

Mihnea Mircan interviews Hans van Houwelingen about Túbélá (Lingala for confession).

MM: For those visitors with a knowledge of the recent histories of contemporary art, encountering your installation in the St-Jozefkerk in Oostende might bring to mind the discourse of institutional critique. The 'other' confessional you have installed in the church is in this sense akin to the maneuvers via which institutional critique artists have engaged or exposed the tacit presuppositions, the exclusions and levers of powers that underpin the politics of display.

HVH: I guess you could speak about the institutional critique of the institution of the church, but for me the installation creates the conditions for a broader critical thinking to take place. An opportunity to reflect, maybe without the theatrics of institutional critique proper, and without the fixed roles which articulate this particular discourse. Instead, there is ambiguity: it is not that my critique already frames a certain conclusion, from which the work would derive its strength. Rather, the installation thinks about – and materializes – the conditions for the critical act to take place.

MM: I think this ambivalence is reflected in the triangle of relations that structure the work. On the one hand, there is your position: guest and critical parasite, taking advantage of the context of the church, but also of the framework of the contemporary art event to which you participate. Then there is the church, which through your intervention is hybridized in a sense with a museum. Two modes of "seeing is believing", that of Christian ritual and that of museological strategies in general, two protocols of making sense, become interspersed. Then there is the position of the viewer of the piece: an art lover or a member of the congregation, the carrier of one or the other set of beliefs, of a spiritual or a secular theology.

HVH: The installation indeed operates within different realms at the same time. On first sight, it is a kind of Duchampian move: you push an object out of a specific context, so that another system of meaning is activated around it. However, nothing is being taken out of context here, on the contrary, the context is overburdened with a doppelganger. The framework of the art exhibition allows an extra confessional to be positioned in a church. The first confessional has always been there, the second one, even if camouflaged in its similarity to the first, triggers questions about who and why brought it in, who and why should use it. I want to offer the imaginative possibility for the church itself to give its confession.

MM: Who would listen, who would grant absolution?

HVH: Of course, there is no simple answer here. Is the church itself beyond absolution, since no higher terrestrial authority exists that can forgive its transgressions? There is always that fraught question of faith and law, about the social and political role of the church. The church channels the word of the Scriptures and the voice of God, formatting them in liturgical gestures, but also in more mundane intersections with the world. The installation intervenes in that puzzle of norms and filters, of authority and accountability. The two confessionals work like loudspeakers, creating a kind of stereophonic effect in the St-

Jozefkerk, where 'truth' is recomposed in the overlap of different narratives. It is a play of resonances, echoing the history of this church being built by King Leopold's own profits from the Congo, reverberating with the other histories of the city of Oostende, among which the king's colonial project is of high significance. Above all I want to trigger those thoughts: neither to gear them to a single conclusion, nor to frame them within one ideology.

MM: The doubling of the confessional, which suggests a different form of listening and expiation, extends into the striking juxtaposition of two figures placed in the two chambers: Christ as a child, holding the globe, and the sculpture of the monkey. On the backside of the object, gigantic fossils are installed. There is a strong sense of these figures being part of an interlocution, listening to each other's confessions through a hatch in time. To focus on these figurative components of the installation, can you speak about the sculptures visible frontally in the confessional?

HVH: The two sculptures are placed to the sides of an empty central position. The cubicle in the middle, which is vacant, is reserved for the receiver of the confessions. What can be heard from this position is first the story told by the black monkey, of course to do with colonial Congo. The right hand reaching out was damaged, but in conjunction with the physical integrity of figure in the other cubicle, it feels like a mutilated hand. Cutting off hands was a standard practice of the Belgian colonists. From the other cubicle that same story can be heard, told in other words by the white Christ child. The voice of Christianity as a force of world domination, as an ideology of charity but also as alibi for unspeakable brutality and suffering, becomes audible in the installation, in spite of the material modesty of these two 18th century sculptures.

In its beginning, the Belgian colonial project was communicated as a fair-trade endeavor, where civilization and prosperity were exported in exchange for goods, mainly rubber. But this transaction turned out – under the eyes of tradesmen, missionaries and other observers, some of them armed with the 'kodak' whose invention Mark Twain's Leopold deplors – to rely on fostering conflict to destabilize the colonized areas and on extreme violence to reach its economic goals. I wonder what could have gone through the mind of a missionary, torn between these realities and the allegiance to the powers in whose name those acts were perpetrated. The confessional is a space for communicating those soul-crushing dilemmas. The monkey and the Christ child are looking from two perspectives at the same story.

MM: An anamorphic effect appears between the two sculptures, as they are the extremities of humanity's image of itself: Darwinian evolution and Christian transcendence, an infra- and a supra-humanity. Historically, in its rejection of evolutionary theory, the church's role has been to 'suppress the monkey'. While misreading Darwin has also foregrounded the racial framing of 'others' as primitive, close to an ape-like stage. This sculpture of a monkey can be taken as the locus of superposed forms of violence, its deterioration the material equivalent of violence.

HVH: That was my intention, to present the simultaneity of those movements around different representations of the human, and embed them into one contemporaneous

historical setting. The neo-gothic, late 19th century oak confessional, with its intricate woodcarvings of forms growing out of each other, comes to represent the aesthetical and moral scaffold for those tensions. The back of the confessional struck me even more, as it is the side that would stand against the wall and receive no attention whatsoever. Never to be seen, it is like a part of the story that has been edited out. I used the backside as a backdrop, one against which any story could appear: the narrative of the confessional is but one of many that could be projected onto this screen. The back felt like the material correlate of a blindspot, seeing absolutely nothing or seeing absolutely everything, in either case a point from which ideological, moral and religious differences dissolve, epochs slip out of their chronological separation and bleed into each other. From its perspective, temporal Christianity appears for only a split second within the endless gaze of God, while time flows between the different scales of history and geology.

If the left and right of the confessional describe a moment of explosive tension within modernity, front and back delineate another timeframe. I placed two large ammonite fossils on the backside, organisms that had a brief life span about 300 million years ago. I think that these different elements and directions function as each other's chronological and symbolic mise-en-abyme. They guard each other's secret, just like the 'dramaturgy' of the confession itself. Everything is told, and everything is held secret, everything is marked as a sin or indiscretion, and everything is pardoned. The church confessional is a sculpture of privacy-in-public, and confession is the choreography of secrecy-in-public. I wanted to capture these ritual or moral relations in the links between sculptures and fossils, in what they might be saying to each other.

MM: The installation articulates these different perspectives into a puzzle of figures, separations and the complicated subjects which they visualize. It strikes me that there might be another level to your metaphor. The art world too can be thought of as a kind of multi-scalar confessional. Going to exhibitions, especially those of the politically-engaged variety, is a form of expiation: one witnesses images that testify to the ravages of capitalism, economic disparity, political intolerance and one's sense of moral balance is restored, as if a moral duty towards society has been fully performed. There is a transaction there, a form of compensation where being aware of social injustice or environmental devastation equals enlightenment, virtuous citizenship.

HVH: That is a nice image. I enjoy imagining what might happen when someone, entering the church for either the art show, for a tranquil moment or for the sermon, and encountering the object. Or maybe missing it, as it looks so much like its environment. I wonder which contradictory explanations or questions might form in their imagination. Artworks can be ignored, but can confessionals be dismissed with the usual "this doesn't make any sense to me"? Is it too late or too soon to ask these questions about religion, post-colonialism and art?