

Menetekel

Journey through Turkey, 1993

We were scared out of our wits when we drove into the wire hung taut across the road, at 60km an hour. With only a few feeble tools at my disposal, I was soon under the VW van, trying to untangle the thick mass of wire that had wound itself around the front axle. I was mainly aware of how lucky we were not to have been beheaded. In an ordinary car the wire would have gone right through the windscreen.

"Pssst, pssst". Urchins with cropped hair, tanned and weather-beaten faces are staring at me brazenly, all the while making vehement smoking gestures. "Sigara, sigara". For the first time this trip, it drove me into a rage and, cursing, I went after the little goatherds as they disappeared into thin air in the vast, empty landscape.

Vlissingen (Flushing) 2002

The turn of the century. Old conflicts are escalating and new ones emerge. Iraq, Israel, Kosovo, 9-11, Al Qaeda, neo-conservatism, religious hysteria and managers on the make. In our damp little Low Country, hollow populism has come to settle in the political landscape, in the shape of Pim Fortuyn. Economic explosions in other parts of the world and the steady growth of the world population doubling once again, all contribute to an even speedier exhaustion and destruction of the earth beneath our feet. This disturbing era sows the seed for a sculpture in me:

A sculpture with a texture skin. A sculpture about language. Language as a symbol of that which distinguishes it from the rest: the human species. A stack of different letter signs that evolved all around the world. A Tower of Babel. The chaos that is world history and what that has achieved to date. A teeth-gnashing starting point?

Eastern Turkey, 1993

Across an endless undulating plain, bare and green, we slowly approach a monumental city wall, partly ruined, partly still intact. The wall, with its many towers and an impressive gate, unfolds before our very eyes in splendid shades of red and with black checked designs, bathed in muted sunshine.

Tense in anticipation of whether we'll be allowed to enter, my traveling companion and I draw closer to the ruined city of Ani, on the far eastern border with Armenia. In the official documents issued to us for our journey through Turkey, it says it is necessary to have a permit to visit Ani, that a guide is obligatory and that photography is not allowed. We are taking a gamble by starting our journey from the town of Kars and traveling without a permit, assuming that the situation as it was at the time of the Soviet Union is now a thing of the past. Besides, Armenia proclaimed itself an independent state not so long ago, though I am not sure what that means in this isolated part of the world. But our gamble pays off. The man at the gate shrugs his

shoulders after asking for our permit to no avail and lets us through on receipt of a large tip: our 50 km journey was not in vain.

France, Côte de Granit Rose, Perros-Guirec, 2002

Like a gigantic box of bricks upturned in the landscape, enormous granite blocks lie glistening in the watery sun that has just emerged. Deep purplish red from the moisture, in contrast to the dark green bushes and weeds that have found their way up high between the stones. Among them, rusty cranes point surreally toward the heavens. Somewhere in this strange world must be the quarry which will provide the material for the intended sculpture.

Blindly, I had driven along the north coast of Bretagne to this spot with a friend in his ancient lorry. The endless drizzle of rain made for a seamless flow of land and air. Water everywhere.

Ani, 1993

Beyond the gate, the entrance gives way to a large space. 'The City of a 1001 churches' is another name for this place. Comparable to cities like Constantinople, and situated on an important trade route between east and west, Ani was in its heyday around the year 1000, when it was the seat of the monarchs of the Armenian kingdom, with between 100,000 and 200,000 inhabitants. The accent is still on the churches. The empty space within the city limits is dominated by a handful of buildings, mainly churches and mosques, scattered across the plain. The walls do not quite encircle the city. The landscape seems to extend as far as the Armenian border without interruption. The only visual boundary consists of a series of wooden watchtowers, that stand guard threateningly over the city. These are from the Soviet era, when even looking in the direction of the border would lead to conflicts for visitors.

Together with Douwe, our canine fellow-traveller, I set out excitedly to discover this extraordinarily beautiful place. At the citadel, between the ruins of a castle, I grab Douwe by the tail in a reflex when he suddenly disappears through a hole in a wall. He is already dangling in mid-air when I pull back his entire weight hanging by his tail. Fear only really takes hold of me when I put my head through the hole and see a gaping void beneath me. At the bottom of the ravine, there is a meandering stream: the border between Armenia and Turkey and at the same time the city limits of Ani. The open side of the city turns out to be a treacherous illusion.

Perros-Guirec, 2002

Everything here is giant-sized. When my granite blocks are loaded onto our little lorry, the contrast is ludicrous. They are mere tiny stones to the enormous digger, while each block causes our vehicle to sink deeper on its springs. Now we have ventured into the precincts of the actual quarry with the Patron, everything other than the workmen is of the same

superhuman size. There's a man standing on a block several meters high, drilling holes with an equally meters-high stone drill. Further along, an oversized forklift truck is maneuvering with 15 ton blocks of stone. In front of us stands a robust hoisting-crane on the edge of a square crater dozens of meters across. In a marvelous design wrought by the large rectangular blocks that have left an irregular pattern with their imprint, and burnished like fire on one side by the emerging sun, the monumental deep red walls disappear into the ground. A sort of overwhelming architecture, but in the negative. This cubist cathedral points down into the depths.

