

Building a Body of Belief (Kate Pickering)

Props: Round black obsidian mirror (echoing the JVE logo) and hagstone worn as pendants, aspergillum, (small branch from a local tree), aspersorium (ceramic hand built pot filled with water from the nearby river), bread.

Costume: White cotton shirt, black skirt, bare feet.

On walls: printed images of 3 moments in previous blessing (entrance hall; stairs; doorway threshold).

Read rite of blessing text whilst holding aspersorium as people assemble:

River Maas, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power. We use your gift of water, which you have offered as a rich symbol of grace. At the very dawn of creation, your spirit breathed, making an end of separation and a new beginning of goodness. We are baptised in the waters of the Maas, we are anointed in your spirit. You sustain us and give us abundance. May your waters be the fountain of the newness of life and the font of grace. We ask this in honour of the great cycles of water, which make us all weather-bodies. Amen.

Intro

Let us come together to echo a blessing, in and for this building of bodies, at the start of our gathering for ‘Murmuring Matter.’ This ritual re-enactment will occur in three parts. Here, we will root into the ground, finding an orientation, a mapping of the mythic and material foundations beneath our feet. Secondly, I invite you to spiral with me around the pillar and onto the staircase to liquify our fixity, and finally, at the threshold, on the limen, we will reorient, our body-worlds held in the structure of the building-body, but porously open to the more-than-building-body world beyond.

Orientation

Here we are inside the belly of the building-body. I invite you now to pay attention to your body, within this crowd, a body of bodies that assemble into the shape of the building, a building-body blessed by the church and sanctified as a sacred space for the arts. The New Catholic Bible tells us:

‘You are no longer strangers and foreigners. Rather, you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ Through him the entire structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.’ Eph. 19-22 (The New Catholic Bible)

The Message interprets this passage as:

'Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day - a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it.' Eph. 19-22 (The Message)

Your body, a container, enclosed in the container of the crowd, the bodies that make up the living container of the building. Pay attention now to your breath, to the rise and fall of your chest. Pay attention to the shared air around you, the atmosphere, the atmospherics of the building-body in which you are enclosed. Can you hear the building's breath? Can you hear the echo through time of a slow inhalation as the skeleton came together and flesh covered bones? And then what seems like stasis, tension holding all the parts together, but is actually a long, low, drawn out sigh, an exhalation, of many years duration? Here we stand within the belly, a busy productive community that works in the microbial guts of the building. And now pay attention to your own gut-brain, a gut within a gut. Think with your belly now. What does it tell you? Is it calm or is it set on edge? Is it churning or empty, tumbling air echoing through its own arched halls? Does it need soothing, does it need to be stabilised with a foundation story?

[Hold up the bread, twist a piece off and hold it up]

The Biblical redemption story is ritually represented as a round edible wafer or fragment of bread that is placed inside the mouth during communion. It makes the cosmos a morsel that is easy to digest. This small yet weighty nourishment hosts a word-thing: the God-man cornerstone of the ur-story (an origin story). The morsel is eaten by the believer in a ritual of both remembrance and identification. It settles like a stone in the belly.

I invite you to share in this offering, take a morsel and pass it on.

[I take a small piece and eat it.]

Here, together, as we eat this bread we consume a stony word-thing. We become what we eat; we are enclosed within the believing body. As the bread passes through our mouths from an exterior thriving with bacteria, it breaks down and dissolves, working its way across the intestinal membrane, and into the busy microbiome of the gut, entering the blood stream through the liver and towards the brain stem and cerebral matter. The immanent-transcendent digested and absorbed. What do we swallow here, what word-things do we ingest that make meaning settle inside us?

Minerals, conducted by water, also flow through the transmuting matter of the body, a shifting liquid lithic. The body converts the mineral calcium into bone. This inner structure enables us to stand, to walk, to be grounded, resisting collapse. The lithic surrounds us, shifts slowly through and within us. It forms a ground both inside and out.

The etymology of religion is the Latin *re-ligare* – to re-bind, re-connect, revealing its role in binding a people to a cosmology, to a stable story-world. The narration of myth, or *muthos* for the Greeks, is the telling of a story that reveals the cosmos as it truly is, revealing the origin of the world and humankind. The myth story stabilises us, is, for Jean-Luc Nancy: ‘a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it.’ Myths, of which the ur-story is one form, provide an orientation – an authorized way of being a human in the world - a foundation upon which a community is built, revealing: ‘the intimate being of a community.’ The narration of myth anchors the believer within the shifting seas of experience. The orienting structure of the myth is not an abstraction, it forms embodied experience. It is felt in the gut.

