

Interview

Elke Van Campenhout: Tell me how the tara concept works for your research.

Stef Meul: In the first moment I was relating it to the Buddhist deity Tara. I did mantra's with the White and the Green Tara. And on the level of the research this helped me to deal with some unresolved questions of guilt, and with emotional blockages. Which was also researched through writing my diary, and working on my body to de-block certain things in myself.

And by visualizing Tara, and working on compassion and healing, I could resolve these obsessions with lost love. I could address desire in another way than as a lack, or as an orientation towards consumption.

This enabled me to escape becoming paralyzed by concepts, or entering into relations I couldn't sustain or other unresolved things. The Tara meditations did not so much produce a solution as dissolve the problem. Through meditating I can see things through Tara's eyes. Walking on the street I can recognize my own narcissistic tendencies, and smile about it. Me as a person, or as an artistic researcher that takes everything very seriously, and then me as the Tara. Being able to communicate out of this position, feels very much like a present, that helps me to get out of projections of future failure, trying to live up the idea of myself as a successful future artist. And it also freed me from delving in my past, and all these unresolved desires or unanswered loves. So Tara, although I'm not adhering to any kind of specific belief system or ideology, is for me opening up a lot of pleasure again, of joy. Without presuming I'm there. I can just accept better the impermanence of things.

You seem to speak of your artistic research a lot in terms of a problem, of a blockage. Is that the way artistic research functions for you?

I didn't plan it like that. I didn't want my research to be about personal problems and blockages. I started out with a project that would tackle the issues of international terrorist laws, me projecting my deeper issues on the world. I wanted to turn hate into love, wanting to change the world through my artistic project, which off course totally failed.

The first moment of failure was when I realized I am incapable of the discipline to dive into the specific language of legal texts. I couldn't do it. I am not coherent enough.

I ended up reading a Foucault interview 'Truth, Power, Self', where I found that politics and all kinds of power, secular, worldly have more to do with 'erotics' than with my previous understanding of power. So I found power was much closer to me than I thought. I thought I wanted to make a performance that would create a legal precedent and such really do something, which is off course also a way to realize my own projection of personal fame. But then I started to work on myself, to find out what was erogenous in me. And to look where the energies in myself were blocked. For me the erotic functions rather on the level of the unseen, the phantasizing rather than the imaginative. I asked how I could actually experience without projecting what I have to be, or to be free to experience outside of ideologies that guide my experience. That's also the moment I left Foucault and all other kinds of texts behind. I'm not a scholar, I'm way too messy to be an academic. I could also let go of the

pretense of truthfulness of these texts.

What is important in this for me is the sense of loneliness and solitude, of isolation, which Douglas Rushkoff talks about in 'Present Shock', the digiphenics that is a schizophrenia caused by being off-line. I always touch upon very different subjects, I work in the way of a scrambled sampling of informations, with which I compose. Theory and discourse only has to make 'sense' for academics, but it doesn't have to for me. Before I even had a kind of radical counter-strategy: let me be the really stupid guy talking to the really smart ones. A kind of a fool, or Humpty Dumpty, or Alice in Wonderland. But that was a kind of protection as well, a certain arrogance that gave me the freedom to speak out of a position of random knowledge without having to go in-depth, which I don't do. This I do in performance, in my work with the other people I create with. But then again, I never arrive at making these performances that would reach a big audience. I mostly leave things open, with a vast array of things to play with. That's why I'm moving rather to music, starting with some starting material, and then see where we end up.

There is a lot of not's in your research, what things do NOT have to be.

Everything I do is case-specific, very hard to generalize. I can make no future projections, no illusions. It is almost a reductionist approach, this negativity creates a space where there is almost nothing. The void you also find in meditation, like with Tara. When I come close to these non-spaces, they seem to start to communicate what I don't know, and not what I already planned to address. But this not knowing, not wanting, doubting, isolation, the constant deconstruction of what wants to be constructed, can also be dangerous. It can resemble very closely a depression. Sometimes that is difficult, but now I think I found more peace with that. I also gave up on the ideal of balance.

Self-research.

Methodology, Gift for the other.

By taking myself apart, becoming dispersed, not knowing myself anymore as myself, you enter into a naked state. Not in the sense of nudity, but in the sense of the nakedness of the self: how many qualities do you need to remember that you are someone. One thing is to associate yourself with everything you perceive. This totally made me crazy, but also opened up other connections: to speak to objects allowed me to experience myself differently. On the edge of where you lose your words. How to share this edge with an audience or the people I work is still a big challenge. My work is narcissistic but in a different way than the attention-seeking, fame-driven motivation of the regular artist. My narcissism is rather based on uncertainty, and also in the recognition that there is nothing 'high' about art. Art is just a specific kind of attention to your environment, to objects and plants, and so on. The artist can carve out another space vis-a-vis the market, a constant search to rethink the value of the art work.

We have as a common denominator that we are all going to die, so there is a space for beauty, or rather for grace. There is a space for things that give colour to the present, and that is the medium I work with. Which expresses itself in poetry, in performance, in a failing punk band. Things that vibrates, that produce different

tunes. That is also their de-blocking effect: of opening up other emotions, desires, images.

I probably waste my time, and my career and my resources. It's clear that this is not a great idea, and I'm struggling to survive as a precarious artist. But that is not so important, there is another vitality that appears. Or not. I'm not even hopeful anymore, I just feel there is something beyond words. In Social Choreography there is this sentence 'Dance is the language that precedes language'. For me choreography is the movement of these pre-bodies, or pre-thoughts.