

## WANDERING IN WHAT REMAINS: EXPLORING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

REMCO ROES (POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW AT THE FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND ARTS, HASSELT UNIVERSITY)  
AND KRIS PINT (ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND ARTS, HASSELT UNIVERSITY)

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

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, Lambeens, and Roes; 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, by way of example, 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 spilt 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 imagery—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 adamant 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.

1 All photographs in this piece: Remco Roes and Kristof Vrancken, Borgloon, Belgium, 2011–2016, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artists.

2 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 265.

3 *Ibid.*, 208.

4 *Ibid.*, 14.



*For whom...*

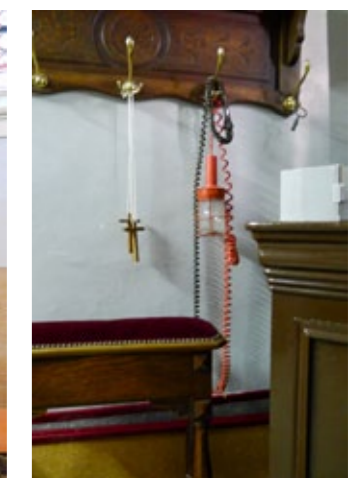
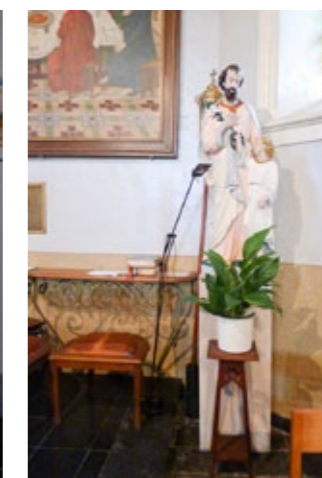
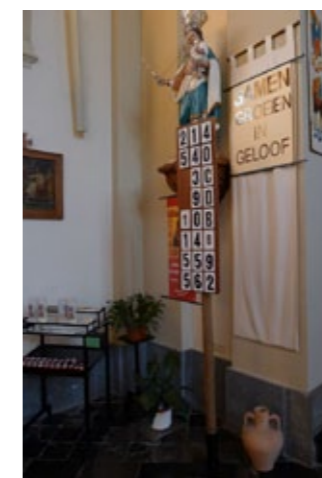
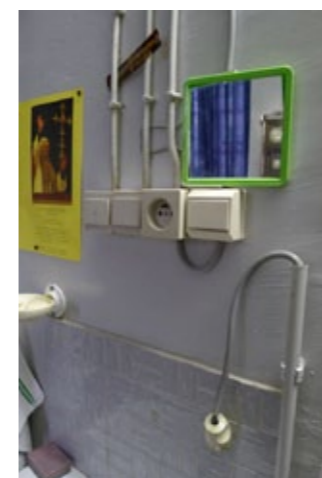
It was a story that I often heard:  
one of the first times my parents  
took me to church, hearing  
the ringing of the consecration bells  
I am told to have said, very loud,  
thinking it was just a telephone,  
or just being naughty:  
Hello!

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.



