

### 1) Border-Square: a story about a possible European Monument:

I still remember the day when I set foot on the square for the first time. It was a sunny morning in February. The freezing cold and the sharp light made my eyes blink. The mirror-glass facades of the office buildings around the square reflected the deep blue sky filled with silver clouds. Here and there an airplane had left a white trace in the composition. The first things that struck me were the enormous tiles in travertine (three by three meters) that gave the square an almost classical inertness. It was as if a surreal perfect rectangle had landed in the middle of the chaotic urban landscape. A massive void of 900 by 40 meter that was cutting right through the neighbourhood, as a kind of liberating 'tabula rasa', which literally broke open the European institutions, and brought the intestines of those dark monsters into the light. From the immaculate surface an overwhelming calmness emanated. It almost seemed as if this pervasive 'clearness' questioned the blurry complexity, the suspicious opaqueness of the European Union itself. The square was at the same time strange and empty, free and tactile but above all filled with an unearthly beauty.

The initial idea for the square was surprisingly simple. The New York Times headline on January 10<sup>th</sup> 2019 described it as follows: 'Europe brings its borders to its centre'. In the hearth of European politics (the EU neighbourhood in Brussels) a square was created, which was itself no longer part of the European Union. This is how the limits of this territory automatically became the new borders of Europe. To achieve this, the square was expelled from the European legal space at the very moment of its realisation. In practice this meant that the European parliament ratified a law that declared the zone 'as not being subjected to European laws'. Thus the square became a sort of "juridical no-man's-land" that at first sight seemed to be the materialisation of Europe's outside; a sort of inverted façade.

In the first years after its construction the monument was surprisingly successful. For many entering this territory by literally stepping outside the law generated a sort of hilarious feeling of freedom, as if they had not only left the Union, but also the whole civilized world. I remember a friend of mine saying to me, after we visited the square together, "this is like going back to my most natural state of being". Entering the square, the laws that regulate our relations with the world suddenly disappeared, and what's left behind almost feels like absolute freedom. The delirious feelings which this experience aroused are difficult to understand if you haven't experienced them yourself. But one should know that in the first year after the opening of the monument, several people had to be carried away because they couldn't handle those emotions. So it must be of no surprise that the square became very soon a popular tourist attraction.

However, the interesting thing was that the monument did not offer us a face nor an identity, but rather a lack of those. Its power seemed not so much to be based on a materialisation of new borders, but rather on the localisation of Europe's outside. On the expression of something undefined one could say. There was nothing in the square that seemed to make a reference to something else. The paradox was that this monument erected to the glory of the Union, got its power of attraction precisely from the fact that it was not a part of that Union. The architect who conceived the project considered this as its strength. Only in later interviews would he admit that he never saw the assignment as the creation of a suitable face for a specific political construction such as the European Union, but rather as the design of life itself. According to him monumentality's biggest problem is that it only produces dead matter. At its best it tries to represent life but in the end always excludes it. With this project the architect aimed at coupling life to the monument, to create an architecture that would not represent life nor confine it, but that would simply be life itself.

On the morning of May 28<sup>th</sup> 2020 some tents suddenly appeared in the square. Three couples who were living illegally in the Union and five artists, had settled there during the night. Each group had its own motive for doing so. On the one hand, the illegal people hoped that their action would compel the European Union confer citizenship on them. The artists, on the other hand, were voluntary exiles. In the 'refugee' they recognized an

artistic figure that, through its uneasy position at the border of existence, causes life to burst out of its own limits; just like Helmholtz Watson who deliberately left the “Brave New World” in search for real life, somewhere on a dreary and inhospitable island.

It didn't take a lot of time before other illegal residents of the EU and other artists joined the original group. The Red Cross provided them with food and medicine (something the EU could not prevent due to international agreements) and slowly the square mutated into a real refugee camp right in the centre of the European neighbourhood. It was a strange view indeed. I remember seeing some news reels showing a colourful patchwork of tents right under the Berlaymont building. At one point it was said that there were more than two hundred residents on the square.

In addition to their daily routine activities, the exiles organized lectures, debates, performances and exhibitions on themes like European migration politics and the subversive possibilities of networking collectives within cultural production. Through those actions the monument originally conceived in honor of the Union, actually evolved into an accusation against it. It functioned like a mirror revealing that our ‘way of life’ is ‘built’ on denying a decent life to others, while at the same claiming the possibility of another life, a life that is more real.

During the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> of August of that same year, the European Union had a steel fence erected around the square in order to gain more control over the border crossings. From that day on nobody, except the people from the Red Cross, had the right to enter the monument. The borders of Europe became prison bars and the square became a cage. Initially life inside went on as before. Some artists conceived the shocking image of the fence as a usable weapon to reinforce their statement. So two days after its construction, a huge banner was attached to the steel fence ‘We R fine, it is you who R the prisoners’ was written on it. And that strong image of refugees behind a fence would indeed put things in motion. Shocked by the whole event, the international community suddenly woke up. Everywhere protests were organized and several world leaders urged the European Union to do something about the inhuman character of this situation. The Union rapidly realized that this whole thing was getting totally out of hand and that it was becoming an intolerable stain on its image. After one month that the fence was erected, the Union conferred the official European citizenship on the illegal people in the square, on the predictable condition that they would leave the cage at once. The result was spectacular, within three days all the new EU citizens had left the cage, even though some artists tried to convince them to stay in the name of the greater good. But they had left the union in the hope of returning one day, and now they could not achieve that goal.

After the exiles left, some artists still decided to stay anyhow to continue their collective experiments. The Union could do very little to prevent this, and resigned itself to it quite easily, because the international protest had faded away as soon as the expelled families were legalized. The European Union couldn't be blamed any more, since the artists voluntarily imprisoned themselves; they could leave the cage whenever they liked.

Initially the lectures and performances went on, and the artists continued to promote their vision of another possible world. But somehow their actions could never engender the same power as before. The voluntary life on the border seemed more and more to resemble an “empty pose”, now that it wasn't any longer linked to the concrete demands of people condemned to that border. The project was said to propose nothing more than some sort of “ontological utopia” that had completely lost touch with “real life”- precisely what the artists were so desperately searching for. Ultimately, the project collapsed into total irrelevance. Life in the cage became nothing more than an exhibitionistic spectacle: a caged jungle where the human being was shown as a savage and life in its most primal form. In 2022 three years after the construction of the monument, the last inhabitant of the cage died from severe pneumonia, having refused to be hospitalized. All the other inhabitants had already left by then. Today the only thing that is left of this unique architectural experiment is a botanic garden surrounded by a steel fence.