

*Interview with Susan Philipsz*

- artist Susan Philipsz and curator Marianna van der Zwaag. Below is a brief account of this conversation.

*MvdZ: You first visited the church some years ago. Now we are at the point of installing the work. What can you remember from the very first time entering Oude Kerk?*

**SP:** It was a while ago, wasn't it? To me the interior of the Oude Kerk is this large empty space, with an amazing set of vistas and volumes. It's an incredible space, and walking in I really felt this sense of the emptiness and potential. My first impulse was to fill this space, the emptiness somehow, with sound.

*MvdZ: What about it struck you, or fascinated you?*

**SP:** What I found extremely interesting are these iconoclastic attacks in the Oude Kerk and their assault on the imagery and decoration inside the church, these gaps and absences that remain are compelling. The fact that it has been emptied due to the iconoclastic fury is really interesting. You feel that; the absence of the iconography, the decorations, the pews, those things that you would normally see in a church. It really resonated with me after reading Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Where he says "In the church, only the high bare, white walls, the vaults and the windows remained of the old gothic style. There is no painting on the wall, there is no picture anywhere. The church has been cleared like a gym. (...)". That I think is really poignant.

And then, when I learned more about the attacks, this story of Weyn Ockers, the lady who together with her maid was sentenced to death because during the storming of the Oude Kerk she would have thrown her slipper at a statue of Mary. The two women were publicly drowned on the Dam Square in a barrel filled with water. That was a horrible death, drowning in a barrel is a very brutal punishment. I was thinking about them, those women.

*MvdZ: There was a musician working here at Oude Kerk at that particular time in history, one of the greatest composers the Netherlands has ever known: Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621). He in fact prevented, together with the city government at the time, one of those gaps and absences you mentioned: the organs did not leave the church. You became inspired by his music. What was it that inspired you?*

**SP:** I had known about Sweelinck before but it was a surprise when I entered the space, like "he's here!" I really love his work. He was a contemporary of the composers of the Elizabethan era, which was known as the melancholy era. I think Sweelinck was very much aware of them as well. He even did an interpretation of a song *Flow My Tears* by his peer, the composer John Dowland (1563 – 1626). I love this composition of Sweelinck, because it deals with these themes of melancholy that were so fashionable at the time.

*MvdZ: Melancholy is a state of mind that has always characterized the human condition. At the time of Sweelinck people celebrated melancholy. When I look around I am sensing a re-valuation of melancholy. Not the one associated with depression, but a healthy melancholy that can also be a source of creativity. What do you see?*

**SP:** Yes, I think you are right. There has been a change recently and melancholia has had such a bad reputation. In his essay *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud believed that mourning was the acceptable face of sorrow, whereas melancholy was pathological, he saw it almost like a disease and that perception has been very strong ever since. However, if you go back to the Elizabethan era, and the time of

Sweelinck, it was fashionable to be melancholic and so much creativity came from that. So, I am happy to hear of writers and artists who have made arguments for melancholia in the present. In her book *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva talks beautifully about melancholia in art and literature. I think there should be a place for melancholia in our everyday lives. A space for reflection and emotion that is a public and shared experience. In my works and exhibitions, I try to create that place; a space where you can feel comfortable being melancholic in public, and witness other people that you may not know, feeling the same way alongside you.

*MvdZ: Upon the composition of a choral work titled 'Mein Junges Leben hat ein End', known as one of Sweelincks masterpieces, you loosely based your vocal piece for Oude Kerk. It is also reflecting this emotional mood popular at the time of Sweelinck isn't it?*

SP: Yes this particular choral work has this repetition and descending scale and that was something I wanted to emphasize, these continuous falling tones. The descending scale also brings to mind the falling tear, the motif of the falling tear is like a metaphor for the fall of man. Falling from the divine sphere to the depths of earthly life. That was something I wanted to emphasize in this church, and it's the title of the show, *The Fall*. I think Sweelinck is about that as well, moving from the sacred to the secular. So, I do find him very interesting also for this reason.

*MvdZ: You mentioned once that songs are found objects.*

SP: Yes I did, this is because they have a history. They've had a history before, but then when you take them out of context and put them in a different situation where you wouldn't expect it, the lyrics take on new meaning in that particular context. I often work in public space and often with intervals of silence, so you might happen upon it unexpectedly, as in the case of *Oude Kerk*. And I like that. I like when people either wait in anticipation or they don't expect to hear something. I'm interested in how that works. Like how it works psychologically; all of a sudden hearing a disembodied voice that you can identify with because it's clearly untrained or there's no musical accompaniment. I think I'm interested in how sound can heighten your sense of yourself in a particular place and time. For that moment or those moments where you hear it, you're all of a sudden aware of your environment. You're aware of the place you're in, whether it's a beautiful setting like this church, or hearing a voice through the public address system of the supermarket. So all of a sudden you're engaged in your environment. It's quite different to listening to music that normally takes you to another place, or you're very engaged with the performance. When I work somewhere, it's often about the place, activating the acoustics of the architecture and being aware of yourself; heightening your own sense of self and a particular place.

*MvdZ: Your work shows a deep understanding of how music carries memories, hopes and feelings of people.*

SP: I'm interested in the emotive and the psychological effects of sound and in particular, singing. How it can define architecture and how it can make you aware of yourself. I've always felt, from the very beginning, that these were the concerns in my work. How sound can heighten awareness of yourself while making you aware of a particular place and time. This stems from my sculptural background, the act of singing is almost like a sculptural experience.

