Monument of Sugar

AN INTERVIEW WITH LONNIE VAN BRUMMELEN AND SIEBREN DE HAAN
BY CHRISTOPHE GALLOIS

Lonnie van Brummeleen and Siebren de Haan, Monument of Sugar, 2006-2007
Production still. Courtesy of the artists
Christophe Gallois: *Monument of Sugar* takes as point of departure the complex nature of sugar trade between Europe and other countries, resulting from the European Union’s subsidy policy. Having discovered that European sugar happens to be cheaper outside the EU than within its borders and that a large amount of its production is exported to other parts of the world, you decided to investigate the trade between Europe and Nigeria, supposedly one of the main areas of distribution, and to inverse the flow by buying sugar there and shipping it back to Europe. In order to bypass the trade barriers, you imagined turning this bulk sugar into an artwork. Do you see this project as the continuity of other of your works that deal with the notion of frontier, such as the film *Grossraum* and the publication *The Formal Trajectory*?

**Siebren de Haan**: For a long time artistic production seemed almost synonymous with a subversive potential to transgress. In the current days of capitalist transgression, violating regulations or crossing borders no longer seem effective strategies to propose an alternative view of the world. Most of us have become aware that life, and art, cannot escape being institutionalised and commodified. What can art still mean under these circumstances? Is encapsulation a given which we have to take into account? We imagine that it is still possible to give a counterweight, without excluding oneself by escapist oblivion or idle subversion. Aesthetics have a specific potential to disclose and renegotiate existing imperatives and to explore hidden leeways in the prevailing order. Robert Smithson stated: “artistic freedom lies in the awareness of the limitations present everywhere.” Exploring the boundaries of our institutionalised world was a starting point for both *Grossraum* and *Monument of Sugar*.

**Lonnie van Brummelen**: Being Europeans, we experience that simultaneous forces of transgression and restriction paralyse the different domains of life. At the same time that politics strives for worldwide emancipation, democracy and a green, sustainable economy, capital escapes the expenses of this enlightened heritage, and outsources its production to countries with less demanding, more flexible governments. Emblematic of the current schizophrenia is Europe’s dealing with borders. Why, on the one hand, does Europe so strictly guard its borders, and, on the other, is not facing its cultural relativism? “Fortress Europe” is closing off a domain, but what is it that we, Europeans, are so proud of that it needs to be protected?

These were some of the initial questions that led to *Grossraum* and *The Formal Trajectory*, a film and a publication which formally explore the outer borders of Europe. The silent 35mm film *Grossraum* traces the landscape around three border locations, in a visual language that is derived from painting. The geopolitical structure of the borderlands is treated in the film as a formal tableau of colour, texture, movement and mise en scène. Long overviews show the divisions, and slow panoramas cut through the layers of the border landscape. European borderlands are military areas and are not allowed to be filmed or photographed. The publication *The Formal Trajectory* depicts the long and harrowing permission procedures, which preceded *Grossraum*’s film recordings.

**SdH**: *Monument of Sugar* investigates Europe’s sophisticated, more hidden boundaries that apply to trade. The film’s subtitle – *How to use artistic means to evade trade barriers* – summarises what the project is about. In Nigeria we eased sugar into sculptural blocks which allowed us to import the commodity levy free into Europe, classified under harmonised system code 9703, which applies to ‘all monuments and original artworks, irrespective of the material of which these are produced’.

**CG**: As for *Grossraum*, the notion of landscape is also very important in *Monument of Sugar*. The film contains many long, slow panoramic shots of the in-between places that you investigated, including harbours and transit areas. It seems that you explored, on the one hand, a tension between the landscape and the aesthetic dimension that this formal vocabulary implies, and on the other, the social and political aspect of the project. The subtitle of the film also reveals your will to position yourself at the intersection between aesthetics and politics.

**LvB**: *Monument of Sugar* indeed develops a tension between acting and contemplation, or politics and aesthetics, as you call it. A dialectical arrangement in fact characterises the whole project: two kinds of sugar blocks, a sculpture and a film, commodity versus artistic value, text and image. We tried to avoid the submission of images to a narrative by strictly separating the two: slowly running subtitles are intersected by relatively autonomous footage of production landscapes. These dialectics invite the viewer to navigate between two parallel dimensions and to explore the in-betweens.
Landscape has long functioned as exile. Artists, amongst others, were
drawn there when their culture had become dictated by blind con-
ventions. One can think of someone like Cézanne. In a time when
the Académie dedicated itself to a neoclassical perception of art based
on formal compositions and historical themes expressing moral vir-
tues, Cézanne preferred to depict the existing life, employing a coarse,
pasty style to fill his canvases. He exchanged Paris for a pastoral life
in the periphery. Although landscape has become more and more
politicised and commodified, it is still appealing to us as exile. While
our contemporary self-absorbed society inflicts the perspective of
nearness and radical closure, a panoramic point of view can disclose
spatial configurations of different domains relating to each other.

