

Catching fish with anger or frustration inside of you is not possible. The notion that every fisherman becomes a philosopher at some point exists for a reason: looking out over the horizon there is nothing but your thoughts to keep you entertained. What manner of thoughts might occupy the head of the metal fisherman that looks out over the port of Rotterdam? This fisherman is a sculpture, designed and executed by Ger C. Bout, without commission or subsidy. Fishing and art have something in common: both are a process that requires time, a scarce commodity in this hurried age. In my opinion this fisherman is an anachronism; he sits motionless while ships pass him by in a harbor in which human labor has largely been replaced by machines. But to come to rest there, this fisherman had to take a trip around the world – at least in his thoughts.

The idea for the project was formed years earlier in France. Bout was visiting Dunkirk for an art project. Like Rotterdam, Dunkirk is aimed at worlds across the seas. Bout was walking along the inhospitable coastline, with the steel mills on one side and a seawall made of man-sized cube-shaped blocks that separates the land from the sea on the other. That industrial coast possesses a scale that man can hardly relate to. Looking at those huge blocks and the equally vast expanse of water, the idea was born. Imagine a human figure for whom these dimensions are real; a hundred meter tall fisherman, with a three hundred meter rod, to whom the blocks are but grains of sand. A figure that could be a connection, not just in spirit but physically as well, between the coasts on either side of the water.

A fisherman standing a hundred meter tall would be visible from across the channel, from Dover. A plan was conceptualised, but it was in no way practical; first comes the idea, then the finances, as Bout sees it. He started to tell people about his idea, among them the director of a Finnish cultural centre he met in Antwerp. She was interested and facilitated the contact with the organization of Helsinki Capital of Culture. Bout hoped that Helsinki could be the home port of his fisherman even though, in the Finnish plans, it had shrunk by a factor of ten; from a hundred to ten meter.

Whereas fishing chiefly requires concentration and silence, Bout was tasked with a different task: he estimates five hundred conferences took place and that he flew to Finland some twenty times. Art in public space depends on goodwill, money, permits, a long breath – the patience of a fisherman. In the end the hurdles proved to be too great; it fell through. After some time however, the solution was found to be far closer to home. Bout related the plan for the fisherman to the Rotterdam politician Dominic Schrijer who wondered why Bout was looking so far from home. And so the plan entered a new fase: for the fisherman to be placed in Rotterdam-Charlois.

For the production of the work Bout approached the metalwork program at the Albeda school in Rotterdam-Heijplaat, whose students still get jobs as welders even in such an automated port as Rotterdam. He asked the students to help him shape the fisherman, from the ground up – starting with the shoe (which was used in the quest for new funders), then the leg, followed by the torso and finally the head. Step by step. In 2006 the body parts were assembled in a posture approved by a physiotherapist. And so, the fisherman ended up by the waterfront among the row of trees, which has for generations provided shelter to fishermen who come to benefit from the tremendous wealth of both fresh- and salt water fish. Just as sculptures outside always derive their meaning from their location, Bout's fisherman gradually began to symbolize the human factor of the harbor, the human trade craft. Hundreds of technical students can point to the sculpture and say "I helped build that".

And thus the fisherman, weighing four to five tons, came from the French North Sea, via the Finnish Baltic Sea, and ended up in the port of Rotterdam. Time has already taken a hold of his appearance; he is made of Corten steel. Steel is the material of the port industry. It's what freighters are made of. Corten steel is mainly known from the art world; the core remains hard while the outer layer oxidizes, giving it patina. Just as statues cast in bronze carry the marks of their modelling process, statues made of Corten steel possess the patina of an industrial production process. It gives the fisherman a weathered appearance while he sits there, looking out over the horizon, the port industry, the gate to the world, where the ships, but also the fish, come from all over the world. Motionless, in thought.

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