

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?

Extract from an interview by Bernke Klein Zandvoort

How would you describe the connection between autobiography and your work?

For me it is important that all my work is honest to myself in what I do. For my work to be wholehearted it has to come from my own reflection and thus connects with my own life and experiences. Because of this it can be seen that my work is quite autobiographic, and for me this is connected with the feminist phrase 'The personal is political'. If my work is not connected to myself, I feel it can not be honest, sincere and wholehearted. If dis-connected it would just become an a set of abstract ideas and concepts. It is my own personal experience that I want to connect and open up with others. When I collaborate with others, I always answer the questions I ask people, so there is no hierarchy and so that just as much of myself is embedded within my work.

I'm not fond of quoting the bible, but when I looked for the meaning of 'secularisation' I discovered its meaning in Dutch is related to the word 'verwereldlijking' - the process of involving the mundane. In the Bible St John expresses the exact oppoiste: 'Don't loose your heart to the world or things in the world. When someone loves the mundane, loving his Father is not in him'.

I am very interested by the fact your work is centred around 'mundane phenomena' that also entangles religion through the media and rhetoric that you use. How would you describe your relationship with this passage from the bible and your relationship with religion?

I find the meaning of secularisation and the mundane very problematic with this quotation from the Bible. For me, the mundane is fundamental to our 'greater feelings' or 'something greater beyond ourselves'. Personally, I don't believe in any God, but I feel that we are connected as humans in a greater sense by the fact we all care, are concerned, love and are passionate about 'things'. Of course, the quotation from the Bible alludes 'things' towards a material reality, but in English, unlike the Dutch and German 'dingen', I find it very important that 'things' is inseparable from immaterial concepts and experiences. In my own work, I want to open up a space for dialogue and connection by expressing and exploring what is most important to people in their own lives. In the last two years, I have started most of my work by asking collaborators the question: 'What are the 5 most important things for you?' Often that can be anything from family, relationships, sex or a hobby to work or a cup of coffee. Considering what is most important to us connects our most inner selves with other people through our own lived experiences. I believe religion complicates this relationship by suggesting that what is meaningful has to be shared to a higher power, rather than focusing on the fact we all care, love and are passionate about 'something' as human beings. For this reason I identify myself far greater with lines of Humanism rather than religion.

I feel if we focus upon what is important to us as people, an open space of spirituality and meaningfulness is created. However I feel it is vital to explore and question the structures of religion through ritual, music and aesthetics which retain an important expression of Spirituality through togetherness, collective experience, and understanding.

A lot of the titles of your works are questions. Why is this?

As an artist, I want to communicate and connect with people by opening dialogue with others. Questions became a fundamental starting point for me because I could communicate with other people openly, instead of making statements or insisting that I have answers. In the works of mine that are titled with questions, questions are used to create a collective and individual experience of reflection. If you ask a question, you are making something universal in which anyone can begin to connect with their experiences and lives. For me, questions are about giving people respect, that their thoughts and feelings are just as important, which is very different from a lot of religious history where structurally they exist by giving answers. Today, very few people are asked questions. Politicians do not ask us questions but try and give us answers, making democracy very little about listening. Over the last year I have seen a change within my work, where I am not only asking questions, but combining questions and answers with the aim of creating dialogue that can lead to better understanding of how we act.

How did the work 'Can We Help You?' come into being?

In 'Can we help you?' I was thinking about the structures of prayer and what it is to turn to another person or power beyond oneself. For a long time, I had been interested in the writings of Iris Murdoch, and felt a connection to her questioning of how a secular or atheist society can keep a positive practise of prayer. Prayer is essentially a reflection with oneself and acknowledging what we need. During that time I was going through personal difficulties and naturally started to create prayer music, questioning whether music itself could provide that space for reflection with ourselves beyond a concept of God. I started to think about my experience singing collectively in a church choir, and that our singing felt not directed to 'God' but to the congregation. The words in spiritual music often become lost, and instead provide an open space of meditation and state of prayer. Often I felt like we were offering the congregation a service of help, as if to say indirectly - 'Can We Help You?' Of course the concept of 'help' is complex, but I feel this question underlines a fundamental aspect of all spheres of life, from a school, museum or a town hall.

The piece of music, thus became a song which I felt could be sung anywhere, and would reflect a dialogue between an institution and the people who use it. The music is very open, and I abstracted the words to only the vowels of the question 'Can We Help You?' - only ending the piece of music with the question spoken directly. I was asked to perform this piece of music for the city hall in Rotterdam, where 7 different choirs from different social backgrounds sang the piece of music to those who walked past. The performance in Rotterdam thus characterised very much the relationship of a city hall between the people who work there and for whom their work is for. In the future the piece would be re-defined by who it is sung by and its context if performed in a hospital, church or embassy, but remains a universal prayer and space for anyone who would come to hear it.

Some articles I read about you, mention that you are a Quaker. Do you feel it is an important piece of information to include concerning you and your work?

I have been connected to the Quakers since I was 14 years old. It is a very important part of my own personal history, after making a decision that I no longer wanted to be apart of the Anglican Church. The Quakers are a group I feel very comfortable with and feel connected to through my own desires and natural attributes as a person. Quakerism exists by the fact that there are no set creeds or beliefs. Instead, people are united by a common set of principles such as equality, justice, compassion and simplicity. The Quakers exist through no hierarchy and work together through consensus. For a long time the Quakers have existed for me

personally as a spiritual form of humanism and an organisation that acts more out of political and social concern. People are united by a common expression of coming together, to sit for an hour of sharing and silence. If articles mention the fact I am connected to the Quakers it is only expressing a true fact. The structures of Quakerism have naturally become interwoven with my work so it is important. It is no different from articles that state I am gay, British, male, feminist and born in 1988 - I am a person.

If you could give religion a new role, independent from its history and from what it is today, what would be your vision?

I think the most important legacy from religion is that of spirituality and shared experience, both individually and collectively. For me spirituality is acknowledging my most personal feelings and emotions. It expresses what is most sacred and precious both with ourselves and beyond. For me the practices of ritual, music, prayer and being together are vital for us today and can enrich all spheres of life, because spirituality is central. If we treat people and things as numbers and commodities we are becoming far less human, and this is what is the catastrophe a lot of education, political life and capitalism. I believe that it is not a matter of creating 'a new church or religion', but thinking about a sacred and more holistic way of thinking which can enrich all spheres of life from education to public services. For me, being an artist creates a space outside of the history and structures of religion, and I can share my own spirituality personally with others, whether that is working in a museum or school canteen.