CG: *Monument of Sugar* combines a 16mm film with a floor instal-
luation composed of 304 sugar blocks. About half the blocks were
produced during your stay in Nigeria and bear the traces of the
transport by container ship. The original white surfaces are covered
with brown humidity stains and, in some cases, parts of the blocks
are missing. These features contrast with the minimalist aspect of
the original blocks. When I visited the exhibition, I really enjoyed
the experience of first encountering the floor installation which has
a very evocative power, before being told, through the film, the story
behind the sugar blocks. When you began the project, did you al-
ready know what the final form would be?

Sdh: We started from a kind of ambivalence about art as knowl-
edge production. We noticed that an increasing amount of research
projects are presented as artworks, even if they display little aware-
ness of their functioning in the realm of arts. Some people see the art
platform as the last beacon for free expression. To us, this does not
seem a proper motivation. Art isn’t just another stage. Every work
presented there has to face questions of its artistic necessity.

LvB: Having said that, *Monument of Sugar* resulted from discus-
sions we had, together and with our colleagues, about art and re-
search. Disputes arose: Is artistic research an effective strategy to
escape encapsulation by the art-market or will it become the ulti-
mate sellable object, easy to distribute, copy and store? Is the cur-
rent interest in artistic research a consequence of a morbid growing
administration of aesthetics?

Sdh: We imagined an inert material ‘thing’ in the non-place
of an art institution. A 16mm film disclosing the narrative of its
production would counter this enigmatic formal artefact. In the
narrative, the logic of the market economy would gradually be re-
placed by an artistic sense. But we had not expected encountering so
much diversion in Nigeria that we had to convert our goals. Tracing
European sugar in the harbours of Lagos turned out to be a mission
impossible. Nigerian import levies, profit margins, obligatory vita-
min A fortification and mood-dependent service charges exceeded
Europe’s export subsidies. Sugar turned out even more expensive
than in Europe. Eventually there was no other option than to open
up the logics of our conceptual framework and follow the organic
wires of the social fabric.

LvB: The sugar blocks we casted with much effort were seriously
weakened during their overseas transportation. When the blocks ar-
ived in Europe, they were almost impossible to extricate from their
packaging. At the first exhibit of the piece, we displayed the block
still in the brown stained paper in which they were shipped. They looked rather bric-a-brac, and not white, formal and ‘minimal’ as we had imagined.

**Sdh:** We had also not expected that it would be so difficult to document the populous streets of Lagos. Many Nigerians perceive photographic images as evidence that can be used against them. Gangs of area boys, who do not appreciate being visually recorded, control the public space. The police seem mainly interested in bribing. In the end, there were just a few possibilities to make film recordings: either shooting on quiet Sunday mornings, when half of the Nigerians were in church, or gathering support letters from high-ranked Nigerian officials, which was close to impossible, and shoot from a roof.

**Lvb:** So even though we did produce something sculptural and recorded some landscapes, we didn’t have much control during the process.

**Cg:** In the exhibition at Argos in summer 2007, *Monument of Sugar* was combined with a work by Lawrence Weiner, a statement that reads **1000 GERMAN MARKS WORTH MEDIUM BULK MATERIAL TRANSFERRED FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER**, 1969. Beyond the obvious link between the two works in terms of content, Weiner’s practice highlights very interesting aspects in your project. Firstly, there is a similar understanding of the position and circulation of art within society. The question of production is at the core of Weiner’s preoccupations. In *Monument of Sugar*, the practical development of the project is so integrated to the work that it becomes the work itself. Another common approach concerns the triangular relation artist/work/viewer. Unlike other artists who started to work with language in the sixties, Weiner’s statements have never taken the form of instructions: the work stands as what he names ‘an empirical reality’. I think there is a similar concern in *Monument of Sugar*, the installation concentrates on the development of a very practical project and, indirectly, raises social and political issues.

**Sdh:** Weiner’s renouncement of manipulation of material indirectly addresses the capitalist control of production and its exploitation of resources. The way he connects his reflections on the conditions of artistic practice to the worldly logics of trade, production and capital, has been very inspiring to us. His critique of the notion of authority, an important topic for many artists in the 1960s–1970s, has been widely digested. Nevertheless, this issue partly transformed itself in a veiled moral superiority. For example, an accepted engaged artistic strategy today is that artists don’t give instructions or set rules, but stage spectacles of inequality and intolerance, intervening as social workers that extinguish the fire when things go out of hand. This kind of role-reinforcement seems a bit too cynical and does not open up new perspectives. We admire Weiner for his consequent and precise countering of value judgments. His renegotiation of the triangular relation artist/work/viewer contributed to the emancipation of all groups involved. Today’s artistic practices are immersed in the crisis that conceptual frameworks have blurred.

**Lvb:** One can indeed say that in the sugar work the presentation of the ‘monument’ can be seen as something different than the final designation of the work. It could also be a prop or a catalyst. Our failed research could be the final product. Maybe it was our loss of control which in the end provided sufficient matter for conversation.