

## Since History Is Always Written by Men ...

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In March 2001 three works of art were set up in the city centre of Luxembourg as part of an exhibition aiming to examine the characteristics of Luxembourg society.<sup>i</sup> One of these works, Sanja Iveković's *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg*, took the shape of a large-scale installation inspired by the Monument du Souvenir, a memorial commemorating the soldiers killed in the two World Wars. This historic monument consists of a plinth supporting an obelisk, on top of which sits a statue of a woman commonly called 'Gëlle Fra', or 'Golden Lady'. Iveković's work triggered a controversy of unforeseen proportions; indeed, never before had an artistic intervention stirred such emotion in the country. In the following three months, ordinary citizens, politicians, public figures, patriotic organisations and war veterans voiced their anger at what they deemed a 'sacrilege' and an 'offence' against the national monument from which the artist's work had been inspired.<sup>ii</sup>

Hundreds of articles and letters to the editors were published in the local press, debates were staged on TV, public discussions and demonstrations were held. Some people demanded the immediate removal of the scandalous work, arguing that it 'threatened civil peace'<sup>iii</sup>, while others, in an eerie echo of history, vowed to 'tear it down with a steamroller'.<sup>iv</sup> The work furthermore prompted two parliamentary questions, several petitions and calls for various public officers to resign, most notably the Minister of Culture Erna Hennicot-Schoepges.

Despite calls for censorships the incriminated work remained in place until the end of the exhibition. As the "case" was unfolding, it therefore continued to stir a range of often confused emotions and attract widespread attention, while allowing the main protagonists in the controversy to manifest themselves publicly and express their views through the media. The countless reactions it triggered constitute a wealth of documentation that provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the role of contemporary public art in democratic societies. More surprisingly, it has also revealed the cracks in the country's largely idealised collective memory<sup>v</sup> as well as the changing power relations between politics and society in those years.<sup>vi</sup>

### From early concepts to seizing the right opportunity

Sanja Iveković's project effectively originated in the run-up to Manifesta 2, the itinerant European Biennial of Contemporary Art, which was held in Luxembourg in summer 1998. During her first visit of the premises the artist showed a keen interest in the Monument du Souvenir (ill. 1 and 2), which stands near the exhibition venue of Casino Luxembourg – Forum for Contemporary Art, the organiser of the event. Based on information gathered from tourist flyers and various publications aimed at wider audiences, she immediately suggested two projects. The first was to transfer the statue of the Golden Lady to a women's shelter for the time of the exhibition, the second consisted of leaving the statue on its pedestal but covering it in pink medical gauze and making it look pregnant. However, the idea of intervening directly on the monument was rapidly discarded after Emile Kriepps, the then president of the National War Veterans' Organisation, strongly advised against 'physically manipulating the Golden Lady' – all the while admitting that the artist's approach was interesting. Iveković therefore turned her attention to other projects she had developed for Manifesta 2 in collaboration with Fraenhaus Lëtzebuerg, a shelter for abused women, and the Luxembourg City History Museum. The illustration published in the catalogue of the biennial (ill. 3)<sup>vii</sup> as well as an unpublished photo(de)montage picturing the monument as an empty pedestal (ill. 4) nevertheless gave evidence of her initial ideas.

Two years later, the Luxembourg City History Museum staged the exhibition *Luxembourg, the Luxembourgers: Consensus and Bridled Passions*, as part of which it invited Casino Luxembourg to curate the contemporary arts section. Three artists were commissioned to work in the city's public spaces: Sylvie Blocher, Sanja Iveković and Silvio Wolf. It seemed only logical that Iveković should present a proposal for a monument with her own version of the Golden Lady, to be constructed on the terrace overlooking the Pétrusse Valley, opposite Casino Luxembourg and only a few steps from the Monument du Souvenir. Iveković's *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg*, Sylvie Blocher's *Men in Pink* and Silvio Wolf's *Gli angeli del tempo* were inaugurated on 27 March 2001, concurrently to the opening of the exhibition at the Luxembourg City History Museum. At that point several newspapers had published excerpts from the official press release, announcing that the Golden Lady 'gets a sister', soon nicknamed 'Golden Lady 2'. Nothing indicated the media battle that was to follow.

### The 'Golden Lady 2 Case'

In a matter of days editorialists got worked up and letters to the editors flooded the country's newsrooms. Straight away *Lady Rosa* was criticised as a 'revolting copy' of the Monument du Souvenir, a 'disgusting parody' of a national symbol.<sup>viii</sup> The artist was not only accused of lacking originality for having copied Claus Cito, who had designed both the monument and its decoration, but also of smearing the sculptor's reputation by inadvertently recalling to the public that he had transgressed the morals of his time when asking his lover to sit as model for the statue.

