



*Kunst & Zwalm* is a biennial project organised in Zwalm, a small Flemish town near Anvers. Within the framework of this project, different artists are invited to make a series of short-lived interventions in different public spaces of the town. The fourth edition of *Kunst & Zwalm*, that took place between the months of August and September of 2003, was undertaken in collaboration with the Espais Foundation of Girona and included the participation of the Catalan artists Isabel Banal, Jordi Canudas, Pep Dardanyà, Domènec, Toni Giró and Pere Noguera. The purpose of the exhibition *Kunst & Zwalm. Identitat i conflicte* is to document the representations made in Zwalm by these artists.

### Signs of identity: art and conflict in public space. Eduardo Pérez Soler

What role should public art play in our time? To answer this question it is necessary first of all to refer to the conceptual re-examination of which artistic creation in public spaces has been the object, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century. Possibly the most notable transformation undergone by art in its public dimension during the last hundred years has been its gradual loss of monumentality. Throughout centuries the projects of public art have acquired a physically imposing presence and a durability that has turned them into milestones, into real points of reference, capable of giving a new meaning to a particular space. Starting with the historical avant-gardes, however, artists have tended to create works which are increasingly fragile, discreet and ephemeral. As opposed to the solidity and desire for permanency of traditional public art, the proposals of many contemporary creators have been characterised by their delicacy and fragility.

It cannot be denied that the twentieth century did give some examples of monumental art – the sculptures of certain Soviet constructivists, Mexican muralism, the art of European fascisms and later, the abstract monuments constructed around the world in the area of technocratic capitalism. It is also true, however, that the most influential artistic currents from the time of the historical avant-gardes have centred precisely on the criticism of traditional public art. The result has been the conformation of certain proposals which in their most radical aspect have become real tributes to insignificance. When lasting materials such as marble or bronze

– so much used in traditional art – were abandoned, the later public art in its more extreme examples has tended to intervene in a more subtle and discreet manner in the landscape to the point of becoming almost unnoticeable on many occasions.

It is obvious that the transformations in the material configuration of public art have been closely related to the changes in the objectives it has brought about itself. As we know very well, traditional public art as materialised in the monument had an essentially commemorative purpose; not in vain does the word “monument” come from the Latin *monumentum*, which means “to remember, preserve the memory of something”. The erection of large sculptures – busts or equestrian statues – and architectonic constructions – mausoleums or triumphal arches – which were intended to be everlasting, had as their objective to awaken in the memory of the spectators the existence of events or persons worthy of not being allowed to fall into oblivion. The logic of the traditional monument has been directed by the desire to give physical consistency to the memory, enabling the solidity of a material to guarantee the continuation of the memory that is, in essence, fleeting and incomprehensible.

In addition, the monument has had as an objective the creation of signs of identity which can be shared by the members of a certain group or community. Foundational acts, memorial gestures, glorious heroes, great dignitaries are the subjects that have been repeated in the different manifestations of public art throughout history. The choice of these subjects has never been gratuitous: in fact, the exaltation of actions and heroes by means of monumental art makes it possible to transmit identifiable values suitable for being accepted as particular to a group of individuals. Public art, therefore, forms part of the symbolic capital used to bind together different societies.

As a general rule, public art has been at the service of power, as the hegemonic groups have had control over public space and have governed the system of art. Following this line of reasoning, it is possible to state that the values diffused by monumental art upon which the identity is based have essentially been those of the hegemonic culture.

The re-examination to which public art has been submitted recently has been directed towards questioning its monumental nature. In fact, the loss of the material nobility of the monument, expressed at the beginning of this text, is one of the consequences of this re-examination. The work of many contemporary artists makes it possible to catch a glimpse of a criticism of the idea of art as a transmitter of the signs of identity of hegemonic groups. The most valuable present-day art questions precisely the wish to preserve the features of a collective memory outlined by the power. This does not mean by any means that the art of public dimension must renounce to its capacity of offering a service to the community, of promoting an imaginary collective in which the members of different groups can be recognised. Public creation should be entrusted with the task of structuring a space, even though it is ephemeral, with which the members of a community can feel themselves

identified, but in which they can also intervene in a critical or reflective manner. In order to be effective, the public work of art, will have to adopt the form of a stage of communicative relations which the spectators can remake critically. It is a question of recovering the political dimension of public space through artistic creation, at a time when this has become submitted to the banalizing effects of industry and culture. And this will only be possible by means of an artistic creation with which the spectator can feel an affinity and which, at the same time, offers sufficient critical elements for him to assume an active and reflective attitude towards the reality with which he is confronted.

