Over the course of two residency periods, Remco Roes and two artist colleagues, Sara Bomans and Tom Lambeens, worked on a series of spatial installations in a thirteenth-century chapel in the small Belgian city of Borgloon. During this process, they also visited a host of local churches, all of which suffer from shrinking rural congregations and thus face questions surrounding their future purpose. The artistic process inside the deconsecrated Gasthuis chapel ran parallel to the exploration of the local churches, and the new installations also mirrored the morphology of those found religious environments.

As they worked, a kind of reversal took place with regard to the spatial configurations of the objects that Roes found in these local churches. Roes, who is himself not religious in the traditional sense of the word, registered a banality of the everyday objects that stood in contrast to the what he saw as the sacred aura of the church (e.g., bricolage under the altar, chaotic spatial arrangements of flowers and other peripheral artifacts). At the same time, it began to seem that the secular installations Roes constructed in the Gasthuis chapel could be considered a form of praying, in a secular manner, by positioning precisely these banal artifacts in a carefully composed constellation, as if attempting, perhaps, to inject them with some form of spiritual meaning.

The photographs we include here show both the found environments of the local churches as well as the working processes and final installations in the chapel. They have been arranged in such a way that the morphology of the found environment and the man-made environment tells a story of its own. We see how combinations of objects are read as peripheral within the sacred environment of the churches. It is precisely from working with this peripheral everyday clutter that the installations in the Gasthuis chapel attempt to attain something like an alternate (secular?) sacrality.

The interventions of Bomans, Lambeens, and Roes in the Gasthuis chapel implicitly pose the question of how such a Catholic or post-Catholic environment can still generate spiritual meanings, be those meanings religious or nonreligious. To address this question, we must first reconsider the definition of meaning. A very interesting book in this respect is Mark Johnson’s The Meaning of the Body, which argues that the creation of meaning should not be reduced to a purely cerebral cognitive act, transcending the embodied experience of the actual environment in which we live. For Johnson, meaning can only emerge from the ongoing and interactive relationship between our mind, body, and environment:

Meaning is embodied. It arises through embodied organism-environment interactions in which significant patterns are marked within the flow of experience. Meaning emerges as we engage the pervasive qualities of situations and note distinctions that make sense of our experience and carry it forward. The meaning of something is its connections to past, present, and future experiences, actual or possible.
Johnson's remarks on meaning pose an inspiring challenge to scholars who operate in the field of cultural studies, and they form a strong appeal to broaden the scope and tools of research in the humanities. Psychological, sociological, and even philosophical or theological concepts are not sufficient to provide an extensive analysis of how a cultural environment interacts with our human, embodied consciousness. These concepts have to be supplemented by a series of other meaningful aspects of experience, ranging from perceptions, movements, and sensations to memories, fantasies, emotions, and feelings.

Art provides an important instrument for such an embodied thinking. Or as Johnson puts it, with a reference to a very appropriate metaphor from Psalms 118:22, "I seek to bring aesthetics into the center of human meaning. Aesthetics is the stone that was cast out by philosophers who thought they were constructing large metaphysical, epistemological, and logical monuments. On my view, however, the very stone that was cast out shall become the cornerstone of a theory of meaning."

The purpose of this essay—in its original sense, from the French verb essayer, which means to try, to attempt—is to experiment with embodied thinking, to use aesthetics, in the broadest sense of the word, as an instrument. We seek to explore a series of complex and interacting meaningful experiences that are evoked by these Catholic or post-Catholic environments. To do this, we combine different image spaces and artistic media: the photographs of existing chapels and churches; the photographs of the installations by Bomans, Lambreens, and Rees; and the imagery of some religious poems by Kris Pint that resonate with elements of the visual artwork.

The images of the poems and the photographs create a kind of meshwork environment that consists of different lines of perceptions, emotions, and associations, all of which interlace or juxtapose with one another. This generates a kind of synesthetic effect, whereby different lines are activated simultaneously during the process of viewing and reading.

Of course, the very nature of this meshwork is that it evades a comprehensive analysis or the distinct separation of all the meaningful elements into different categories. A lot of resonances are at work simultaneously, and that is precisely why such a hybrid approach has value in describing the overall experience of a physical and mental environment. However, as a guide, there are some nodes that we would like to touch upon briefly, before letting the environment of the essay speak for itself.