Pay attention now to the gravity that pushes you down, to the weight you can feel in your legs. Beneath your feet feel the hardness of the floor, and beneath that see with your mind’s eye the basement. Travel further now down into the concrete foundations, shot through with steel for enduring stability, foundation piles that sink down through the topsoil, subsoil, rubble and rock fragments into the stable zone. But the foundations of this building are not only made of steel and concrete, foundations are made of ideas and beliefs and plans. Foundations materialise a community, make matter into the shape of a body of belief.

Before this community existed, it was already a site for making. There was a municipal works repository here, rows of bricks, pipes, slabs and other construction materials stacked neatly in a mass shrine to industry and civic development. Prior to that it was a field, a breeding ground for horses. Since this site opened in 1961, the Netherlands has become one of the most secular countries in the world, with atheism outstripping theism, but Maastricht has remained determinedly Catholic.¹ In the Netherlands as a whole, agnosticism and ietism, the feeling that there must be something, predominate. This certainty-uncertainty is felt in the body as vacillation, the spiralling vortices of not-knowing, of what might be, of what could be imagined.

Limburg’s history is shot through with Catholicism but this sacred space covers a longer history of worship in the area. Before Christianity inflected the identity of the region, the people of Maastricht made different offerings here at other shrines, to the Celtic gods and goddesses, to Roman deities, to Mithras, born from a rock, a globe in one hand, a thunderbolt in the other. A panoply of polytheism, a multiplicity of imaginaries, laying as strata below our feet.

However, below the Jekerkwartier are stream deposits from the Holocene, this interglacial period in a long ice age. Close nearby are the more ancient strata from the Pleistocene, where we find shallow marine limestone and river deposits. The limestone is comprised of skeletal fragments of shells, fossils and other marine life. Our foundations sit above porous rock that was once a shifting, unstable, watery milieu, one that was not fixed but in flux.

¹ In 2010–2014, 69.8% of the population of Maastricht regarded themselves as religious. 60.4% of the total population stated an affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church, 13.9% attend a ceremony at least once a month.

In medieval Europe the church is symbolised by a ship bearing souls across life's passage, navigating the dangerous waters of temptation. The ship is an ark, a place of sanctuary and survival. The mast is emblematic of the cross, and the hull is termed the 'nave' - the space for worship where congregants gather. The etymology of 'Nave' is Latin for Navis- ship. The vaulted ceilings of churches and cathedrals, their lofty heights echoed here at the academie, mimic the water tight interior of the hull, turned upside down, appearing also as a skeletal rib basket, a body-building container.

I invite you now to follow me and see our bodies as we rotate around the pillar, mirroring the movement of the elliptical black disc of the academie logo, steps into a process of change. Find a place on the staircase, looking up, or looking down.

[I lead group around pillar in a spiralling shape and onto the stairs, I take a position at the top of the staircase.]

Disorientation

Sara Ahmed speaks of a sense of orientation arising when we have our bearings, when we know where we are. Familiar objects form our anchor points. For Ahmed, to be oriented is to: 'turn toward certain objects, those that help us find our way.' These orientations enable us to feel at home. Our beliefs result from and produce these orientations, belief becomes a repetitive, reinforcing habit and an orienting habituation within a 'religious habitus.' To live within a believing community creates bodily sensations of being grounded. The stories we tell about our histories and beliefs stabilise us.

On the 13th May 1948,² falling on the day of Saint Servatius, (SER VAT EEUS) patron saint of the city of Maastricht, religious and secular authorities sign a charter establishing an arts academie, established on the belief that Catholicism should find visual form here in Limburg. Every seven years, a procession of Saint Servatius's (SER VAT EEUS) relics is made around the city, beginning with a drink from the spring that leapt into life where the saint struck his crozier on the ground. The academie initially meets in the Sepulchrine church and Bonnefanten convent. Seven students begin on the 1st October, based on their drawing, modelling and knowledge of art, religion and literature, but it is art as a reflection of the times that forms the ethos of the school, and the students modest first motto is 'making do', a play on Jan van Eyck's motto 'As best I/ Eyck can' (als ick (eyck) can). In his opening speech for the academie, Reverend Leo W. Linssen states that the academie will seek to spread the Catholic light of Divine and human beauty across the Netherlands.

² 13th May 1948. The day of saint Servaas/Saint Servatius, patron saint of the city of Maastricht. In hagiographies (the lives of the saints) fact and fiction blend to make him miracle in man form. Servatius founded several early churches both in Tongeren and Maastricht where his tomb is located at the Basilica of Saint Servaas. On his death, the angels covered him in heavenly cloths. The Noodkist, the Chest of Distress, containing his relics, is walked around the city every seven years for the pilgrimage of the relics, beginning with a drink from the spring that sprang into life where Servaas struck his crozier on the ground. The relics, housed in ornate reliquaries and held aloft, are enveloped in ceremony, sacred objects invested with divine presence and power, a focal point for encountering and sustaining belief through proximity to greatness.