I'm interested in getting a sense of a person behind the voice, rather than a mediated, polished and post-production voice. I really want to make it clear in my work that it's an ordinary voice. It could be anyone's voice.

It's important. I think everyone can identify with the human voice, and I think when it is stripped down to just the voice and without any musical accompaniment, then you really do hear the flaws. So I recorded my voice dry. What you will hear in Oude Kerk is completely dry, and of course, the acoustics of the church will make it sound less dry. When I say dry I mean I'm not adding anything to reverb or anything like that to make it sound better. So usually any voice that you hear mediated or is recorded, is made better post-production. But I don't do that because I want it to sound like anyone's voice. I have an okay singing voice, but I really wouldn't emphasize that. There is a person there, which you hear through the flaws, because it isn't polished.

MvdZ: In your work for the Oude Kerk the act of falling is also important.

SP: Yes this idea of the falling, the descent of man, the coming down to earth, that grounding into the present. But the madrigal *Mein junges Leben hat Ein End* itself is beautiful, it has these, as I said, this descending scale repetition to create this feeling of falling/descension, descension from heaven to earth. That was what he was about, in his music as well, and what was happening within the church and the iconography. I read that he managed to save the organ in the Oude Kerk from the iconoclasts by creating secular music and opening the church to the public. I think that's interesting.

What is also interesting about the madrigal is that it's designed to hear the breath almost like it are heavenly bodies that are singing, as if they are not actually humans. So each layering of the voices covers over the part where you would have to draw breath. And that creates this effect of never having to draw breath. But what I'm doing with this is making it more apparent by separating the madrigal. So by fragmenting it I'm making it more abstract. So the emphasis is more on the physicality of producing breath to create the sound.

MvdZ: You use eight enormous industrial silo's in your installation here, hanging from the ceiling of the church. To emphasize this falling?

SP: Yes exactly, but also this feeling of separation and isolation, by having the sounds being more localized within these silos. Also the silos echo the other verticals in the space like the long, stained-glass windows and may even suggest candles hanging low into the space. I arranged them in the space so that they appear to call to each other.

Each of them has a speaker inside that project raw elemental tones made with my own voice that resonate inside the body of the container. Important is the fact that the voice is not a trained voice. Also I'm not singing the lyrics from the piece, it's just the tones, so it's more abstract and more emphasizing the breath that's needed to project the sound. I want to really emphasize the acoustics of not only that of the church itself, but also the acoustics of these forms, which have their own acoustics within the space. So you do get a more emphasized sense of the separation of the voice.

And I suppose I was also thinking about Weyn Ockers and her maid servant. Their voices are almost like these disembodied voices, spectral in a way, which come in these silos, if you like.

MvdZ: I visited your presentation in Berlin earlier this year, in June, and there you also used these objects, based on the shape of silos. How did you come up with this idea to use silos? Normally these are only found outside, in rural areas.

SP: The silos have a very interesting acoustic and I've been fascinated by the acoustics of objects. I've often worked with architecture and its specific acoustic but

more recently, I've been looking at objects that actually have a particular acoustic, like water wells and stairwells, barrels and silos. Silos have an amazing acoustic and just discovering what happens when you project your voice up inside a silo; it's an incredible resonator of sound. At Konrad Fischer Gallery, the space where we met, it is all about echo. It's really something that you cannot ignore, so I felt I had to address that in the work I made for that space. And so it became all about echo, not just the echo of the space, but also the mythological echo and the mountain nymph echo, which is what echo is named after.

*MvdZ:* Very interesting this echo, also thinking of a place like Oude Kerk. As the oldest building of Amsterdam it is saturated with time, all those voices and echoes from the past are still there. Do you think sound ever dies?

*SP:* An echo in a space creates a sense of time and of time passing. It makes sounds sound distant, as if coming from the past and by the time it reaches you it has crossed a distance from the past. There is this idea of sound always being there. This is something pioneer Guglielmo Marconi (1874 - 1937), the inventor of radio, has once said: when sounds are generated, they never die or die away completely. I thought it was such an evocative notion that all the sounds that we ever create are still out there.

*MvdZ:* A nice bridge to a separate sculpture with organ pipes you created for one of the side rooms, the Collegekamer.

*SP:* I think when you enter that room, you feel that you're going into a room where people are sleeping, which is also a metaphor for death, mortality. The recording is of me breathing through these large organ pipes, which takes a lot of breath, and then those same recordings emanate from within the organ pipes themselves. Which have their own acoustic. So it's almost like the recording is playing the instrument, you know?

*MvdZ:* *What do you hope audiences will take from your work?*

*SP:* I'm interested in how sound can heighten your sense of yourself in a particular place and time. For that moment or those moments where you hear it, you're all of a sudden aware of your environment. You're aware of the place you're in, whether it's a beautiful setting like this church, or hearing a voice through the public address system of the supermarket. So all of a sudden you're engaged in your environment. It's quite different to listening to music that normally takes you to another place, or you're very engaged with the performance. When I work somewhere, it's often about the place, activating the acoustics of the architecture and being aware of yourself – heightening your own sense of self and a particular place.