But more than anything else it was the inscriptions on the plinth of *Lady Rosa* that sparked public outrage. The words, written in capital letters on the four sides of the square construction, were harshly condemned as intolerable comments on a 'sacred and untouchable symbol': the words '*Kitsch*', '*Kultur*', '*Kunst*' and '*Kapital*', '*La Résistance*', '*La Justice*', '*La Liberté*' and '*L'Indépendance*' ('Kitsch', 'Culture', 'Art' and 'Capital', 'Resistance', 'Justice', 'Liberty' and 'Independence') as well as 'Whore', 'Bitch', 'Virgin' and 'Madonna', despite forming an integral part of the artist's work, were instantly perceived as an implicit critique of the Monument du Souvenir – despite the fact that different interpretations had been suggested from the outset. As a matter of fact, rather than denouncing the monument for fallen soldiers, *Lady Rosa* aimed to right a historic wrong by evoking the hardship endured by women in wars and their contribution to victory, away from the battlefield. More generally, Iveković's work highlighted the continuing ambivalence that characterises the status of women in Western societies. By representing a pregnant woman and giving her a name, the artist provided her figure of a becoming mother with an identity which, unlike the Allegory of Victory atop the Monument du Souvenir, wrests it from the realm of abstract, and hence indisputable, concepts. Similarly, the words at the base of the sculpture were borrowed from the symbolic vocabulary used to construct the image of women on the one hand (insult and sacralisation in English) and of peoples and nations on the other (social values in German, ideals in French).

The artist had also learned the lesson from her initial proposal for Manifesta 2: by creating a work that reiterated the historic monument instead of transforming it, her intervention had a clearly visible impact on the picturesque cityscape and, by way of a mirroring effect, opened up a space of critical and aesthetic reflection on the role of women at a time when the debate on emancipation in the country was rife.<sup>ix</sup> Alas, this discussion fell flat, since right from the start the organisers of the event were mostly concerned with fencing off violent attacks. This begs the question why the response was so violent. And why did the critics of the work consistently deny it any legitimacy? The answer to these questions is that by drawing attention to the Golden Lady at a point in the country's history when the monument was finally becoming an abstract reminder of long-gone events, Iveković vividly summoned up its 'censored' past – and did so with the tools of contemporary art.

### **The truncated memories of the Monument du Souvenir**

It appears that by 2001 few people were still familiar with or even cared for the history of the Golden Lady.<sup>x</sup> The Monument du Souvenir had been built to commemorate the Luxembourg legionnaires fighting in the ranks of the Entente Powers in the war against Germany. Although Germany had violated the Grand Duchy's neutrality by invading it in 1914, both the government and Grand Duchess Adélaïde remained in power throughout the war. This arrangement with the enemy effectively jeopardised the small country's future once the war was over, making rapprochement with France or Belgium indispensable if it hoped to survive as a sovereign nation. Backed mostly by the Socialist and liberal margins of society, the idea of a monument was launched in 1919 as a means to illustrate the political and economic reorientation of the country, which had been a member of the Zollverein, the German customs union, since 1842. However, this change in policy was not without conflict, attracting the opposition of the conservative Catholic majority of its citizens. It was not by coincidence, therefore, that both Grand Duchess Charlotte and the Bishop of Luxembourg failed to attend the inauguration ceremony of the Monument du Souvenir on 27 May 1923. Conservative circles publicly castigated the 'ethical abomination [...] of this figure of unspeakable nudity [...] which even as a bronze cast, remains an artistic atrocity'.<sup>xi</sup> Legend has it that the students of the Athénée, the gymnasium attached to the cathedral, were instructed to avoid walking past the Golden Lady for fear they would succumb to her sultry allure ...<sup>xii</sup>

In 1940 Germany once again occupied the Grand Duchy's in violation of its neutral status. On 21 October, amid protests from onlookers and students from the nearby gymnasium, dozens of whom were subsequently arrested and brutalised by the Gestapo, the Nazis took down the Golden Lady, which they saw as a symbol of the country's rapprochement with Germany's enemies. After the war, however, none of the war veterans' organisations ever publicly mentioned this significant incident, wherefore it was only much later that the myth of the Golden Lady as a sign of collective resistance against the Nazi occupant was born.<sup>xiii</sup> Luxembourgers abroad, on the other hand, soon identified with the statue, as witness a photograph from 1942 of a

miniature copy of the Monument du Souvenir parading in New York to draw attention to the oppression of the Luxembourgish people.<sup>xiv</sup>

