting the power from the king to the State. Other major figures include artists, writers, and philosophers, like Vincent and Theo van Gogh, Multatuli, and Baruch Spinoza.

Reeser, who penned the four-page introduction, admits that what is included as "sculpture" may very well depend on one's point of view. However, this term is left unspecified. For context, the readership of this work may want to explore it in conjunction with academic discussions around the evolution of Dutch public art and the multifaceted relationship between art/sculpture, public space, and public audiences, as profoundly analyzed in Van Winkel (1999), and Boomgaard and Brom (2017), among others.

No definitive number of sculptures in the Dutch public realm is provided, which could run into "the hundreds, perhaps thousands" (2), according to Reeser. Based on the 54 sculptures that can be counted in the photo overview, I see mostly bronze or stone versions of key figures that exhibit Dutch history. These are all non-fictional human figures – with Jan de Baat's sculpture of Groningen's folklore symbol *Peerd van Ome Loeks* ('Uncle Loeks' Horse') as perhaps the odd one out. Also, by and large, the depicted sculptures are situated in prominent city squares rather than in more peripheral urban or rural areas. Temporary sculptures and non-material, performative sculptural types are excluded from the inventory.

What is striking is that the companion text largely tells a *his*-story of Dutch society and arts – which likely reflects androcentric hegemony that has been governing societies more generally. However, the book does offer some vignettes of carvings of powerful leading women in Dutch history, such as the statues of Queens Emma and Wilhelmina of the Dutch House of Orange, and suffragettes Wilhelmina Drucker and Aletta Jacobs, who are both regarded as instigators of the

Dutch women's rights movement. And there is one Dutch sports heroine, athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen.

Reeser makes the point that the Dutch neither have a long-standing nor manifest tradition of public sculpture; sculptures were seen in churches and not so much on the street. However, especially since the secularization of Dutch society, sculptures in Dutch public spaces, usually town squares, have become a significant way to express national and local history, identity, and feelings of community. Reeser indicates that the intended meanings of sculptures have changed correspondingly, from educating the public about shared history and expressing a sense of togetherness to celebrating ordinary but meaningful people (like soccer player Johan Cruyff).

There is little evidence to suggest that such sculptures would strictly embellish the public realm in the eyes of the public, at least not primarily, as we can learn from the featured example of *De verwoeste stad* ('The destroyed city'), which was sculpted by Ossip Zadkine. This is one of the few instances in this book that mark a historic watershed. The statue represents a human figure, screaming of hopelessness, with a hollowed heart, symbolizing the dramatic upshot of the Nazi bombing of Rotterdam. Unveiled in 1953, residents largely perceived this sculpture as too abstract, or even an eyesore initially, but it reportedly conquered the hearts of many soon after its inauguration in 1953, becoming an icon of Rotterdam.

Reeser references the old saying "*wie betaalt, bepaalt*" – translated: "*he who pays the piper calls the tune*" (emphasis added). This particularly applies to the politics around which sculptures are commissioned, by whom, where, and how – and which sculptures may stand the test of time. First and foremost, you need stamina on the part of initiators and a fan base on the receiving end to bring a sculpture to fruition. This is typically done posthumously. One of the vignettes in this book about the statue for the Amsterdam folk singer André Hazes suggests as much. A crowdfunding foundation collected the monies required for the statue that was erected near Hazes' birthplace in De Pijp neighbourhood in Amsterdam, just a year after this singer's death in 2004.

Not only money is crucial in producing statues. Power and symbology play an undeniable part in the representation of culture and society through the lens of public artwork. Reeser argues that "the street has increasingly become the battleground of groups with their own view of society and their own heroes and martyrs" (4, translated from Dutch original). Sometimes this plays itself out competitively in the international arena, too. As Reeser exemplifies, sculptures in one place evoked reactions, or "anti-sculptures," if you will, in another place. As an example, the author hinted at competition between Dutch and Flemish masters. The sculpture of Rubens in Antwerp was responded to by the sculptural

embodiment of Rembrandt in Amsterdam. Reeser furthermore illustrates this point with the example of the memorial of the colonial governor general J. B. van Heutsz, later redubbed *Monument Indië-Nederland* ('Monument [Dutch East] Indies-Netherlands'). This monument met with opposition from Dutch socialists. They, on their part, found their reified soulmate in the statue of the anti-militarist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, the first socialist in the *Tweede Kamer*, the House of Representatives of the Netherlands.

The permanence of sculptures is relative and is, as Reeser indicates, subject to public acceptance; this reveals something about social relations. There is scope to build on this survey book in light of topical global developments around decolonizing thought and minority activism addressing ethnic and gender underrepresentations, or misrepresentations. This has resulted in widespread "updates" of numerous sculptures and major objects of "dissonant" public heritage. In light of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Confederate statues across the U.S. have been defaced, removed or annotated with anti-racist comments. The statue of colonist and slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled by BLM protestors in May 2020 and replaced by Marc Quinn's resin-and-steel sculpture of Jen Reid, in honour of this activist who, after the Colston statue was toppled, climbed the empty plinth and raised a Black Power fist salute (Bland 2020). Events like these reinforce the message that public condemnation can boil up and lead to grassroots action. This could subvert imposed decisions about who gets remembered in the public realm through the straitjackets of hegemonic norms, notably white heteropatriarchy (see Zebracki & Luger 2019).