The Catalan artists present at the public sculpture project *Kunst & Zwalm* made some proposals for generating signs of identity, but without leaving aside the contradictions of the social context into which they would be inserted. Their works recovered elements belonging to the area where they were made – the surroundings of Zwalm, a small rural town in Belgium where Flemish is spoken –, but without divesting them of their problematic and contradictory features. The result of this strategy was a number of works that both offered a sensation of closeness to the viewer and also compelled him to question the reality which was presented before his eyes.

Thus, for example, *Het idiomatische bos* by Toni Giró appeared as an attempt to use the elements of a shared imaginary unit with a critical purpose. In a wooded area near Zwalm, the artist made an installation inspired in both open-air museums and public footpaths. At the side of a path, Giró placed a signpost like those used in country roads which indicated the start of a route through the wood where several of his photographs had been arranged. On the signpost there were written popular Flemish proverbs, which were then represented visually in the different photographs distributed among the trees. Just like the works with proverbs that Giró has been doing these last years, the images represented the meaning of each proverb in a literal and not figurative way. This created absurd and sometimes comical situations. For example, in the photograph illustrating the phrase “lemand een spaak in het wirl steken” (to put obstacles in the way of someone’s work) a person can be seen trying to stop a cyclist with a stick, whereas in the image representing the phrase “de pijp aan Maerten geven” (to pass the inheritance down to the son) there is a man offering a pipe to a young boy. In this installation Toni Giró recovered elements of the Flemish oral tradition in order to reflect on the tendency, typical of our culture, to make any phenomenon worthy of being in a museum – even language itself – and convert it into an object of safe-keeping and at the same time, a public show.

Other artists chose to present an ironical vision of certain local signs of identity, with the wish to change them into elements of critical reflection. This is the case of Domènec, who was inspired by the very common custom in Flemish residential zones of using small reproductions of wooden cabins as mailboxes. In *Zwalm Mailbox Project* the artist replaced many of these mailboxes by scale model constructions of functionalist inspiration. The coldness of these small architectural works

designed by Domènec contrasted with the warm although frankly kitsch quality of the original mailboxes, emphasising the division between the tastes of a section of the European “petit bourgeoisie” – expressed in the rural fancy of the cabin – and the rationalist and technological projects of many modern architects.

A deeply rooted custom among the people living in the rural areas of Flanders is to place a kind of still life made with fresh vegetables just beside the front door of their houses. For this reason, it is not unusual to see curious ornamental compositions made of pumpkins at the front of many houses. Isabel Banal used just this custom as a starting point for creating *Stilleven/Bodegón*, a proposal which analyses the artistic potential of certain apparently harmless practices. The artist intervened in a very subtle way in some of the vegetable arrangements which the people of Zwalm had kept on making spontaneously at the entrance of their houses: she simply placed a cloth on its frame behind each of the different ornamental compositions. The artist placed the cloths facing the wall so that the back part of the frame was left visible, where the words *stilleven/bodegón* could be read, words which mean still life in Flemish and Spanish respectively. With this simple gesture, Isabel Banal tried to confer artistic dignity on a practice that lacks the prestige of the products of high culture, while at the same time relating it with the still life genre, one of the most important in the history of Flemish painting.

Following a different path, Jordi Canudas presented a proposal that only attained its full meaning with the direct implication of the inhabitants of Zwalm. Canudas made various cushions with the inscription “Hoofdkussens van Zwalm” (Cushions of Zwalm), which were distributed among the inhabitants for them to use in their homes for a week. By using these objects, the different people left their mark on them and they became loaded with memory. Later, the artist collected the cushions and tied them with ribbons to different trees during the time the exhibition lasted. By this action, Canudas placed in a public space a sequence of objects that for a time had formed part of the personal surroundings of different people, and at the same time he allowed the natural elements to continue modifying them. The result of this were works which bore witness to the actions of men and nature on things. In the end, Canudas' cushions became an ephemeral and modest monument: they were something like a receptacle which preserved the memory of simple human actions and natural elements.

The work of Pere Noguera, on the other hand, reviewed the mythology that surrounds the world of the countryside. His intervention, entitled *Allophane. El desenllaç no és el final*, placed emphasis on the symbolic value of maize, a cereal which dominates the Flemish landscape. Noguera’s installation consisted of some chairs covered in cloth dyed a vivid red, facing towards a field of maize. The chairs represented a kind of invitation to sit down and contemplate the changing countryside of Flanders, submitted to the cycles of the cultivation of the land. He completed the installation with a screen placed

inside a granary, on which you could see a series of images of ears of maize that covered the shape of ambiguous female sexes. Noguera’s work made reference to the multiple associations that agrarian communities have created between the fertility of the land and that of human sexuality, precisely at a time when industrialisation and technological-scientific development have alienated us from the rural imaginary collective.