*Noli me tangere 1*

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

*Noli me tangere 2*

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

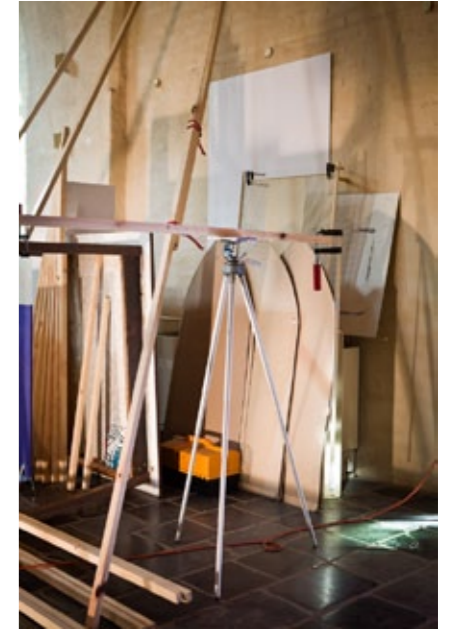
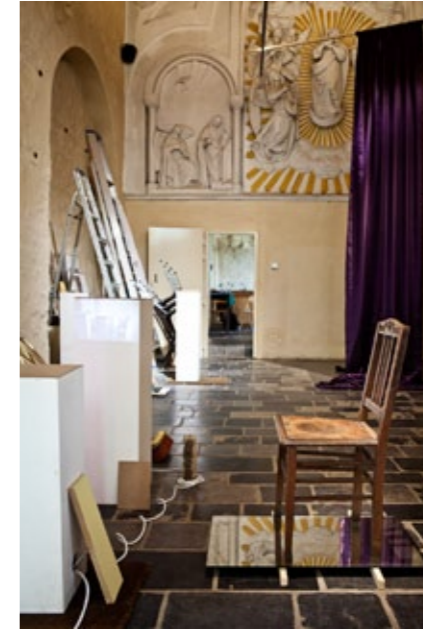
just like that time  
when you made me fall  
in love with some Italian girl,  
I never spoke to her, never touched her  
or perhaps only once, very lightly  
and by accident, in an overcrowded bus.

One day, she showed up with her sister  
and mother, just after Sunday Mass:  
they all lit a candle and  
briefly kneeled 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

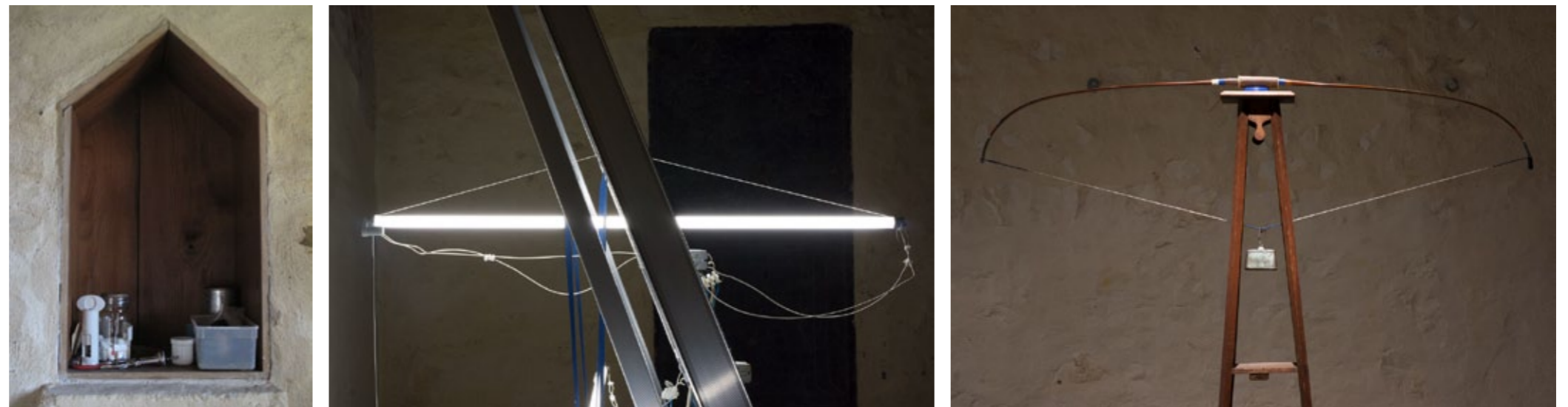
A little field chapel was built,  
more than a century ago,  
to thank the Virgin, and when a drunk  
driver crashed it some years ago  
they rebuilt it, and gave the keys  
to a man in a wheelchair who had  
broken his knee, not knowing yet  
that cancer was hiding beneath  
his pain and that in a few 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



*Noli me tangere 4*

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

