

Individualism

Ann Meskens – February 15th 2020

Column 5: Week theme 'Next to, above, on and below each other'

The Neverending Park. De Grond der Dingen.

They have a mouth but do not speak, they have eyes but do not see, they have ears but do not hear, they have a nose but do not smell, their hands - but they do not feel, their feet - but they do not go, they do not make a sound with their throat.

Psalm 115

Next to, above, on and below each other

Listen. I am who I am. My birth is my beginning and my death will be my ending. I am autonomous. I am an individual, as they say, and note the origin of the word; *dividuum (divisible)* and *in (not)*. I am therefore one and indivisible. An individual stands alone and does not coincide with anyone else, so individualists say, and they are right.

And look. There is no me without the others. I am born from two other people, that's how my life starts, and without them I never become a person. I walk in the tracks that my ancestors left behind and I only become what I am in living together with others. I am part of a larger whole, the community, so collectivists or communalists say, and they are also right.

Me and the others, the others and me.

Independence and dependence.

Self-development and sense of community.

Self-determination and social limits.

Whoever seeks the extremities of these views, however, has twice the chance to walk into a wasteland. On the one hand, the isolation of one's own identity, in which the contact with the others is primarily about the self and their sensitivities. A real conversation becomes very difficult. On the other hand,

walking without a thought with the crowd and drowning in the masses;
I do, I think, I desire, I buy whatever the others expect from me. There is no conversation anyway.

But this way, it seems that only people shape the world. That the only thing that matters is myself and the others and the conversation among us people. But wait, who talks about things and about their conversation with each other and with us? Do things have less of a voice anyway because they are so good at being silent?

The houses, shops and churches *next to* which we walk, the streams, bridges, cellars and car parks *above* which we live, the benches and stairs *on* which we sit. The foliage of the trees or the light of the street lamps *under* which we walk.

The coolness of the stone.

The color of the facades.

The sound of the clock.

The taste of the fries.

The scent of the blossoms when spring comes.

No matter how we consider humans theoretically. In practice, our world is always a world of people and things, strongly together, next to, above, on and below, and all that very concrete. The origin of the word *concretus* is *covenant (union)* and *crēscere (growing)* and actually means *grown together*. There is no world without materiality, that which we can lay down on or bump into. Actually, life with things is just like life with people: it is a constant fight and love-making, conflict and consensus, dialogue and silence, and so it is real life at its core.

Yes, I am an individual, one and indivisible, but I am without a form without the support of things in the world. Yes, I am part of a group but where and how would we meet if there were not the concrete world to give us space.

This applies indoors but just as well outdoors.

Take your coat and go outside.

The squares,
the sidewalks,
the stairs,
the fountains,
the benches,
the parks.

The wind, the rain, the warmth of the sun.

We forget it too often. It is also a conversation. People and things are everywhere and always together, connected, in a reciprocal relationship. The city finds you, just as well you find the city, the city embraces you, even when you walk around without another person. Whoever understands that loyal union never has to be lonely, because the city and its things are everywhere and always beside, above, on and below you.

Our awareness is lost in the thin air of internet and Netflix, cashless payments and all the spectacular attention for consumer goods. But there are so many different things besides, above, on and below us. And it can be practiced, really.

It has to do with being really interested, in the meaning of *inter (between)* and *esse (being)*. Standing always and anywhere in the middle of existence. The city and its materiality exists today and always will, all you have to do is use your senses to become more aware of it: look at the windows of a house or a statue in a church and know its little story or its great history, sit down tired on a stylish city bench and enjoy its support. And do you listen enough? Because a city has so much sound as well; bicycle-ringing and car horns, the banging of the morning deliveries, a silence, and then suddenly the swishing of the finely brushed branches of a tree above you, laughing at the nervous chirping of startled birds, and one moment remembering the natural life outside the city, then again following with your nose the smell of a roast chicken, feeling the hunger in your belly and the appetite, and oh, then suddenly in an unguarded moment, touching and embracing a lonely tree in the park, rubbing your cheek against the bark, resting your forehead, and be comforted by this and continue your path again.

Listen, watch, smell, feel. We are all standing on the same ground. Things are always and everywhere around us. Luckily. How can we not see them, not hear, smell, feel or taste them? Us humans, we should sing every day out loud from our hearts, to those sweet, rebellious, willing, proud but always present and determined things around us.

(Song *The Ground of Things*)

Take your coat and go outside
walk in wind and weather
walk through alleys, streets, squares
until the city finds you.
Houses, shops and fountains
an occasional tree!
schools, market and zebra paths;
don't run into a dream.

You see the ground of things here.
That's what we sing about.

Take your courage and be heard
talk to who you find,
know the city and its inhabitants,
everyone, even the smallest child.
Parks, tower and footpaths,
an occasional bench!
parties, carnival and cafes,
city has so much sound.

Wave to trees
smile at birds
salute the monument
for a city embraces all who she meets.
Wave to, smile to, breathe in and breathe out,
because a city is nothing without a sound.
Listen, watch, smell, feel,
for a city is so full of life, yes, yes, yes –
tralalala

The *Ring - Ring Ring!* - and bicycle paths
red light, green light, red!
water, streams and canals
an occasional boat! (a little one!)
Vismarkt, Veemarkt, Haverwerf and
a dog here and there!
big history, little stories,
everything has its ground.

Ann Meskens