

**Rudiments**

Notes to the work of Gwenneth Boelens

by Nickel van Duijvenboden



Kierkegaard calls his book an elaboration [*Udvikling*, literally: development]. More than anything else, to develop here means to de-envelop, unwrap, peel, bring to light that which is hidden. In other words, in developing the concept of despair, he intends to come closer to the core as the argumentation unfolds. In a later diary entry, Kierkegaard notes: 'Although development is by no means a regression, it nevertheless is a return, which is primitiveness.' (In this context, primitiveness unmistakably denotes authenticity, genuineness.) Likewise, when it comes to personal development, progress is made only when it is primarily a return, a re-searching, a re-collecting of that which is truly uplifting and inspiring, a recovery of true primitiveness.

Andries Visser, 'Inleiding', in: Søren Kierkegaard, *De ziekte tot de dood* (Dutch edition of *The Sickness unto Death*). Boom, Amsterdam, 2008

Although development is by no means a regression, it is nevertheless a return, which is primitiveness.  
— Søren Kierkegaard, 1849

## A

At the bottom of the stairs leading up to our home, just inside the front door of our building, there's a photograph on the wall. It's been there ever since we moved in. Even though we've passed it every day for years, it's hard to describe it from memory, to put it into words. I can't remember us ever trying. There was no need; until now, the picture required no words. But the images that defy description are, as we know, inevitably the ones most worth describing.

The print is an unframed monochrome of unknown origin, measuring roughly 24 x 30 centimetres. It shows two people who share a profession, a couple perhaps, deeply absorbed in studying a row of ancient figurines. Although they are using cameras, it is somehow clear they are not photographers. They wring their bodies into slightly awkward positions, as if the artefacts standing so squarely and impassively on their pedestal are the most spectacular sight they can imagine. There is a strange sense of separation between the two of them and the objects, unlike the usual intimacy between precious museum pieces and their custodians. Without a doubt, they are captivated by the objects, but to an almost deferential degree. They seem unaware that they are being photographed, and it appears to have escaped their notice that the statuettes are rather unsightly, rough-hewn and rudimentary – much like the photograph itself, with its uneasy verticality, muted contrast, and simple presentation.

It was an improvised gift to Gwenneth

from friends we've lost touch with. I seem to recall that we didn't understand right away why they thought it would be a good fit for her. It's one of those things that come into your possession by chance and before you know it become familiar, ultimately taking root in your life. I now realize that this picture suits Gwenneth, both as an individual and in her art, in an almost telepathic way.

For as long as I've known her there have been moments when all at once she would fall mute, slowing nearly to a halt, seemingly locked in a silent confrontation with something that had previously escaped my attention – a stone, say, a piece of furniture, a sound, or a gesture. Hers is a haptic mode of perception closely tied to a state of motion. It's as if she has to stumble on her source material in passing. Sometimes the thing that transfixes her is impossible to pin down, simply because it's so elemental as to be almost undetectable.

'What is it?'

'Nothing. Just... something about those stairs, the way they're submerged.'

This was in 2007 in San Sebastián, the Basque coastal town she used to visit as a child. The bay is divided in two by a rocky outcropping with a concrete stairway zig-zagging up to the top. It was high tide, and water sloshed over the steps.

We ended up shooting a full Super 8 cartridge – a still, fixed stare with the coarse grain of a memory. After seven years, the footage has yet to surface in her work. It's a question of incubation, and of patience – a patience I admire in her and lack myself. I'm always looking for a casual confession, an exact localization of the root of a feeling. It is my role never to refrain from asking what's going on in her mind at moments like these. But she is almost never prepared to answer, either because it's too soon to tell, or out of reticence. Whatever the reason, it makes her work seem somehow abstruse and secretive, even to me.

'True writing has its roots in secrecy,' the Dutch poet and psychiatrist M. Vasalis



Nowadays nearly all art is seen as an 'attempt to communicate'. I don't really share that belief. [My earliest poetry] was certainly not an attempt to make myself understood by my parents or anybody else... The verse has changed over time. It's become like the movement of a hand that is unaware of itself beyond the wrist, but still senses that it's attached to a body and sticks out into the air. It seeks to determine its position relative to its surroundings *and* to the body... If it's an attempt at communication, then communication with what is called life.

