



A-LIFE

by The Monastery

with Elke Van Campenhout, Stijn Smeets, Robin Amanda Creswell

special thanks to: Sara Ten Westenend



Welcome to the Monastery.

What if the monk is the ultimate artist.

Shaping life out of paradox
Spinning time out of distress
Surrendering to the grace of
the whirling objects, beings, spirits
All around
We dance the world into being.

Finally going nowhere
Waiting for nothing
Reclaiming love.
Reclaiming desire.
Reclaiming time.
We embrace the discipline
To be
Free.
Unravelling our longing
To come.
A-Life.



In the whirlwind of work, relationships, deadlines and discussions, we sometimes get distracted from the most important things in life: feeling alive and being conscious of our entire being and everything around us. The Monastery is an experimental spiritual urban community that aims to do exactly that. By performing daily rituals and making every action an intense experience.

The Monastery is coming to the Kaaistudio's four times this season with *A-LIFE*, a ritual day that is patterned to the rhythm of the seasons. You can live the life of a monk for an entire day or take part in only one ritual, attend a lecture, or join a ritual dinner. The 'monks' who will lead the *A-LIFE* cycle are Elke Van Campenhout, Stijn Smeets and Robin Amanda Creswell.

Heightening the sense of being alive. That is what the quest is about. Making every moment count. Making every gesture aware. Choosing the monastic life is about reclaiming time. The time to be there. To notice what is happening. To enter into the stream of movement, of colour, of sound, of reality-out-of-reality. And at the same time, finding yourself smack in the middle of it.

The Monastery is a real-life community in the centre of Brussels (Rue de la Limite 93, 1210 Sint-Joost-ten-Node). It is a place where fulltime and part-time monks live together, following a monastic order of the day that repeats itself over and over again: 6AM Morning Ceremony, 7AM Yoga, 8AM Silent Breakfast, etcetera. The days are both disciplined and open. The community is both separate from the 'regular' world and porous to everyone who wants to drop by.

This Monastery is a transspiritual one: there is no religious reference point, no master narrative, no God to believe or not believe in. The monks are free to be the origin of their own spiritual paths, follow their own methodology. In the communal life, there is no Absolute Transcendence, only 'transcendences', as philosopher Bruno Latour would call them: everyday events and objects that gracefully escape our grasp, and show their uncanny hidden face if you approach them with devotion. What the monks share is the practice of everyday life. Sitting, singing, dancing, eating, cooking. They create communal and overlapping lives, sharing the same sleeping space, living in simplicity, and practicing openness and gratitude.

It is a practice that 'listens' to the other, willingly or reluctantly, in which bodies and minds tune into each other, creating an ever-changing landscape of interindividual exchange, of interbeing. With every monk that comes or goes, the Monastery changes palpably. The rhythm continues, but the sense of live-ness has changed considerably. In that sense, the Monastery is a place of commonality, as well as it is a place where the singularity of each of its members gets vitalised and becomes more visible.

“I longed for an environment where every part of me –mind, affect and body- would be embraced. A place that would stimulate diligent spiritual practice, where I was free to dwell at the limits of human understanding. Moving towards a life that would flow naturally, rather than being blocked by doctrine or chastity. An answer to the stress of contemporary working life, an experiment in tolerant (religious) diversity. A positive answer to cultural and religious tensions, a rigorous spiritual alternative for the fragile identities of individuals in a free, democratic, multicultural, atheistic society.

I wanted to come to a standstill, to a desert.

To lose all sense of separateness in surrendering to my barbaric yawps.

To reduce life to what is absolutely necessary while taking in all sense pleasures.

To be quenched by life. To contain multitudes and extremes. To be pulled apart by polarities.

To feel intensely alive.”

(Self-reflection of a monk)

“I longed for a place where I could finally just be. Leave behind the stress and forceful discipline of the working life we all have come to accept. Of being molded into a ‘self-chosen’ identity, to then have to spend all my time and energy to keep it up. To have to produce an ‘interesting’ life of visibility, representation, symbolic capital. Of having to seem autonomous, strong and inventive all the time. Of pretending to reinvent the world over and over again, the body knee-high in the stale, lukewarm water of my predecessors. Of having to put on the emperor’s new clothes every day.

I longed for a place of silence, where even my whispers would be heard. A place of daily practice, where the whirlwind of events would not make me unaware of the movement of the breath of the other. A place to reconfigure myself, not as a separate entity, but as part of the whole. Not a hiding place, but a place to retreat in order to step into the world, the city, with more vitality.