The visual perception of the photographs is complemented with other senses as evoked by words. For example, we see a photograph of a church interior and then read words that make us consider the taste of the holy wafer or the sounds of church chants. Different perceptual and sonorous qualities, in changing modalities, repeat themselves throughout the essay. We experience these rhythmical patterns in the sequence of the photographs. For example, there is a visual rhythm to the angles, curves, and directions of the artifacts—the legs of a chair; put upside down in a storage room, echo the candlesticks on the altar; the divine rays of a bas-relief echo and reoccur in the composition of the small wooden beams of the installation. But these rhythmical patterns can also be found in the interaction between the photographs and the poems. The kneeling man in the blue overalls is linked to the memory of the kneeling girl; the movement of the whirlpool in one of the poems is evoked by the spiral form of the split rice, a spiral that is also repeated in the torsion of the plastic bottle filled with milk, which in its turn also connects to the surreal image of the plastic doll in a poem. These perceptions are not only linked to other perceptions but also to feelings—feelings of loss and longing, of desperation and desire—and those feelings are part of an overall gradual movement, again both in the poems and the photographs, from chaos to a form of order, or rather, to an ordered, contained form of chaos. This tension is expressed by the Sufi metaphor of the whirlpool, which contrasts with the balance of the plumb line.

There are also some intertextual and inter-visual references to biblical imaginary—for example, to Jacob's ladder, as described in Genesis 28:10–17, to the scene of the gardener and the empty tomb in John 20:11–18, or to mystical writing and theology concerning transubstantiation, an important topic of
the Council of Trent. Obviously, the artifacts and the poems inevitably express more abstract concepts and meanings: they invite us to reflect, for example, on the ambiguities that mark our dealings with our environment—the ambiguity between presence and absence, immanence and transcendence, materialism and idealism. Like the bow-without-arrow that points to the sky and the arrow-head shape of the plummet, without bow, that points to the ground with the adamantine sternness of its leaden weight, it is as if together these images are the visual expression of two different, mutually exclusive worldviews, each insufficient to grasp human experience but coming together in an unsolvable spiritual paradox.

But the point we want to make, following Johnson, is that such a conceptual paradox is itself only the result of embodied experiences—of moving up or down, of missing something. As Johnson puts it: “Human spirituality is embodied.” It is this embodied spirituality we want to explore here, on a preconceptual, sensuous level. This essay is an exercise in artistic research that wants to demonstrate how aesthetic tools (i.e., installations, photographs, and poems) can be used as a form of embodied thinking about the presence of Christian environments and artifacts in the secular context of contemporary Western Europe.

We also want to show the interrelatedness of all the different experiences, thoughts, and emotions still evoked by these environments. Different lines are brought together in this physical and mental religious environment. Together, the photographs and the poems create a constellation of different meaningful experiences. Depending on one’s perspective, one can read and look at them as prayers in a secular environment or as secular spiritual exercises in a Christian context.


3 Ibid., 208.

4 Ibid., 14.
For whom…

It was a story that I often heard: one of the first times my parents took me to church, hearing the ringing of the consecration bells I am told to have said, very loud, thinking it was just a telephone, or just being naughty: Hello!

I do not recall it myself: the only thing I do remember is the taste of my first Holy Wafer, given to me in secret: I knew I wasn't allowed to have one for years to come but I suppose my mother was not feeling too well that day, so sitting on her lap I had my first clandestine communion, a tender transgression, the surreal transubstantiation of bread into a black telephone.

Proposition

In the church choir there was a man who sang with a loud, thunderous voice, it was rumored that on occasion, he would make indecent proposals to the elderly ladies but they were not afraid of him, he did no harm, and in his own way he feared the Lord, combed his black-dyed hair and went to fetch another Hosanna, Hosanna from the cellar of his chest.

Every Sunday, I sat right behind him, letting the Holy Wafer melt in my mouth touching it with my tongue, feeling how boring these Sunday Masses were sitting alone beside my parents. My brothers were already old enough to be atheists, I was old enough to be terrified by the thought I was not.
I did not like you, Beloved, not since that first time in which you showed me that you were a sick sparrow, scaring me by suddenly flying away.