After the liberation the plinth was reconstructed from its original stones and the plates commemorating the soldiers of the First World War were put back in place.<sup>xv</sup> But old resentments and disagreements between the recently founded war veterans' and resistance organisations, which were competing for official recognition and positions in post-war society, prevented a comprehensive reconstruction of the monument. The two bronze soldiers, for instance, were only found and restored to the plinth five years after the end of the war. As for the Golden Lady, fragments of the statue were exhibited at City Hall in May 1955 as part of the Semaine de la Résistance, a week-long event celebrating Luxembourg's resistance fighters, but disappeared soon after. Until 1981 one rumour had it that the Nazis had melted the statue to cast cannons ...<sup>xvi</sup> A compromise was eventually reached in 1958, one year after the proclamation of a general amnesty: the plinth was to be reconstructed according to original plans and allow for the obelisk to be added at a later stage.

Yet nothing happened until 1981, when the remains of the Golden Lady were 'rediscovered' under a stand of the municipal football grounds. Following renewed controversy, the statue was eventually reinstated on the obelisk thanks to extensive restoration works financed through a national subscription scheme, and was inaugurated for the second time on 23 June 1985. By that time, Luxembourg had undergone massive changes: as a result of the European integration process and the expansion of its banking sector, the country had prospered and become a respected actor on the international stage, its economic success attracting a significant number of foreign workers. This was also the time when Luxembourgish was declared the official national language. In other words, the 'return' of the Golden Lady coincided with a deep transformation of Luxembourg society. In terms of historic narratives, this translated into the consensual story of a country united in its fight against Nazi occupation – a view which also reflected the fact that, towards the end of the twentieth century, the small country was facing new, global challenges.

### **The end of the consensus and the return of controversy**

Sanja Iveković's *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg* unexpectedly challenged this consensus by exposing a weak spot in the national myth, built on a rather quaint image of society and monopolised by men, while simultaneously questioning the role of women in a world where simplistic antagonisms (resistant fighters versus Nazi collaborators, wife and mother versus whore, etc.) were fast running out of steam. By closing ranks and condemning Iveković's 'sleazy attack' against the Golden Lady, veterans and resistant fighters therefore merely highlighted the troubled history of their symbol and discredited their cause through verbal abuse riddled with chauvinistic, sexist and xenophobic undertones.<sup>xvii</sup>

Simultaneously, *Lady Rosa* acted as a catalyst of a simmering dispute which had been undermining Luxembourg's largest political party for quite some time. Many commentators have indeed suggested that the controversy around Iveković's work was merely a pretext for, or even fuelled by, the conservative wing of the Christian-Socialist Party in an attempt to weaken its progressive faction, to which the then Minister of Culture belonged. Whatever the reality of these claims, it is hardly a coincidence that the first parliamentary question trying to destabilise her was put forth by a member of her own party and that calls for her resignation subsisted long after the removal of the work.

Throughout the controversy, the critics of *Lady Rosa* moreover manifested a profound misunderstanding, if not total dismissal, of contemporary art, often formulated in a way that betrayed utter contempt. The artist, it appeared, was not only Croatian, but also a woman. To make matters worse, she produced a work which, in their eyes, had 'no aesthetic value' and was 'monumentally stupid', 'worthless and childish'.<sup>xviii</sup> The exhibition organisers in turn were called 'agents provocateurs', 'pseudo-intellectuals' and 'self-proclaimed experts'.<sup>xix</sup> In this context it must be said that, for the better part of the twentieth century, Luxembourg had remained on the margins of international artistic movements and had only recently come into contact with avant-garde contemporary practices. Few observers acknowledged that this situation was changing, as Casino Luxembourg – Forum for Contemporary Art, which had been established in March 1996, was gaining international recognition. Presumably, *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg* was therefore experienced as an aesthetic shock by many of its critics, for whom the notion that art could achieve something else than decorate living rooms or fill museums seemed simply inconceivable. They were all the more outraged by Iveković's 'affront' as it undermined their artistic convictions, and did so publicly.