I longed for a communality that would not have to be conquered by reasoning. A space tuned by the repetition of sameness that creates all the difference in the world.”

(Self-reflection of a monk)

Love



*the lover's petition
to become undone
a silent cry for returning
to the home within.*

The Monastery lives and breathes through the practice of its monks and inhabitants. It is created through devotion: the labour invested in the communal practice of desire and love. A Monastery is a 'factory of love', it produces the awareness of life itself, in love's embrace of the connectedness that precedes us. What manifests itself in Love, is the acute awareness of our fragility. In Love, we momentarily take off the harness that protects and alienates us from the world. It is in letting go of my protection that I become aware of the existential fact that we are breakable, prone to disintegration, to sickness, to death. It is this 'breakability' that connects us, that makes us able to embrace the other's pain, and turn it into a shared celebration of a-live-ness.

In Love, we are no longer affirming our autonomy and self-interest. Other than the contemporary commodified, contractual agreement to form economic-affective partnerships, this love does not ask for reinforcement, but rather for the opposite. This love asks our partner(s) to help us to become undone. To be able to let go of who we think we have to be. To let go of representation. To finally reconnect to a deeper awareness of being part of life's fabric all along. To exist on a plane that is not one of separation, but of connectedness. Not only with the partner(s), but with all the others that seem to have misplaced their lives as well.

Time



*No future can hold
The promise of the now
Shining through the cracks*

A monastic life is an attempt to reclaim time. Growing up in today's society, time has molded itself into a future shape. We study to become something or someone, we date to build families or otherwise meaningful lives, we have a vacation to be able to work harder later on, we work hard to be able to have a nice vacation. We are living in a constant push of accumulation towards a better future: more visibility, more love, more things, more time, more credibility, more acclaim, more creativity, more enjoyment. The future-oriented approach of time and the need for accumulation are one and the same thing. By portraying a life-to-come, life gets colonised by projections. Of a better one. Which makes it quite difficult to appreciate the one we actually have. Right now.

This upward soaring curve of accumulation stands in stark contrast with the downward curve of our life span, which inexorably leads us to a gradual physical and mental decapacitation. The painful awareness of the growing distance created between both, is a source of gnawing frustration.

The monastic life tries to save time by decolonising it from future projections. There is no accumulation necessary in the monastic life. Nothing to achieve in particular, although a lot can be done. Each day looks pretty much the same, although every moment is experienced as radically different. It is a rather 'monochrome' life, in which the nuances only become visible on closer inspection. And this is the time we are given everyday: to practice life in every moment. To be there for the other, and for the things around us: the plants growing in the garden, our body practices, our reading, our working. To practice really being there and listening to the other. To make the meditation become life itself. In all its appearances.

Practice



*In the doing I become
A-Life
Finally going nowhere*

In the practice, I become alive. Probably this page could do with just that. As a basic ingredient of the monastic life, the practice is what it all comes down to. The Monastery is based on the sharing of meditation, prayer, and other activities, but also more mundane tasks like cleaning, eating, learning to speak to each other with attention, using the space without making it impossible for the other, shopping with awareness, ... Without any 'master narrative' to guide our lives, the practice becomes the main reference point for the spiritual life-work. Without any kind of explicative framework (of science, God, Gaia or any other kind) the situation is always there to be experienced in its fullness. It can never be claimed and ordered in advance. It can not be reduced to a category that precedes or overrides it.

To practice is to try to stick to what is actually there. The breath, the warm water in which you wash the dishes, the snoring of the cat, the emotion that erupts through the serene morning meditation, the dust whirling up in the light. It is a simple doing that goes beyond conceptual thinking, towards a direct experience of being present to the particular situation you are in. Which is always different. There is nothing to explain or understand. There is no ontological truth to be unveiled. There is only the slow 'falling backwards into my arms again': to reconnect to what Zen master Dogen called 'the original intimacy'.

A practice like that demands surrender. A discipline of letting go. Of what we think we have to be. Of what we think we are. At that point, life no longer happens in the future. There is only movement, stillness, awareness, attention. The more we practice, the more we come alive.

Relation



*Invoked
by the whirling dance
Of people, objects and spirits
()
Surrender*

The Monastery is created through relation. Through the appeal of the other. Through the ways our lives intertwine and form patterns. Through the ways, we get moved by the other, out of our comfort zone, onto unstable grounds. The whole monastic life is about other-ing. Tuning, adapting, learning. But not in the sense of creating a uniform group identity, rather as a constantly morphing, porous whole, without clear limits or territories. Our community consists of the monks, the guests, the visitors, the participants to workshops, the people from the neighbourhood, the Brussels scene, the world events...The practice of 'other-ing' in that sense zooms in and out, linking the personal to the political, the internal to the external, the micro to the macro. Becoming vulnerable to being touched by the other, is what renders us potentially ecstatic: prone to step out of ourselves, into the world and into the other. Allowing us to meet them without judgment or preconception. Because we recognise them for what they are through the recognition our own fragility.

