

How do you replace a church? Ellen Harvey's *Repeat* in Bossuit

– FRANK MAES –

How do you replace a church? That was the dilemma facing the local council in Avelgem, owner of Sint-Amelbergakerk in Bossuit. The little church, set in a small yard, was in such poor condition that in 2007 the council had to ban people from entering it. The danger that gravity would win out over divine providence had simply become too great. The move also meant that mass could no longer be celebrated in the village. The possibility of restoring the dilapidated building and bringing it back into use as a church was rapidly dismissed: the council could not justify that kind of investment for a village with fewer than five hundred souls. Bossuit's plight is by no means unique: all over Western Europe ongoing secularization has pushed the repurposing of empty churches up the agenda in recent decades.

Partial dismantling of the decayed church seemed the most logical option, but that did not answer the pressing question of how the site ought to be used in the future. The local council took the noteworthy decision to involve artists in the process: not in spite of the complexity and sensitivity of the situation, but precisely because of it. Could art bring some consolation, where politicians had wisely chosen to step aside?

Ellen Harvey's proposal does indeed embrace the partial dismantling of the church. The tower is stripped of its 'hat' and the nave of its roof; the columns are demolished and the existing floor replaced by a beautiful terrazzo design. The latter incorporates schematic traces of former architectural structures and ritual furniture, such as the columns, the cross-vault, the pulpit and the confessionals. The grey patterns in the floor simultaneously evoke the shadows of the church as seen in a photograph (of the church) following its bombardment in the First World War. The result is a more or less stabilized ruin, which the artist views as a site at which local people can organize all manner of gatherings and celebrations.

The way Harvey's proposal relates to the visitor's gaze is intriguing: although the architecture has been emphatically opened up, the visitor

cannot look outside. This specific characteristic of a church is retained: nowhere does the window function as a frame through which to view the surrounding landscape. It serves purely to admit the light. Traffic here occurs mostly vertically, beneath the open sky, in sharp contrast with the busy road that passes nearby. When the eye loses its supremacy, other senses gain in importance. Even more strikingly, the images that the artist adds cannot be viewed in their entirety, as they are executed in the form of a floor motif. It is often more important for images in a ritually charged setting simply to *be* there than to be consumed as an object of the gaze. Sculptures high up a tower, for instance; the masterpiece in a darkened chapel; or the labyrinth in the cathedral floor over which people carelessly step. In this scintillating, beautiful floor Harvey integrates the traces – like so many shadows from the past – of how this place came about: inaugurated, blasted, reconstructed, dismantled. Nowhere, however, is this expressed in 'image-bites' that tourists can consume in a tiny instant of their precious time. We hope that no press photographer manages to climb the tower during the inauguration of *Repeat*.

The project fits seamlessly into Harvey's artistic journey. Her point of departure comprises the clichés about art that exist among the general public; she draws frequently on traditional genres that relate closely with the everyday, such as landscape, portrait and still life. She is fascinated by what art is capable of in the popular imagination. In many cultures, for instance, the artwork functions as a substitute for something (irrevocably) absent. It is capable in that guise of consoling people, bringing them together and mobilizing them. Ellen Harvey understands that this faith in the power of the image is not necessarily naive, but is related to the image's inherent characteristics. No matter how charged a theme or context may be, Harvey uses an astute, mild irony – reflecting her British origins – to explore the way images function at the cusp between reality and illusion, seriousness and play.

The avant-garde logic that dominated the modern art world for most of the twentieth century led artists to distance themselves radically from the village and its fossilized clichés. According to this logic, poetry and the commonplace are mutually exclusive. In her analysis of the historical avant-garde dynamic, the architecture theorist Hilde Heynen states that 'Banality and mediocrity are the supposed allies of the commonplace: the whole mass of ossified and imposed external forms, the weight of which crushes any inner perception and which is hence intrinsically false. The



genuine, the authentic, the real are presumed to exist behind this screen.¹ Ellen Harvey is the archetypal example of an artist who is convinced that such black-and-white contrasts are too simplistic. As Heynen too argues, the possibility of poetry need not lie in the destruction of the commonplace, but rather in a constant pendulum movement. This oscillation between the familiar and the strange, the particular and the universal, the personal and the communal, can give rise to forms 'that do not ossify so readily. Forms which, through the intelligence of their approach and the grace of their interplay, achieve a moment of contact with this variant reality and – even if only briefly – allow us to sense something that transcends the everyday: an intensity of emotion, a fleeting insight, of which the image takes root in the memory'.*

What is it that makes a ruin beautiful to us? There can be a whole variety of reasons, depending on our individual frame of reference and aesthetic sensibility. Classicists enjoy reconstructing a mental image or plan of the original edifice, based on its remains. To the Romantic, the ruin is a vehicle that can transport them back to a lost past. Modernists enjoy the transparency created when the decoration is gone and the bare construction beneath is revealed. The ruin becomes picturesque when it appears as the momentary result of shifting processes, with which first human beings, and then the elements have had their way. Ellen Harvey creates a zone in which these aesthetic forces are present in a balanced, restrained yet at once generous manner. A chance meeting, a family ritual, a personal reflection, a collective remembrance or a celebration are all possible here. And hopefully more than once, with that extra spark of intensity which – if only for an instant – allows something to be sensed that transcends the everyday.

1. Hilde Heynen, *In New Babylon kan je niet wonen. Over het omgaan met poëzie en gemeenplaats*, in: Hilde Heynen, ed., *Wonen*

tussen gemeenplaats en poëzie. Opstellen over stad en architectuur, Rotterdam: 010, 1993, pp. 11–17.