If faith might be thought of as a locational strategy, orienting the believer toward certain objects, images and texts, then disorientation is a loss of this identification, a dislocation from the normative anchor points of identity. The etymology of convert is to turn about or around; to not have faith is to be 'lost,' to have it and then lose it is to be 'fallen.' And yet, the unpleasant sensations of disorientation, of losing one's bearing, opens up new pathways leading us askance, down unfamiliar roads that have not yet been trodden.

On 14th January 1961, the academie opens. A crowd of dignitaries, including the bishop of Roermond, (HRURGH MOND) come together for ceremonial rituals where the civic and religious blend. In his speech, Dr. J.A.J. Peters frames the artist as seer, as a visionary that reveals the truth of man and world, that creates a world in its own right. Creative use of material and sense of poetic vision are one. Such statements echo the quasi-spiritual calling of the artist as both priest and mystic, enmeshing immanent world and transcendent experience.

Monseigneur (or Monsignor) Roncken, his mitre like two flames from a candle, is followed by two clergymen in flowing white vestments as he proceeds through each room in the academie. He holds aloft his aspergillum – a brush or branch used for blessing – in an act of anointing the building-body with Holy Water. It is performative rituals such as this that for Richard Schechner are 'laden with power' and have the potential to bind people to their communities and anchor them to an identity. The Monseigneur descends the steps of this staircase, the holy water spirals out into the air, dispersing into the atmosphere, falling to the floor. The water cleanses and sanctifies the building-body, authorising it as correct, as Catholic, as Holy and set apart for good works. It dissolves the line between art school and church.

Built to house the growing academie, the current building was designed by the architect Frits P.J. Peutz (PEE UTZ). Peutz is as distinguished for his traditional church designs as for his secular modernism, both forming temples to different bodies of belief. However, Peutz designs this building based on the utopian principles of modernism, but the site is reminiscent of a monastery with its cloistered corridors around a central courtyard. Yet, over time Catholicism retreats from the light to become another layer in the strata that underpins the site. The building-body forms a serene white spaceship that appears to have transcended the body, a different kind of church: austere, elegant, signalling a forward movement towards a future mankind. The making of art in this purified site, clean of invulnerability, committed to idealism and ideal forms, replaces the need for religious rites. Art and design will heal a people in the aftermath of war and devastation, science and technology will provide possibilities for reinvention.

In the decades after this ritual blessing, the building-body begins to shift, turning a series of revolutions, a re-invention occurring with each new director. Look into the spiral of the staircase now and notice how it moves, morphing into a mechanism like a cog rotating. As the religious emphasis is downplayed, the students become more self-directed, and divisions between disciplines, classes and fields are dissolved. The school looks outward, international students flood in. In 1980 artist John T. Kormeling transforms the site into an 'art factory' for 24 hours by projecting laser beams into the sky, creating an imaginary building for production. In

1988 the policy plan of the academie is written in architectural terms as ‘macchina arte’, an architectonic concept that converges on the idea of the machine. Now cultural objects are formed by a community united by different ideals, unanchored from mythic histories and religious origin stories. Labs are places of alchemy, where discarded and found things are formed into something new. Making expands to encompass new media and cross-fertilisation of practices occur. Teaching hierarchies are flattened into the horizontal arrangement of the werkplaats.

Abstracted metaphors of machine and factory their appeal as late Capitalism begins to fracture. At the academie, cooperation and exchange, innovation and experimentation, symbiotic and rhizomatic forms of working gradually replace such ideas. The academie, located at the nexus of several countries, continues to look outward to a global public. It is a self-regulating entity, shifting, mutating in response to its participants, testing, reformulating, redefining. It is both critically engaged and a ‘safe haven’ for reflection. In 2020, Hicham Khalidi states: ‘We believe in the role of art and design to develop resilience in a time that demands radical change, and we have no choice but to contribute with our imaginative capacities to writing the history of the future.’

Ron, who has worked at the academie over many decades, images the building as a ship, echoing the church-ship of past times. For Ron, this boat of the academie has set out to discover new, high land, islands, a continent. The director ‘steers’ the boat, but it is the participants who all work together, Ron says, because: ‘someone knew how to raise a sail and get the wind, and someone knew how to stir, and someone else knew how to keep the people at peace... and someone else knew how to navigate...’ All that works together.³ He views the shifting conglomerations of community as producing self-lessness. Ron compares the community to Franciscans, a holy order made up of kindred spirits.