Our relation to the world is created through desire: the curiosity to learn, to transform, to come closer to other-ness, to difference. It is desire that entices us to connect, to love. It is desire that charms us out of our habits and certainties. An objectless desire, without the aim to be fulfilled. A desire that creates an outward movement. From the nest to the world, and back again. It creates an ecology of being-in-relation that connects us not only to other people, but also to all the other things that influence our being-in-the-world: the food that enters us and becomes our body, the political decision-making processes that transform our environments, the language that allows or prohibits us to experience 'reality', the bird that got stuck in an oil spill.

Other-ing is becoming aware that we are not. But relation.

No-Master



*No master
I follow
Lost at last I free
The dragon within*

The Monastery is a community that forms itself organically, through the interest of the people investing in it. It is not centred around a conviction, a belief or a set of truths. Nor is there any central teacher, guru, abbot or more enlightened being guiding the path. We love to practice together, and share our practices. We love to exchange thoughts and discuss. Some of us love to read and share their insights. Others love to garden and share their fruits (and vegetables). Still others just like to lie around, play with a piece of string, and purr while licking our tails.

Not having a master narrative, challenges us to improvise and make up the practice in the doing. It renders the Monastery quite vulnerable to the touch. Allowing it to stay alert, aware of its possible collapse or implosion. It also protects the community from hiding behind 'spiritual materialism' (as Buddhist master Chögyum Trungpa so aptly describes it): holding on to rules, habits, behavioural norms, and personalised devotion.

In the Monastery regularity and experiment meet. We have an order of the day, but it has been collectively constructed, and as such can be changed. That doesn't render the order less powerful. To surrender to what you have yourself created might seem like an absurd strategy, but by not accepting a rule out of awe for its (religious, historical, personal) authority, we make the surrender complete. This surrender is unreasonable, it doesn't need proof or self-importance. We surrender to no-thing, no-master, just to the surrender itself.

We learn to give up on certainty, symbolic capital, self-delusion. Or at least, we practice trying to.

Bodymind



*Dazzled by
The body's thoughts
The mind dances
The world into being*

The body is an integral part of the monastic practice. As a living, breathing, thinking 'thing', it opens up a mind space that goes far beyond the discursive or linguistic. The technologies of the body are gateways to different orifices for practicing. For creating pulse, rhythm, expansion, for allowing direct access to the non-material. Paradoxically, it is through the body that we often have the deepest experience of immaterial expansion. Like the smallest particles of matter seem to turn immaterial, the immateriality of ideas creates bodies that move, and materialise consequences in the world around them. The body is part of the mind, as the mind is part of the body. Beyond the dualist segregation lies a whole world of realities.

In that sense, the spiritual practice is also very much a 'material' practice. A practice that is intuited by bodies, by the spaces we work in, the sounds produced by cars outside, construction works, the water cooker. Situated in an apartment and studio space in the centre of Brussels, visited by different participants taking part in workshops and classes, the practice of the Monastery is as much a consequence of material circumstances (its city location, the limited space available, the lack of private rooms, its accessibility to the inhabitants of the city) as it is conceptually grown out of the ideas of the monks.

Our bodies and minds are objects, temporary products of circumstances. Which in their turn connect to other objects to create larger wholes. Like a family, a country, a forest or a Monastery.

Paradox



*Awake in the gap
Between one and the other
Duality splinters
I come a-life*

To live in paradox is an attitude that allows for spaces of intensity to open up. A paradox becomes productive when it is not resolved. When the tension between the apparent opposition is allowed to resonate into the practice. It is not a question of solving the problem, of creating a particularly attractive shade of grey. Rather, the suspension of dissolving the tension, or of choosing either/or, allows for a much more alert practice.

Like the artist that refuses to 'choose' between transparency and obscurity in his work, the monk is not making it easy on himself by ignoring what is at hand. In the artist's case, too much transparency makes the work perfectly 'understandable' but ultimately bland. Whereas an overall obscurity robs the artwork of its mystical potential to speak to whomever it encounters. It is in the tension territory between these two extremes that the work can breathe freely, shapeshift in the gaze of the beholder, and become a place of contemplation, intense experience and shared intuition.

