

Birthe Blauth
and Benita Meissner

BM: Birthe, I have a few questions about your installation, Poem of Pearls, which is on show in the Church of St Elisabeth during the documenta fifteen in Kassel. Approaching the church, the first thing you notice is the words 'My Precious Pearl From Paradise' on the façade, which are visible day and night. Why My Precious Pearl From Paradise if the installation is actually called Poem of Pearls?

BB: I didn't want the title of the installation on the façade of the church. Instead, the inscription on the façade is part of the installation, a puzzle to lure people in.¹ I wanted it to get people thinking about what My Precious Pearl From Paradise might actually mean. It could mean the church itself. But as soon as you're in the church, you realise the actual meaning: My Precious Pearl From Paradise tells you where you can find your precious pearl – in paradise.

BM: Why did you choose the pearl as a symbol of preciousness?

BB: The pearl is a symbol of the human soul. I like to work with ancient symbols that people from all cultures will understand. A lot of ancient symbols and their meanings were adopted by Christianity and adapted to its teachings – which is how the pearl came to symbolise Jesus and the souls of the faithful. Even in the 18th century, people still believed the pearl got into the oyster shell by immaculate conception, by the oyster rising to the surface of the ocean and being impregnated by the light of the stars. The pearl then matures in the oyster as the fruit of this marriage between heaven and earth, the 'sacred marriage'. So the shell came to symbolise Mary and the pearl Jesus. My installation as a whole represents a journey that ends with you receiving your own precious pearl – a pearl that symbolises you, your soul.

BM: The first part of the journey starts outside, on the square where the Church of St Elisabeth stands. There, you've painted a Cretan labyrinth on the ground in green road-marking paint. What's the labyrinth about?

BB: At the centre of the paradise I've created inside the church is the pearl. There are various stories around how you have to earn your entry into paradise in some way. Take the Syriac Hymn of the Pearl, for example. That tells the story of a prince who descends to this life to steal a pearl from a serpent in the ocean. On returning home, his Robe of Glory is given back to him. There's also a medieval poem, in which the narrator has a dream vision where he sees the 'pearl maiden' as he journeys to paradise. All this got me thinking about how I could represent the journey to paradise, and I came up with the idea of the labyrinth. Labyrinths have existed since at least 2000 BC. Originally, they probably mapped out a path for a ritual dance in which the dancer danced into the afterlife to retrieve the sun for the springtime. By the time the myth of Theseus emerges, this meaning of the labyrinth has already faded somewhat. Theseus entered the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur Asterion, the ancient Cretan sun god. The motif of the labyrinth is adopted by the Christians, who equate Theseus with Christ. So the journey through the labyrinth and back becomes a symbol of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. Huge labyrinths were quite often set into the floors of gothic cathedrals. Some of them still exist, in Chartres for example. And they map out a pathway for the faithful to wind their way through – in place of embarking on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem – before proceeding to the altar. So a labyrinth sets out a long and winding path in a compact space, which you could interpret as representing the twists and turns of our pathway through life and the journey into the otherworld, paradise.

BM: Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has only one pathway which you follow in two directions – once to get to the middle of the labyrinth and once to get back out again.

BB: Mazes don't signify anything in a religious context. There's just the labyrinth, with a clearly pre-determined pathway in and then back out again. You enter the otherworld by that path and leave it by the same route.

BM: After the labyrinth comes a transit area in the entrance to the church. What will visitors find there?

BB: The transit area is designed to shield the paradise garden from view as visitors enter. It's a transition zone between the outside and the inside, where visitors are asked to take off their shoes. It also protects the interior of the church from the traffic noise outside. To actually enter the main space of the church, you have to go to the end of the organ loft. And as soon as you get there, you see the full height of the space – unobstructed by the loft. The entrance to the paradise garden is flanked left and right by two large, white pillars of light, which stand there like abstract gatekeepers. Going through the neutral, anthracite-coloured transit area is a bit like going through a gateway. You then go through the curtain in the middle into the spacious, peaceful paradise garden.

BM: So we're inside the Church of St Elisabeth now, and we find ourselves in the middle of your installation. Before we talk about that and what awaits, let me ask you: how does your installation support the architect Armin Dietrich's original idea for this space when he was designing it?

BB: This church is a hall church, but unusually, the windows are not at the top but at the bottom. They're made of transparent window glass, which extends across a length of 18 metres and a height of 5 metres on each side of the church. These great expanses of glass look out onto a courtyard on either side, which is surrounded by a green wall. When you're inside the church, it feels as though you're in a basilica – but one where the side aisles are essentially these courtyards, which don't have roofs. I've never seen a church that looks out onto courtyards on both sides like that anywhere else. When Armin Dietrich designed the church, his plans referred to the courtyards as "little garden yards." and he intended them to be green. Today, though, the ground in the courtyards is just paved with concrete slabs. In a religious context, the fenced-in garden symbolises the hortus conclusus, or paradise, in other words. And that was how I realised the paradise garden is actually already there, in the architecture. All I had to do was clear the space inside the church and cover the floor with grass, which also extends out across the courtyards. And because the windows are so big, you feel as though you're in a garden, even though you're actually in the church. You're protected from the elements, but you can still experience every change in the weather or the light as though you were out in the open air.

