

Which way to paradise? Martin Matl

The way things are in the world at the moment, we hardly seem to be on the road to paradise. After a decade marred by various political crises, it's now the Covid pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine that weigh heavily on even the most hopeful and optimistic among us. This war heralds not the end but a terrifying return of history.

In the spring of 2022, it seems there is only one angel whose work is universally evident: Walter Benjamin's Angel of History:

This is how one pictures the Angel of History. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹

Meanwhile, the church has reached what Munich's Cardinal Marx describes as a "dead end."² its message of hope eclipsed by efforts to get to the bottom of the systemic abuse that has taken place and by the painful process of adjusting to its own dwindling relevance in society.

This is the world in which Birthe Blauth introduces into the Church of St Elisabeth a series of unmistakable symbols of paradise from traditional iconography. The interior of the church – which melds with the courtyards on either side to form a basilica-type layout – has been transformed into a garden, a hortus conclusus offering an oasis of calm from the roar of the traffic outside on Frankfurterstraße. On the square at the front of the church, the artist has created a labyrinth symbolising the arduousness of the journey to paradise, while inside, in the centre of the 'garden', a large, illuminated basin of precious treasure awaits: myriad pearls as gifts to visitors.

Blauth's installation entices us into a kaleidoscope of images of the Garden of Eden and provokes us in more ways than one. The artist seems to view the church as an apolitical space, a place of unity and contemplation rather than opposition and confrontation. Gone from the day-to-day practice of Catholic church communities is the eschatological promise of paradise, instrumentalised for far too long to evoke punishment and reward for interests of the more worldly kind.

Given the various discussions within and around the church at the moment, the artist's tranquil image of a garden connecting humans and religions seems almost naive. But it's not until you explore the means she uses to evoke this paradise that the real provocation becomes apparent.

How better to depict the heavenly garden than with lush, green grass? The grass in the Church of St Elisabeth thoroughly fulfils this expectation. But only at first glance. Because it soon becomes

obvious that the idea of cultivating natural grass inside the building would barely have been practicable; even with vast amounts of light and water, the result would have been pitiful. Instead, the grass in the church is more perfect than it could ever be out in nature – because this garden is a product not only of art but also of artificiality. It is made with the most complex manufacturing processes our industrial society has to offer and utilises all the various options for reusing, separating and recycling 'artificial' materials so they can be reintroduced into the material cycle. It is with products and cycles of this kind that humans imitate the ingenious ecosystems of creation, albeit as secondary creators. They will never match the intelligence of nature, but imitation has become essential to their survival.

And there's another disconcerting aspect to this installation: all the furniture that is usually found in the church has gone, and instead we find a paradise that consists of an empty space. So what, exactly, is the exhibit here? Within this space, the only thing one can do is find one's place – which the folding chairs invite us to do. Whether that place will be one of silent observation or lively discussion among many other interactions taking place in the room remains to be seen. At the centre of it all is the individual's own decision as to how they will position themselves within the space and relate to others at that particular moment. Visitors are left to their own devices. Or are they? Perhaps a table is already laid and waiting for the guests to arrive?

And last but not least, there's the basin of pearls. This brings to the installation an element of real

nature – and raises another raft of questions: how were the pearls 'produced'? 'Harvested'? Sold and transported? To what degree do exploitation, tolerance or giving characterise our relationship with nature? Or indeed with each other? Every irregularity of every pearl is of such geometric complexity that it is barely reproducible either artistically or technically – so can a pearl be a symbol of every person?

The view across the green expanse, then, generates a tapestry of questions around our uncertain relationship with the world. The artist invites us into paradise. Yet at the same time Blauth obstructs the simple route back to the Garden of Eden. And in doing so she highlights the divergence between the retrospective and creative approaches to her metaphor. Her persistent epistemic interest – a trademark of hers – and her cautious reversal of expectations open up new perspectives on the unsayable and indescribable: rather than romanticising paradise, she rationalises it through her awareness of modern technologies and the limits of feasibility. Moreover, taking as her starting point her extensive expertise around art history, the sociology of religion, and aesthetic practices of bygone eras and other religions, the artist starts to play her very own game with familiar image typologies of paradise.

This quest by a restless consciousness to express perfection was uniquely described over 200 years ago by Heinrich von Kleist in *On the Marionette Theatre*. Kleist's thought experiment starts with the question of whether and how a marionette, by virtue of the fact that it has no life or consciousness of its own, might be even more graceful than a human when making the perfect movement:

We see that in the organic world, as thought grows dimmer and weaker, grace emerges more brilliantly and decisively. But just as a section drawn through two lines suddenly reappears on the other side after passing through infinity, or as the image in a concave mirror turns up again right in front of us after dwindling into the distance, so grace itself returns when knowledge has, as it were, gone through an infinity. Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god.

“Does that mean.” I said in some bewilderment, “that we must eat again of the tree of knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?”

“Of course.” he said, “but that’s the final chapter in the history of the world.”³

The only way humanity can return to naturalness is through artificiality. And the only way we can create new images is by reflecting on what’s available to us. In the summer of 2022, Birthe Blauth presents us with paradise not as an idyll but as

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1 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969: 249.

2 Letter from Cardinal Marx to Pope Francis, dated 21 May 2021: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247895/cardinal-marx-offers-resignation-to-pope-francis>, retrieved on 3 April 2022.

3 <https://southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>, translated by Idris Parry, From Hand to Mouth and other essays.

a catalyst for imagining fresher, more beautiful, more interesting metaphors around which to unite. This is the kind of metaphor we need everywhere. And where should the search for such metaphors have its place, if not in our churches?