In the Monastery Productive Paradoxes are what shape the daily practice. An obvious one is the false paradox between Discipline and Freedom. In the Monastery discipline is not what takes away your freedom, but exactly the thing that opens up a space and time to experience it. By embracing the paradox as a whole, without favouring either side, it creates an enormous space of vibration and liveliness.

Moreover, the Productive Paradox creates an attitude of alertness, of awareness not to fall into the trap of easy solutions. There is no redemption in absolute discipline, as there is no liberation in absolute freedom. Only the weaving of patterns in the aftermath of duality is making something visible that was not there before. Not by reducing everything to the One, but by creating force fields for practice in-between the one the two the three the multiple.

TWILIGHT RITUAL

1. Welcome to the Monastery

2. Morning Prayer

In gratitude
I deliver myself to your light
Another day to be nigh
To surrender by your side
My beloved

My love - I am in you
My love - I can see you
In me, in the world, in every step I take
In every word I say, today

3.

Finally I'm falling backwards into my arms again

DYING RITUAL

1. Welcome to the Monastery

2. Mantra

The primal gap is plain to see
A self-conscious reality
Estranges us from how we'd be
A-life in full complicity

3. Dying Song

Time has ended
I close my eyes
All is gone no more desire
Let me go
I will fall until
I am no more

3. Preparation Song

I am prepared to die
to let go
and be no more

4. Closing Song

Death has befriended me so completely
It turned me to ashes and freed me

FUNERAL LUNCH

1. Welcome to the monastery

2. Mantra

Underneath the surface lies
A plane so naked no disguise

This simple grace, you realise
No thing's left to its own device

3.Song

Finally I'm falling
backwards into my arms again

4. Incantations

WATER

Like water in water
My body flows
Dissolving its limits
in-to the unknown
My liquid Mother
my subconscious well
in you I surrender
the infinite spell

EARTH

Carrying me
through darkness and light
You are my food
my bed and my sky
You are in me
as I am in you
My grounding force
My grave and my roots

AIR

Entering my body
the life that i breathe
i thank the air
for its daily feat
to keep me afloat
in the lightness of space
embracing the spirits
in all their grace.

FIRE

Warming my heart
flames dancing out light
Obscuring, revealing
what is inside
my drive and my passion
you are my fuel
my darkness and lightness
my fiery rule

4. Closing Songs

1: My body's floating

into the unknown
to her I surrender,
my Love and my bones.
Through air and fire,
through earthly desire
I'm finally
coming home.
2: I've entered my body
my Love and my bones
I've entered my body
I'm finally home

RENEWAL RITUAL

1. Welcome to the monastery

2. Mantra

The resonance of you in me
Abundant graceful vibrancy
Surrendering the skeleton key
to original intimacy

3. Song

I am reborn in you
No One, no I, no Truth

4. Song

I can see you, I can hear you

DINNER RITUAL

1. Welcome to the monastery

2. Mantra

In gratitude I've come to see
This food's a living mystery
Ent'ring and transforming me
Into a new reality

3. Evening Prayer

In gratitude
I deliver myself to the night
I dissolve in the smile
of your darkest eye
to be closer to you, my Love

My love - I am in you
My love - I can see you
In me, in the world, in every step I take
In every word I say, today



A leaf that falls from a tree, the waving patterns of wind in high grass, the expanding and colliding of flocks of birds, do these patterns mean something?

Believers project meaning in random combinations of events. But if we don't accept a master-narrative, how can we read into the complex patterns of our surroundings?

What these meaningful events share is that they consist of complex patterns of shapes, directions, density and colors. The writing is an investigation into the translation of these patterns into a simple system of connecting signs, sounds and meanings. The writing combines simplicity (there is only one symbol), relativity (the meaning of the symbol changes with the perspective of the viewer) and three-dimensionality (the writing is a projection of a three-dimensional structure on a two-dimensional plane).

In that translation meaning loses its central significance in language. No longer only referring to an outside 'truth', the writing becomes an experience in relating signs to each other in the particular situation they appear in: the meaning of the language changes through the execution of the writing, the perspective from where it is viewed, the movement of the mobile 3D signs.

It is a playful take on the need of the intellect to capture life's complex beauty. It questions our desire to search for meaning in all things, and our illusion that finding it would satisfy us. Rather than a conceptual insight, we seek an experience of being alive.

Therefore, the last phase in the writing lets go of the conceptual frameworks. The writer is free to surrender to the spontaneous interaction with the canvas and the paint.