

Temptation

It was the perfect chance for me to give in to temptation. After our first overwhelming encounter, a different feeling came over me: curiosity, new perspectives and a slowly diminishing shyness. No, not dwindling respect, but something that felt quite natural: the aura which had kept me at a respectful distance on our first meeting made way for an attraction that drew me closer and closer. After a week, I took the plunge I tried to look around inconspicuously – where were those little men in uniform – and then, with a strange tingling sensation, I reached out and touched him.

Blinking in the dazzling light, I walked through the sun-drenched streets in euphoria. Merely touching him had purified me. A changed person, I returned to work in the dark and oppressive theatre.

On our next encounter, everything was different. The inscrutable almost ruthless smile on the face seemed to shift into an expression of recognition and the feet, one in front of the other, appeared hesitant, as though *he* were making the advances now. What had seemed unattainable became real, a bond through time and place. In all his beauty, power and staggering simplicity, he stood there before me, quite vulnerable.

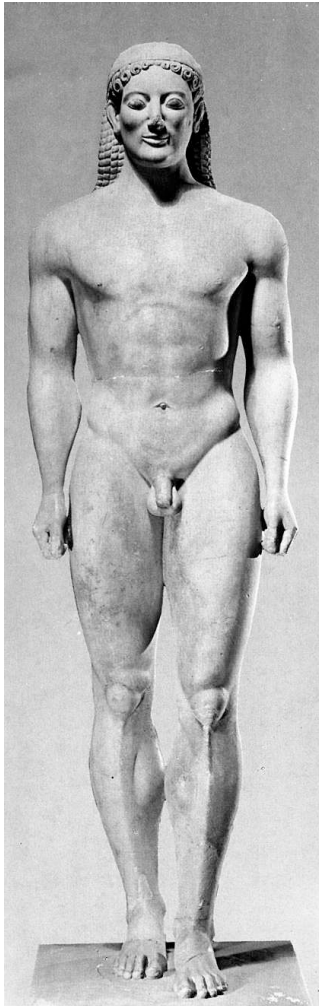
It was March 1995 and I was with Rudi van Dantzig in Athens, where we were working on his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. My fine task was to convert the immense monumental décor designed for Amsterdam to fit the minute, old-fashioned theatre. The stage was narrow and wedged in between a stone wall at the back as well. A massive monumental gate in the mansion, a focal point in the original design, was now reduced to the size of a sentry-box. The key word was improvisation. No spacious studios for scenery and props here, but a barely accessible cellar from which pieces of scenery were hauled up onto the middle of the stage by lift. Really convenient, especially when the ballet floor had to be taped, and everything was crammed into the narrow space in the wings. The dancers had to be caught in mid-flight by others, to avoid boring into the scenery as they went offstage. If you watched closely during performances, the Renaissance walls at the rear could be seen shifting slightly and the famous balcony quivering: if dancers breathed in tightly while changing sides, they could just pass one another between the scenery and the stone wall.

There was no lack of personnel but all communication was in Greek, leading to plenty of misunderstandings. And yet, I was in my element. All I can do in the Muziektheater in Amsterdam is give directions. Here, I had to get stuck in. All my minutely-drawn designs had been carried out rather roughly, so there was plenty to be done before the first night.

No matter how hectic things were, there was still time to play truant. And then, in the serene warmth of the sun's rays and clad only in a T-shirt – what a luxury in March – I would invariably walk over to the large museum, to be enticed by him again, 26 centuries old: The Kouros.

Our work came to an end after the premiere. We rented a car for a fortnight's trip through the Peloponnesos. It was a journey through antiquity, but the modern age thrusts itself upon you in no uncertain terms. Leaving Athens in the direction of Delphi, the route passes through Eleusis, a name that appeals to the imagination, but nowadays a stinking, churning expanse of petrochemical industry determines the view and the smell. Still, we soon left the bustle and commotion behind us. In early spring, the awakening landscape can still be enjoyed in peace, forgetting for a moment that all the lovely places will soon be overrun by coachloads of tourists. After a marvellous walk through a Delphi shrouded in silence, we took the ferry to the peninsula. Olive groves as far as the eye could see, row upon row of orange trees and winding lanes led us through the rolling hills to Olympia. Here I was in for a new surprise. No matter how familiar these places are from the images in your mind's eye, it is really weird how different it feels to step into them in real life. There is a wonderful synergy in Olympia between the ancient ruins in the open air and the light and spacious new museum. The scene evoked outside is complemented inside in a manner that takes your breath away. Bombarded by all manner of impressions and images, I needed time to take it all in.

The temple of Zeus, a ruin and a platform with the fallen columns lying strewn around. A perfect shape, as though laid out with intent. Slightly elongated, the fragments equally spaced apart, they bore a startling resemblance to a sculpture I had completed a year earlier: '*Antipodes*'. Once inside, I found myself in a long hall where the statues had been positioned along both walls, sculptures that had once adorned the tympana high up in the temple.