Some critical references to Dutch colonial history are made in this book. For example, the vignette about the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the Dutch East Indies' governor general, mentions that the interpretative panel on the pedestal was amended. It now simultaneously conveys Coen's merits and wrongdoings – in order to add that his regime had blood on its hands (saliently, the Dutch military conquest of the Banda Islands led by Coen resulted in a massacre in 1621).

Considering the inseparable relationship of Dutch history with colonization and slavery, I would have welcomed stronger visibility of this troubled past in this retrospective overview. The introduction mentions that slavery monuments have been established in Amsterdam, Middelburg, and Rotterdam since the turn of the century. We do not yet see them in this work, although issues concerning historical slavery and racial inequality are particularly imperative in public debates in the Netherlands and beyond at present. In recent years, such issues have been coming to the fore especially around the controversial annual celebration of the white patron saint of children *Sinterklaas* ('Saint Nicholas'), particularly the blackface figure of *Zwarte Piet* ('Black Pete'), the "helper" of *Sinterklaas*, at which anti-racist activists and human rights organizations increasingly take umbrage.

In a photographic compendium, such as *Standbeelden in Nederland*, lies an obviously important role for visual representation. Rather than a reference in the introduction alone, I would have particularly welcomed a photograph supplemented with a self-critical historical account regarding the *National Slavery Monument* in Amsterdam. Besides, this book's focus on human figures seems to carry with it the limitation of the absence of just the few non-figurative public artworks which have unmistakably been of major importance for historically marginalized or discriminated groups, such as migrant communities and LGBTQ+ populations.

A welcome addition in this regard would have been the non-figurative *Monument voor de gastarbeider* ('Monument to the Guest Worker') by Hans van Bentem, which was unveiled in Rotterdam's migrant neighbourhood Afrikaanderwijk in 2003. I think that another key omission is the *Homomonument*, installed in Amsterdam's city centre in 1987, which is the world's first commissioned public artwork dedicated to gay and lesbian people, and by extension the LGBTQ+ community (see Zebracki 2017). Furthermore, controversial sculptures, like Paul McCarthy's statue of the fictional figure *Santa Claus*, heralded in its current location at Eendrachtsplein in Rotterdam's city centre in 2008, may have provided an interesting contemporary contrast with the kind of more traditional sculptures that this compendium showcases. The *Santa Claus* sculpture, known in its local community as the "Butt Plug Gnome," is the artist's incarnation of an indictment of the neoliberal consumer society (see Zebracki 2012).

The geographical coverage of this book is comprehensive. The lion's share stems from the largest Dutch cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. And key sculptures from all Dutch provinces are included. However, there is one exception, as I search in vain for a sculpture from the youngest, human-made province of Flevoland. Its provincial capital, Lelystad, hosts in the heart of this small city a column of thirty metres in height on which sits a sculpture of Cornelis Lely, the Dutch engineer who led the most extensive land reclamation in the world. As the well-trodden adage goes, "God created the earth, but the Dutch created the Netherlands." This landmark statue of Lely, as important image-maker of the Dutch country, is therefore perhaps an absent eye-catcher in this source book.

It has probably not been the aim of the contributors to provide an exhaustive outline, not to mention academic exposition, of the Dutch landscape of public sculpture and its diverse and complex histories and geographies. Nevertheless, the coordinated visual and written efforts make *Standbeelden in Nederland* a highly accessible work for anyone who wishes to gain a bird's-eye view of this landscape. A translation of the book into English, or another major language, would obviously make it available to a far wider readership. In addition, I would have been pleased to learn more about the intentions and thought processes behind the provenance of this retrospective work. And from which

perspectives were the photographs taken, selected, and presented? (in terms of location, theme, and period). I realize that space in a visual anthology like the one at hand is limited. That said, as I have alluded to above, deeper engagement with particularly activist issues around diversity and equal rights would lend some more critical understandings around major visibilisations vs. invisibilisations and rememberings vs. “unrememberings” in Dutch society – as they are told by public sculpture and read by diverse “publics.”

I concur with Reeser’s statement that the landscape of public sculpture will change in both form and interpretation: “if the story of the Dutch statues makes one thing clear, it is that each generation looks at them in a different way” (5, translated from Dutch original). Yet, again, rather than reading this collection as a representative canon of Dutch sculpture, I entertain supplementary perspectives that challenge Dutch history and identity through the image of sculptures that are present – or are (still) deemed missing pieces – on the street. Moreover, I would encourage engagement with the reinforcing role of digital technologies in the making, and re-making, of sculptures – which are curated in public spaces ranging from the street to the tweet, so to speak. This would capture the social interconnectivity of offline and online worlds, as the production of, and debate about, public art is not confined to the street alone (see Zebracki & Luger 2019). Perhaps this book itself could be provided with an online addendum, adopting some of the suggestions above. Dutch public sculpture is in flux. And so, it needs to be constantly reflected upon, and thereby *re-written* and *re-mapped*, according to the changing diversity and social relations and tensions in society.

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**About the reviewer**

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