Ani, 1993

Confusing: I am the only visitor walking through this no man's land. The view is framed all around by higher hills with snowfields in the distance. Eye to eye with the overpowering ancient buildings, centuries old, the desolation and the deathly hush is almost alarming. A beautiful, round church is half-collapsed in perfect symmetry, as though cut in half with a knife,. Further along, I enter the cathedral with some hesitation. There is no information whatsoever to be found about the accessibility of these buildings. Nothing on safety. No sign of a guard anywhere to be seen.

Confusing: inscriptions, frescoes and decorations tell of a flourishing and abundant culture, but the tranquility of this moment is in stark contrast to the history of this city. Besides natural disasters – a number of serious earthquakes have been described – there is the ruthless and bloody violence of human history within these city walls. Many tyrannies occurred from the 11th century onwards: Byzantine, Seljuk Turkish, Georgian, Kurd and the Mongolian invasion in 1237, when the entire population were murdered, after which the city lost almost everything and became a mere settlement within the city walls under local Turkish dynasties. Eventually, the area was abandoned entirely around the middle of the 17th century during the Ottoman Empire, when plundering and murdering by Kurd nomads made life impossible in the district.

Vlissingen, 2004

The row of pink granite blocks in the street in front of my house, which has served as a climbing frame for the neighbourhood children for some time now, is dwindling fast. Using a simple trestle and a chain hoist, I bring each new stone inside. It is an exciting process to see the sculpture stack I have in mind as it develops. The rough sides of the often jagged blocks of granite determine the construction and so, in turn, the structure of the sculpture. Each piece of the composition will acquire its own identity, with a skin of letters in the shape of an alphabet that came into existence somewhere in the world: the simplest way to avoid giving the letters a textual significance. Fifteen alphabets have been selected, chosen for their graphic quality. *"Mene mene tekel upharsin....., God has numbered the days of your kingdom, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting...."* Echoes through the workplace. The radio presenter introducing Handel's oratorio 'Belshazar'. It is about the announcement of the destruction of the Babylonian Empire by the Persians, as described in the Book of Daniel, in the

Bible. At that moment, the title of the sculpture I've been working on for two whole years, and referred to as Texture Sculpture until now, is handed to me on a silver salver: 'Menetekel'.

Internet, 2008

The rediscovery of Ani took place in the final quarter of the 19th century, after the region had been annexed by the Russian Empire. A thorough investigation and a start on conservation of the buildings were the first steps in tracing the history of this city. The archeologists were not granted much time, since the First World War and the subsequent Russian Revolution gave the Turks the chance to recapture the region, destroying virtually all the documents, photos and the contents of an improvised museum in Ani in the process. After that, the border with the Soviet Union was fixed along the current one with Armenia. In 1921, the Turkish authorities commanded a general to destroy Ani altogether, 'dotting the i' after the deportations and massacre of the Armenian population during the latter days of the Ottoman Empire. It is ironic that the word 'ani' – with no dot on the I – means 'memory' in Turkish. It is a miracle that this general had the insight to know that history could not be erased like that. He refused. The city was granted another respite when, during the regime of the Soviet Union, the entire border region was a forbidden area.

I realize my good fortune that my visit took place before the city fell under the discretion of the Turkish government. Shortly afterwards, a new offensive against the heritage of Ani began. The authorities undertook restoration of the city walls and several buildings, without any knowledge of or interest in their origins. The Armenian identity is often even denied. Besides this, surveillance was left to the provincial authorities in Kars who, in turn, delegated it to a village just beyond the city walls. The villagers soon discovered a lucrative trade, in which graves and other underground rooms were broken open, plundered and destroyed. On the other side of the border river, an enormous stone quarry was opened on Armenian territory. The stones used to build a new cathedral in Jerevan had to be of the same origin as its oldest predecessor: the cathedral in Ani. A number of immense dynamite explosions each day brought about demonstrable damage to the ruins of Ani. An article in The Los Angeles Times about these events led to great commotion, particularly within an extremely fanatical Armenian organization in America, who demanded the resignation of the reporter. To this very day, there seems to be no end to the violence surrounding this city.

Vlissingen, 2005

The seasons come and go. In the meantime, the sculpture in the form of a human figure is upright. For now, each part is written upon in black felt-tipped pen, as though tattooed with lettering. Wearing waterproof gear and warm clothing underneath – it's winter – I work my way around the sculpture day in, day out, chiseling out the minute shapes. The last part – summer now – is the head. I chose the Greek alphabet for this part, by virtue of its simplicity. I do not want to tamper with the expressive shape of the face too rigorously. Using a tiny mill grinder on a flexible drill shaft, I carve a groove along the black lines forming the letters. At the same time, water flows out of a tube onto the stone, to enable cutting. After the grinding, the granite around

the letter-shape is hewn away with a small chisel, leaving the letter behind in relief. As I step back to view the work, something quite unforeseen is revealed. The water has colored the head a deep purplish-red, flowing out over the rest of the sculpture. The sculpture seems to have turned deep red in shame.

Gertjan Evenhuis, Vlissingen 2008