**History continues ...**

While its feminist message was partly drowned out, *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg* nevertheless underlined the lack of debate on the condition of women in Luxembourg society and the general prevalence of patriarchal conceptions.<sup>xx</sup> Ironically, the work's fate after it was dismantled echoed that of its 'big sister': once removed from the public realm it was deposited in the backyard of a women's shelter for several years, before being "adopted" and transferred to the institute run by the organisation *Initiativ Liewensufank*, a collective campaigning for the improvement of birth conditions, where she became 'a silent witness to the confessions of pregnant women'.<sup>xxi</sup> Although she was now hidden from the public eye, *Lady Rosa* continued to cast her long shadow on various local debates on art and society for more than a decade. And while her appearances on the international stage went virtually unnoticed, the slightest of her movements in Luxembourg was diligently reported by the press: her presence on the cover of the catalogue accompanying Iveković's solo exhibition at *Fundació Antoni Tàpies* in Barcelona in 2007 and in a major exhibition at *Van Abbemuseum* in Eindhoven in 2008 was thus hardly commented on, but when the *Golden Lady* – opportunely rechristened 'Angel of Peace' – was hauled off to Shanghai, where she adorned the Luxembourg pavilion at the 2010 World Expo, she too was in the headlines again. Incidentally, the unthinkable thus became reality: as anticipated by Iveković's project for *Manifesta 2*, the obelisk of the *Monument du Souvenir* remained empty for over half a year. *Lady Rosa* was again in the spotlight in 2011, when *Initiativ Liewensufank* announced that she had been moved to the storage facilities at *Mudam*. On this occasion the public also learned that she would be exhibited at *Mudam* in 2012<sup>xxii</sup> after a stint at New York's *MoMA*, both exhibitions providing an opportunity to retrace the work's history and assess its renewed significance in light of current events.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### ... and memory evolves

The *Monument du Souvenir*, with its statue of the *Golden Lady*, is a place of remembrance. But memory, both individual and collective, is selective and malleable, as witness the tormented history of *Claus Cito's* work and the often contradictory interpretations it has elicited and which, albeit indirectly, point to the fact that the collective subconscious and latent transformations of Luxembourg society are not merely the result of noble sentiments and glorious actions. Contemporary art, in turn, is a place of debate: it 'calls forth', in the etymological sense of the word 'provocation'. Maybe this explains why it is closely linked to the idea of democracy, providing us with an opportunity to see society as it is rather than what we would like it to be. By reappropriating the *Golden Lady* and merging a highly evocative figure – a gold-coloured, pregnant woman whose name refers to a revolutionary feminist – with powerful words – the kind of which, for better or for worse, lie at the heart of our social values – *Sanja Iveković* provoked a violent and passionate debate around a place of remembrance and thereby revealed the darker aspects of Luxembourg society. To do so, she temporarily enhanced the cityscape of the Grand Duchy's capital with a monument dedicated to women – a monument it is still lacking today.

<sup>i</sup> *Luxembourg, les Luxembourgeois. Consensus et passions bridées*, ed. Corina Mersch, exh. cat. (Luxembourg: Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg, 2001).

<sup>ii</sup> André Heiderscheid, 'Schafft den Unfug weg!', *Luxemburger Wort*, 19 April 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Comité de coordination Non à la Gëlle Fra 2, 'Lettre ouverte à l'adresse de M. Jean-Claude Juncker, premier ministre, président du gouvernement', *Luxemburger Wort*, 10 May 2001. Similarly, editorialist Jos Telen evoked a 'Culture War' (*Tageblatt*, 12 April 2001), while Rosch Kriepe asked the Prime Minister to take a stand on what he termed a 'civil war' ('XXXXX', *Journal*, 25 May 2001) and Henri Etienne considered that 'the country [was] divided and confused' ('XXXXX', *Luxemburger Wort*, 30 May 2001).

<sup>iv</sup> Léon Morheng, 'XXXXX', *Luxemburger Wort*, 14 April 2001. The author here alludes to the method used by the Nazis to tear down the *Golden Lady* in 1940. The destruction of *Lady Rosa* is a recurring image in the views expressed in the press, as witness Raymond Schaus's suggestion that 'the police would be well inspired to keep watch over this cardboard abomination so as to avoid the worst case scenario (not so long ago trains were derailed, bridges were blown up ...)' ('XXXXX', *Journal*, 28/29 April 2001).

<sup>v</sup> See Robert Thill, "'D'Gëlle Fra" oder die Sakralisierung unserer Vergangenheit', *Tageblatt*, 4 May 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> See Romain Hilgert, *d'Lëtzebuurger Land*, 21 February 2008: 'Once again we are witnessing what could already be observed eight years ago in the debate around *Sanja Iveković's* sculpture *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg*: the clerical right can

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vociferate all it wants – no one is listening anymore. Maybe Luxembourg society has emancipated itself, maybe it has merely become more liberal.’