For Astrida Neimanis, a ‘hydrologic’ flows ‘through and across difference,’ blurring the boundary between the individual and the other. Neimanis states that we must think our embodiment as watery, and to highlight our relationality and responsibility across different watery bodies, a necessary method for resisting individualism. Neimanis writes: ‘As watery, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: *I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation.*’

Notice now how this staircase is not mechanised or automatic. Instead, notice a gentle wave work its down the balustrade, the peristaltic movement of a gut. The stairs gently undulate in a fluid motion, it is a living elevator. Inside this spiral of steps, rather than a foreword and upward path to progress, let us spiral down, as the holy water sprinkles out and away from the hand of the Monseigneur. I invite you to follow me now, to the threshold, an orifice that admits and expels, a site of exchange.

³ Ron: ‘You’re on a boat and you are discovering a new, high land, continent, or something, and you have the people who are notoriously messy, who will be the people who are going out there to discover, they just want to get forward, they wanna go ahead. They come to an island, and they go “Well, OK, we’ve seen the island and now let’s get going” right? “Come on, come on, let’s go! I want to put the wind in the sails, I want the boat to move forward.’

[I use the branch to spray out the river water from the container as I descend the staircase and move to the steps outside the door, looking back in.]

Reorientation

The wall-skin marks the porous bounds of this soulful site. The door is a mouth, a maw, a portal to the more-than-building-body beyond, an expansive, shifting milieu. Breath in the Jekerkwartier air, feel it as it slips in around your bodies and mingles with the atmosphere inside, and the air from the academie moves out, billowing unseen into the atmosphere and dispersing.

[Hold up my round obsidian glass and reflect the crowd back to themselves.]

Here, at the threshold, in this liminal space between the story-worlds of outside and in, what and where are your anchor points? In a time of instability, of particulates in the air, and pollutants in the water, and microplastics inside our bodies, what word-things now form your rituals and rites? In a disintegrating world can the sacred space of this building-body still conjure enchantment? Rather than a God-man, could your higher power be a weather-body, or a river-body, or a rock-body? What water, breath, ground forms our story-telling now?

Ursula Le Guin tells us that the proper shape of a story isn't the linear story of progress, the Ascent of Man the Hero with his stick, axe or knife, a weapon that defeats and subdues a hostile world, instead, stories form the shape of a container, a sack or a bag. The container, not the weapon, is our ancestors greatest invention, containers for words that hold meaning. Stories are 'medicine bundles' that hold things in powerful relation. For Le Guin, the best stories, and those that tend to remain untold, are made from: 'a leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.' Le Guin writes of the 'belly of the universe,' a vast sack: 'this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.'

We gather words into meaning, we gather bodies into community, we settle into the stability of enclosure. The embodied need for a meaningful story-world creates a tension between inside and out, fluidity and fixity, fact and fiction. Whilst hermetic seals prevent contamination, they also prevent regeneration. Stories, buildings, bodies spring leaks, find themselves breached. Holes open up, boundaries are crossed and new stories are told. Building-body is such a word-thing: 'a bag a sling a sack a container.' Not a space of confinement, but a space of multiplicities, of vortices, of revisions, and revolutions.

In troubling times, let us align with Donna Haraway to resist: 'the sterilising narrative of wiping the world clean by apocalypse or salvation.' Haraway dismisses both hope and despair. Instead of endings in which we refuse responsibility, she offers the provocation of staying with the damaged earth on which we reside, building messy, difficult but liveable futures. Let us stay with the trouble, making 'oddkin' in strange and risky collaborations with a more-than-human world.

Pointing out that different gatherings of objects create different grounds, Ahmed asks: ‘what difference does it make “what” we are oriented toward?’ Our orientations form our beliefs which shape our worlds. The stories we tell matter. They materialise into our lived experience. The liminal space of the mouth is the portal of the story, the words summoned from within and propelled to the outside across this bodily threshold. For Le Guin, the story of the container is urgent and necessary. She writes: ‘...still the story isn’t over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.’ A miracle forms here in the doorway, in the mouth. This miracle becomes the bearer of new worlds. It matters which worlds we want to speak into being.

I invite you now to receive a watery blessing on your forehead from the Mass, when this is complete, please follow the stairs up into the auditorium. As I draw a water spiral, I ask you to reimagine your own story within the academie, your own watery body as a container of the material and mythic, as a sacred site for kindred spirits, for oddkin, for collaborating with and participating in the enveloping world.

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