BM: So, we're gradually approaching the centre of the installation. Paradise is a place in our imagination, a beautiful place. How are you creating this beautiful place in the church of St Elisabeth?

BB: Well, how do you actually define beauty? We all have our own idea of what's beautiful, but we imagine paradise as being more beautiful than anything that exists in reality. There's no death or decay in paradise, and therefore no time either. Everything is just there in its full glory, in total harmony. Paradise is an artificial place, and that's why my installation uses deceptively real-looking artificial lawn with soft, long grass. Conceptually, that's the most coherent solution, to my mind, because the grass in paradise has to be completely unchanging. An artificial lawn is exactly that: it doesn't change. So no matter how many visitors come in, they won't wear a path into it. And another thing we mustn't forget is that paradise is the place Adam and Eve were banished from when they were sent to live in nature.

BM: The inside of a church is a place of calm and contemplation. How do you create the setting for that?

BB: By offering visitors a spacious, peaceful place for reflection, where they are free to wander about, lie down on the grass, immerse themselves in their thoughts or even take a nap. It's a place of rest for body and mind.

BM: The title of your installation is Poem of Pearls – which brings us to the centrepiece: a firepit containing countless pearls standing in the middle of the lawn in the church. As a visitor, I already know I can not only admire the firepit but also take a pearl home with me. Why was it so important to you to allow your visitors to take a pearl with them when they go?

BB: If you choose your very own real pearl, you don't throw it away. You'll probably keep it in your trouser pocket or on your desk. And whenever you see or touch it, it will remind you of paradise and your journey to get there. The pearl is a kind of anchor, a trigger for that thought. Along with your memories of the paradise garden, it will always make you think about yourself and your role within the community of all those pearls.

BM: What image comes to mind when you think about the pearls being taken from the firepit and making their way to all four corners of the Earth?

BB: I like the idea that first of all, when they're in the firepit, they form a massive community. Each one is a valuable member of that community. As a visitor, you choose the one you want and take it home with you. So the pearls will be all over the world, just like the people that took them, radiating out like an explosion in slow motion. And they'll still be there, even after the installation has been dismantled.

BM: Sitting on the lawn in your installation makes me think of the sea. Why is that?

BB: Because it smells ever so slightly of the ocean. I didn't want it to smell of grass because I wanted to preserve the artificiality of paradise as a place without a history. Smells are very nostalgic and emotional, and the smell of the ocean is a reminder of the pearl and the fact that it comes from the sea, that it was created by a 'sacred marriage' between heaven and earth.

BM: You've very much reduced the elements in the room and consciously cleared the space in the church to create a new sense of an expansive space and bring the outside in, in a fascinating way. By doing that, you've created a place that invites us to contemplate. What's the purpose of the invitation? Is there one?

BB: It's an invitation to find peace with every fibre of your body and all your senses. And it's an invitation to contemplate. The space can make you reflect on all sorts of things – yourself, your mission in life, your pathway through life, your responsibility as a member of the human community and of the world. You can also contemplate your own vision of paradise and its relationship with nature and culture. Anyone who finds peace here will also find something to think about. I think it would be important for us to value contemplation more again. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, it was considered the best way of being. People were convinced that the most valuable insights came from contemplation.

BM: The elements of your installation are deeply rooted in various mythologies and religions. The images you use will be familiar to theologians and art historians. How important are the various potential interpretations visitors might come up with?

BB: I'm pretty sure even people who know nothing whatsoever about the installation will be able to find their own interpretation. I've more or less updated the symbols. As an extension to that, the history around the individual motifs is fascinating and inspiring. But what matters to me is that everyone should be able to get as deeply into the installation as they want to. Exhausted visitors to the documenta will probably just want a rest and not to have to think too hard about things. But a few days later, their pearl might remind them of it and make them think about it all.

BM: When your installation is over, what changes would you like to see to the architecture of the Church of St Elisabeth?

× Benita Meissner has been Managing Director and curator of Munich's DG Kunstraum since 2015.

1 The typeface is DIN 1451 medium, which is widely used for road and other signage, not just in Germany.

BB: If I could write a wish list, the first thing I would put on it is different seating instead of the wooden chairs that are there at the moment, with their green upholstery. I wouldn't hang up the Tischbein paintings again, and I would green the side courtyards as the architect originally intended. I would try and insulate the entrance better to keep out the noise from the street. And I'd keep the church as empty as possible in general. All these things would enhance Armin Dietrich's crisp, sleek architecture. And clarity and space support people in prayer and contemplation.

BM: Thank you very much.