Statues never intended to be seen face to face were lying and standing there telling their story chiselled in stone. Never before had I seen the subtle drama that every single detail possessed. A direct confrontation with the sculptor straight out of the 5th Century before Christ. And the reconstruction of the sculptures – tumbled some twenty meters to the ground in an earthquake – and the missing parts, seemed to make direct contact with my own work. At moments like these, my hands are itching, but at the same time, there is a crushing effect in the realisation that it is no longer possible to spend so much time and attention on work like this nowadays. I would need ten lives. Our world is so much more complicated, even though the Greek tragedies, once staged in the splendid theatre at Epidauros that we visited on our way back to Athens, are still a source of inspiration in modern drama.

So there I was. Back in dismal old Vlissingen again. My head pounding, full of impressions and images. Around that time, I paid a visit to the water-tower at Oost-Souburg in Zeeland. A building that had recently been taken over by the Fine Arts Bureau in Vlissingen for exhibitions. Inside, right up at the top of the tower, I found something wondrous: the water reservoir is a round concrete space, 9 meters across. For access, a doorway has been hewn into the thick wall, and the remaining slab secured to the outside like a wide-open door. The magic of this space lies in different dimensions: the closed circular shape seems to defy gravity, with the floor line rounded off as well. There is no fixed visual focal point showing where the wall begins or ends. The more so, because the wall has been marked inimitably from the time it was filled with water. Some forty years of lime and iron oxide sediment cling to the wall, bathing it in a cloudlike yellow ochre and almost orange glow. It seems veiled in a kind of mist. Moreover, the infinite echo makes it impossible to hear one another speak.

Here, everything fell into place. Images from the journey began to project themselves in this stunningly beautiful space and I decided to make it the backdrop for a 30 meter long story, along the contour of the circular wall. I took photographs of the wall according to a precise system. Each negative overlapping slightly, in three levels. The bottom ring took in a small strip of the floor: the stage where the action would take place. Then, I set up a photo studio in my workplace with specific lighting, imagining the round space. It was impossible to work on location for long periods because it was actually freezing inside at the time. Over the next six weeks, the form and content began to take shape. The first stage was improvisation, while I thought only in terms of form and composition. No story as such, but a kind of score. Every attitude I took on, checking it in the mirror, had to be of such quality that it could be a sculpture itself. Naked, in white greasepaint against a white background, I ran back and forth endlessly between my camera with long focus lens and the place being filmed fifteen meters away. This was necessary because the camera had to be reset after every single shot. Every day, I



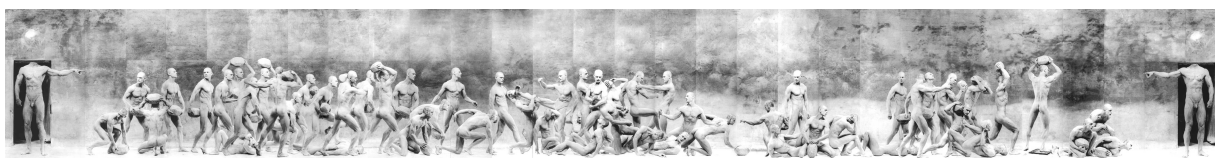
developed the negatives and made small prints on photo paper, cut them out and positioned them on a long strip of white paper, laid out on the floor in my bedroom. Each combination of the individually-made figures was a possible connection and after a few weeks of sliding and shifting and rearranging the material that was accumulating daily – sometimes blue with cold because I was already in bed and the heating had been off for hours – I decided to add an element, that would become a recurring theme and connection: the stone. As a result, the photo sessions were even more arduous, but it gave the work more

direction. Moreover, the 30 kilogram stone limited possibilities and ruled out overstated drama almost entirely.

In the original space, there was one means of escape from the treadmill. In my version, the circular shape was opened out into a long, flat wall and I had chosen to have the opening appear on the left and right, obstructed by a guard, a prime mover, a god? The stone became the aim, the mission of the drama. The stone had to be moved. From left to right. As soon as the figures reach the right side, they are sent back again. Out of all the hundreds of figures, only 60 would play a role on stage. The audition had come to an end. In the following weeks, using a surgeon's scalpel and a glue pen, I assembled a montage nearly 7 meters long, creating the basis for what would be developed into a screen print. So, in actual fact, the product was merely part of the process. In the same way that I had taken photos of the original space, I reproduced each little section – 90 in all – so that I could convert them to screen-print stencils later on, like large, black and white slides. Doubtful as to the feasibility of this project, I put away the montage for the time being.



At the end of 1996, I was awarded a prize for my entire oeuvre. It was presented by the regional Lions Club. I decided to put this money to use by carrying out part of the design in the intended screen print. More realistically now, I cut the life-sized version by half. It would still mean a total length of 15 meters. I chose one part, which meant one sixth of the original. It took me a good two months of long days to carry out the panel. From this I came to the conclusion that realising the whole of it – more than a year – was unrealistic for this technique.



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