M. Vasalis (1965), quoted in: Maaïke Meijer, *M. Vasalis: Een biografie*. Van Oorschot, Amsterdam, 2011



[The] movement of one's own body is to touch what lighting is to vision. [...] Even on the most sensitive parts of our tactile surface, pressure without movement produces a scarcely identifiable phenomenon. [...] And like the exploratory gaze of true vision, the 'knowing touch' projects us outside our body through movement.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945]. Routledge, London/New York, 1998



1 The biographer who unearthed this passage makes the perceptive comment that Vasalis's poetry 'maintains a connection to the pre-verbal stage of her life. There is thus no way of saying where her writing comes from, and that must remain so... Writing is not thinking, but inhabiting another, earlier mode of consciousness.'

2 Gerhard Richter, quoted in: Jürgen Harten et al., *Gerhard Richter: Bilder | Paintings 1962-85*. Dumont, Cologne, 1986

3 A trace of this event endures in the form of a photographic diptych entitled *Studio*.

wrote in her diary at the age of 56 – and that secrecy had to give shape to the poem from within.<sup>1</sup> To me, this ambiguous attitude towards the origins of artistic work – evasive but focused on the essence – seems doubly applicable to Gwenneth. Her work not only hints at an unfathomable core but often becomes a moulding, negative, or packaging of it.

In the 16 mm film *Hand Wall* (2007), a hand trails over the walls of a room. It's shot in close up, as if through the eyes of the hand's owner. You can see that the fingers pick up every sensation. The hand brushes over irregularities in the walls, around corners, along heating ducts; it crosses the surface of a closed door and of a large window that gives us a glimpse of the outside world. But the camera remains focused on the hand, and the hand goes on unhesitatingly circling the room. Not for an instant are you shown its owner, or the interior of the room. You see (or feel) only the outer perimeter; everything else takes place in the mind.

Gwenneth's native medium is photography, but the scope of her work shifted at an early stage and broadened to include three-dimensional installations, performances, films, and sculptures. The common thread running through all these different media is a lateral or circuitous approach. Perhaps this is what drew her to the phrase 'the entire business of coming closer', an offhand remark by Gerhard Richter that became the title of her first solo exhibition.<sup>2</sup> It brought together four of her works: *Ramble*, *A Whole Fragment*, *Score*, and *Hand Wall*. Each work represented a method of marking off space – more specifically, of demarcating an interior. There were several analogies to the research or work space: the workshop, the photographer's studio, the rehearsal room, or the botanist's greenhouse.

Earlier, she had covered the floor of her studio with panes of greenhouse glass prior to a visit from fellow artists at a residency. When you stood in the doorway, you were also in the 'entrance'

to the greenhouse. It was the fusion of two spaces, each dedicated to accelerating the process of growth. In its deceptive transparency, the glass formed a highly breakable barrier that stopped you from entering the studio; everything else had been left exactly as it was. It made you acutely aware of an individual process otherwise only visible from the outside, as a mechanism or a result. The installation was inextricably linked to the studio and was never recreated for the public.<sup>3</sup>

Through the years, 'the entire business of coming closer' has taken both an inward and an outward turn. The works became more manifest, sculptural presences, projecting further and further into space, towards the viewer; at the same time, their focus shifted ever further towards an unknowable point. While some of her earlier works at first glance appear to be puzzles of some kind, and thus hold out some hope of a solution, she increasingly seems to suggest that the solution is out of reach. By comparison, her recent work is more austere and abstract. Its intricacy is not to be found on the surface, but is inherent in the process, of which the work is in every respect a residue.

In this regard, the diptych *Not often the walls of the mind become transparent* is illustrative (p.28). The title is a borrowing from Virginia Woolf, and can be read both literally and figuratively: on the left is the maker's forehead, a 'wall of the mind', and on the right a negative of a pit filled with rocks, but without the transparency typical of negatives. They make an incongruous pair, suggesting a sporadic inner short circuit – an association subtly reinforced by the very strong magnets that hold the two photographs in place.

Throughout Gwenneth's work, the act of probing the sensory limits of space becomes an expression of the limitations of consciousness. Perception and self-awareness are like two analogous, adjacent rooms. They surmise each other's presence, form each other's double, perhaps even fit together perfectly – but they will never coincide.