There are all these ways – ugly as provincial roads with their generic megastores – in which you seek to instruct me, show me how your cold mercy is merciless as the fluorescent tube-light of my soul shining in the trains I take in the morning to get to work.

And by the way, what were you thinking when you left me halfway Jakob’s ladder as some dimwitted shaman, not knowing whether he is descending or ascending the moment his drawing hand touches the wall of the cave and falls through just like that time when you made me fall in love with some Italian girl, I never spoke to her, never touched her or perhaps only once, very lightly and by accident, in an overcrowded bus.

One day, she showed up with her sister and mother, just after Sunday Mass: they all lit a candle and briefly knelted before the statue of the Virgin, her blood and flesh wrapped in the blue jeans of heaven, a camp epiphany of lust and longing, turning me into some mediocre and daft Dante inventing Beatrice.

So clearly, even after all those years, you can imagine I do not like the way these archangels bend over to each other to whisper about it behind my back, their gold glow under a tent of plastic foliage so safe and silent and untouchable in their infinite golden Russian steppe.

I do not like to talk to you about it on the phone, because each time you tell me the same story all over again, of how, when Mary came to your grave you played hard to get – ‘Do not hold on to me’ – yet.
Noli me tangere 3

The sweetest thing about love
are its storms, Hadewijch wrote
and yes, indeed, such mystic weather
is much to be preferred to what Melville
called 'the damp, drizzly November in my soul'
And yes, Hadewijch experienced that
kind of weather too.
It can last for quite some time,
overcast, no wind and very chilly.

It makes you feel like one of
these plants in their plastic pots
desperate chlorophyll mystics
supposed to cheer things up
a bit, but they miss the breeze,
the smell of rotting autumn leaves

Milk

I never had visions, only once
or twice something what you could
call at best a religious dream
in one of them, you were in a chapel
breastfeeding an ugly plastic doll -
and when I awoke,
I felt relieved, at peace

Trent

The priest who married us
was very down to earth,
informing his audience that
there was more to life than
Fressen, Ficken und Fernsehen
and then went on to turn wine and bread
into a 'visible form of an invisible grace'
into the blood and flesh of Christ, that was
'truly, really, substantially contained
under the species of those
sensible things' – or as he called
his performance -
the trick of the table

The church roof is leaking, water is
gathered in plastic buckets
I love the resilience of these
sensible things, the way
they change their stubborn ugliness
into some useful or useless act
or speech act:
I do, yes, I do

Aim low

I remember you standing against a
pillar in an empty, dimly lit church
like some she-Saint-Sebastian
One for the road

It was told that two farmers on their way home from a feast where stopped at a crossroad near the house were we live an invisible force made it impossible for them to move just the kind of trick some pagan Celtic goddess would play but the Mother of God was kind enough to act as a substitute and gave permission for their feet to walk away

A little field chapel was built, more than a century ago, to thank the Virgin, and when a drunk driver crashed it some years ago they rebuilt it, and gave the keys to a man in a wheelchair who had broken his knee, not knowing yet that cancer was hiding beneath his pain and that in a few months he would be dead – this all happened months before you were born, so the only thing we could say to this childless dying man, was that you were on your way

Trivia

One night, no force did freeze my uncle's steps when he passed my parents' house, crossed the provincial road, and all those other streets on his quite long walk to the canal there were three things that kept my uncle alive, he once had said: the first was singing silently, the second was the love for his animals, his sheeps, his chickens, his ducks; the third one I forgot. One day he told my father the inner singing had stopped
The very shallow water pool was like a mirror before the abbey church disappearing in the soft summer breeze. Soon they would forbid it but that day nobody stopped you to take off your tiny shoes and walk around in the water ankle deep in the tangerine glow of a setting sun – Do not hold on to me, daddy; why would I even want to, you could not drown here, you are safe.

Leave the drowning to me to my uncle, to a stone, to all those that were not given permission to enter Noah’s arc –

A Sufi story tells that only they, drowning in the whirlpools of the flood, in the chaos of submersion, experienced you in a way Noah in all his dogmatic wisdom could not.

Thank you for showing me how you can drown in shallow happiness too, you just have to take care, like a gardener, of all those sensible, perishable things that turn your body into a love letter, writing I am really, truly, Yours