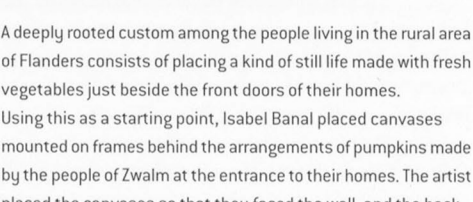
*Consolat 5.1* by Pep Dardanyà based its effectiveness on the recovery of certain conflictive aspects of Belgian history. For this presentation Dardanyà transformed an abandoned house in Rozebeke – a village situated in the municipal district of Zwalm – into the offices of a fictitious Consulate of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The sudden appearance of a diplomatic representation in a small rural town was certainly shocking. Fundamentally, Dadanyà wanted to emphasise the importance of Belgium’s colonial past, which had its moment during the reign of King Leopold, a period of great prosperity for the country owing to the riches coming from Africa. It goes without saying that this historical episode is a matter of pride for some Belgians and of shame for others. The proposals described here are a perfect example of a kind of art which, far from quietly celebrating the values of the hegemonic culture, tries to restore the political dimension of public space, in order to convert it into a point of confrontation of different visions of the world. Ideally, the function of public art at the present time is to direct itself towards the generation of spaces where subjectivities can meet, whether they are in agreement or opposition. Artistic creation has to take the form of a stage on which the subjects are able to generate shared signs of identity based on participation and reflection. It is a matter of reversing the logic of the traditional monument, based on the imposition of certain values by the cultural and economic elite, to favour instead a type of creation which makes it possible for the subjects to negotiate their visions of reality in a just way. It is a kind of creation which will have to stimulate changing and fleeting values, submitted to a constant process of redefinition. Within this logic, the role of the artist must consist of establishing the mechanisms which enable the individual to face his ideas and experiences concerning certain aspects of reality.

It must be pointed out that this is not defending a relational art based on the illusion that it is possible to operate on a reality from which social contradictions have been excluded. It is naïve to think that the task of the artist is to limit himself purely to “the invention of relations between subjects”, as Nicolas Bourriaud defends<sup>1</sup>. Art must go beyond pure will to establish a reified experience, represented in an illusory space from which all signs of conflict have been banished.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, here we present an artistic production orientated towards generating stages of agreement and disagreement which make possible complex processes of negotiation among the different subjects. Here we defend an artistic production intended to promote the creation of signs of identity that are shared but that do not hide the enormous contradictions which this task implies.

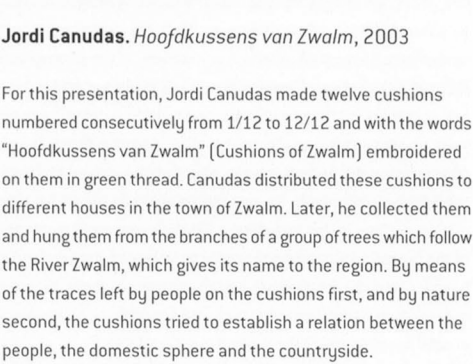
- Nicolas Bourriaud: *Esthétique relationelle*, Dijon, Le Presses du Réel, p.22.
- Not in vain have a large part of the relational presentations promoted by Bourriaud and his proselytes taken place in the context of the museum, a space in which real life, with all its contradictions, gives way to a second mystified and spectacularised second reality. As far as the immersion of the museum in the logic of the culture of the public show , José Luis Brea states: “The fantasy of a universal and authentic communication between spirits, that alienates the modern appearance of the museum fails at a second level: that this dream of immediacy and authenticity collapses in the irreversible emergency of the cultural industries – which irrevocably absorb the institution of the museum into its bosom.” (“El museo contemporáneo y la esfera pública”, in José Luis Brea: *La era postmedia. Acción comunicativa, prácticas (pos)artísticas y dispositivos neomediales*, salamanca, Centro de Arte de Salamanca, 2002, p.95).



**Isabel Banal. *Stilleven / Bodegón*, 2003**



**Jordi Canudas. *Hoofdkussens van Zwalm*, 2003**



**List of the cushions and the neighbours of Zwalm**  
**1/12** Luc Debrugne · **2/12** Moreels family · **3/12** Sebastian, Emile, Victor and Maria · **4/12** Luci · **5/12** Patrick’s home · **6/12** Catherine · **7/12** and **10/12** Inge Decuyperne · **8/12** Eric’s son · **9/12** Marc and Alice · **11/12** Karel Maryke · **12/12** Room in Kloosterhoeve