<sup>vii</sup> *Manifesta 2, Biennale européenne d’art contemporain, Luxembourg*, exh. cat. (Luxembourg: Agence luxembourgeoise d’action culturelle and Casino Luxembourg – Forum d’art contemporain, 1998).

<sup>viii</sup> Comité de l’Union nationale des passeurs, filiiéristes et résistants luxembourgeois (UPAFIL), **XXXXXX**, *Luxemburger Wort*, 28 April 2001. [UPAFIL is a collective of frontier runners who helped Luxembourg conscripts to the German Wehrmacht flee the country.]

<sup>ix</sup> These issues were discussed in the first press article focusing on *Lady Rosa*. See Colette Mart, ‘Luxemburg hat zwei goldene Frauen’, *Journal*, 5 April 2001.

<sup>x</sup> As late as 2010, long after the controversy around *Lady Rosa* and the renewed interest in the Golden Lady it had spurred, the history of the Monument du Souvenir remained largely unknown: ‘Who knows that the monument was built in honour of Luxembourgish volunteer fighters in the First World War, that Luxembourg’s citizens paid twice to finance it, that the Golden Lady looks different today from 1923?’ Michel Wolter, ‘D’Gëlle Fra ass erëm do’, in *D’Gëlle Fra, Käerjeng, 11.12.10-23.01.11*, exh. cat. (Luxembourg: Agence luxembourgeoise d’action culturelle, 2010), 9.

<sup>xi</sup> Quoted in Catherine Lorent, ‘Die Rezeption der Gëlle Fra von 1923 bis heute’, in *D’Gëlle Fra, Käerjeng, 11.12.10-23.01.11*, 85.

<sup>xii</sup> See Jay Schiltz, ‘Madame, ech wollt iech froën...’, *Tageblatt*, 2 May 2001.

<sup>xiii</sup> It was not until 1963 that the destruction of the Golden Lady by the Nazis was timidly mentioned in history books, and only after its reconstruction in 1985 did the statue become a rallying symbol for rival patriotic and war veterans’ organisations. See Pia Oppel, ‘“Gëlle Fra” und “Lady Rosa”. Eine erinnerungskulturelle Kontroverse in Luxemburg zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts’ (MA diss., Philologische, Philosophische und Wirtschafts- und Verhaltenswissenschaftliche Fakultät der Albert-Ludwig-Universität, Freiburg i. Br., WS 2008/2009).

<sup>xiv</sup> See Benoît Majerus, ‘D’Gëlle Fra’, in *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg* (Luxembourg: Editions Saint-Paul, 2008), **XX–XX**.

<sup>xv</sup> For a detailed account see Jean Reitz, ‘L’histoire mouvementée de la Gëlle Fra’, in *D’Gëlle Fra, Käerjeng, 11.12.10-23.01.11*, 29–66.

<sup>xvi</sup> Josy Braun, ‘D’Gëlle Fra 40 Jahre lang versteckt gehalten! Warum?’, *Tageblatt*, 22 June 1981.

<sup>xvii</sup> See a.o. the anonymous article ‘Starker kroatischer Tobak’, *Journal*, 14–15 April 2001.

<sup>xviii</sup> See various articles in *Luxemburger Wort*, 7 and 14 July 2001.

<sup>xix</sup> See a.o. articles in *Luxemburger Wort*, 14 July 2011, and Heiderscheid, op. cit.

<sup>xx</sup> Cid-Femmes, Déi Léng Fraën, Déi Gréng Fraën, Femmes en Détresse, Femmes Socialistes, Fraëforum and Union des Femmes Luxembourgeoises, ‘Wenn nun wir Frauen auch das Wort ergreifen’, *Tageblatt*, 5 May 2001.

<sup>xxi</sup> Salomé Jeko, ‘Bye bye Lady Rosa’, *Le Quotidien*, 15 January 2011.

<sup>xxii</sup> A short video clip of her displacement can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1aqDZ4sD3g> (accessed 10 November 2011).

<sup>xxiii</sup> See a.o. Marie-Laure Rolland, ‘Lady Rosa à Luxembourg’, *Luxemburger Wort*, 24 January 2011, and Enrico Lunghi, ‘L’histoire (de l’art), la mémoire, la politique, le rêve...’, *kulturissimo*, no. 95, 10 February 2011, 15, <http://www.kulturissimo.lu/publication/2011/février> (accessed 10 November 2011).