

God is Not Nothing

A Discussion with Zenita Komad

Johannes Rauchenberger

Beyond the bounds of any institutional affiliations, without having undergone any noteworthy awakening or conversion, and completely free of any aversion or irony, but with verve, esprit and subtle humour, the young Vienna-based artist Zenita Komad, exceedingly successful within the art-system as she is, has placed 'God' into the centre of her subtle collages and text-pieces. The absolute insistence of her personal and artistic presence and work pulls the beholder into a current which flows toward establishing connections with one another and placing particular weight upon a new sense of awareness. Zenita Komad speaks openly with 'Kunst und Kirche' [Church and Art] about her love.

Johannes Rauchenberger: Zenita Komad, life occasionally thrives in rather polar territories, as it were. Having myself encountered this in your work, it is this notion that I would like to begin our discussion with: Included in your most recent show *Sei Licht für die Welt* [Be Light for the World], there was a letter to be seen with the heading, 'Letter to God'. Throughout my involvement with art over the past fifteen years, I have not once encountered such unabated directness, and what seems to be veracity, in naming God in this way—such outright praising and entreating of Him. More typical would be the negation, the inversions and parallels, the backdrops and projections, and often the exaggerations—not to exclude plain blasphemy. Particularly bewildering to me is that I personally have encountered other pieces among your work that are highly critical of religion, such as *Religion is dangerous* and—its text arranged in the form of a cross—*Do you take yourself serious?* The latter almost appears to recall the Apostle Paul. How would you explain this cleft between the seemingly varied statements, or describe what is intimated between the lines?

Zenita Komad: In my view, God does not necessarily have any connection with religion and does not automatically require the existence of any institution. Speaking with God was a necessity for me even as a child. It is a loving relationship, which, through doubt and insecurity, is repeatedly endangered. However, now that those working in the fields of science, quantum physics, molecular biology and the like have begun to acknowledge the existence of a 'supreme authority', many people have begun to prick up their ears. The research of many quantum physicists has shown that God is the source of all energies, and of all matter in the universe! Beginning with Heisenberg and Einstein, spectacular developments and insights have continued to be made regarding elementary particles, biophysics, and so forth. In our societies, the need for a synthesis between the sciences, teachings of wisdom and spirituality is becoming evermore urgent! Art ought to convey, connect and serve in a more accessible manner! The danger (*Religion is dangerous*) lies in the notion that, in practising either blind obedience or disobedience, one may become want to neglect the meaning of life and the whole of existence altogether. It is rather a matter of inner processes that need to be experienced so that knowledge can be transformed into wisdom! Institutions, teachers or religions can either help us or hamper us, but the actual work must be done by each person on their own. When beholding our world, I cannot help but to ascertain that priorities have been massively displaced, and that heedlessness has reached a drastic state of culmination. On the one hand, we attribute far too much importance to ourselves; on the other hand, we continue to undermine our own existence.

JR: Are you not afraid of disavowal by the tough critics of your field in the face of such adamantly displayed faith in God? One gallery owner politely, and yet with some embarrassment, remarked that the last time he had written to the Lord God had been in a Christmas letter to the Christ Child, before eventually leaving the church. You yourself are not baptised, and yet you have no qualms about having contact with the church, or working together with institutions that officially advocate specific religions. Spirituality is an attitude and an experience that takes place beyond the bounds of the various religions, thus uniting them (hopefully) to an extent. You do not baulk at making the most intimate of discussions of all—namely that with God—public, yet remain far removed from presenting any kind of revelatory striptease. Is that art? Is that you, yourself? Have the two coalesced? When even merely glancing at your exhibition history and the breadth of critique your work has given rise to, I am, at any rate, certainly bound to admit to nothing less than astonishment with regard to your ‘artistic development’ ...

ZK: Of course there are instances in which people respond to me with a great deal of scepticism—even long-standing friends of mine confront me at times with judgements such as, ‘Oh geeze, all this esoteric nonsense ...’. Nonetheless, the wise once said, ‘Speaking about third parties kills three: it kills the one who speaks, the one who hears the speech, and the one of whom it was spoken’. For the most part, however, I tend to meet more and more people who experience great joy at becoming involved with these issues. Many artists have already concerned themselves deeply with God and spirituality. Questions such as ‘Who am I?’ or ‘What is my purpose in life?’ apply to all of us in equal measure. For thousands of years, these have remained the issues that art attempts to address, account for and resolve, in dialogue with society. Any tenable conception of society can only come into existence through a recognition of the fundamentals of the spiritual world.

JR: Over the course of the impressive achievements that mark your artistic life thus far, you have had a whole row of companions who, apparently, were so taken with your approach toward making art that they were ready and willing to lend you, not least in terms of theory concerning your work, a great deal of support. You began studying art at University when you were just sixteen years old. When had it become clear to you that were to become an artist?

ZK: According to my mother, that had already been clear to me when I was four years old. My conscious decision toward that end, however, was actually made when I was fifteen, and, with sixteen, I entered the University of Applied Arts. That having been said, I would like, at this point, to extend my gratitude to all those who have accompanied me along the way.

JR: Yet, you have stood on more than just the sunny side of a well-established artist’s history; indeed, you have established the existence of an entire cosmos therein. What, in fact, is ‘Zenita Universe’?

ZK: How was I to progress without the existence of a shadow? ‘Zenita Universe’ is a connective device. It is a ‘work of art’ that attempts to emulate the principle of creation. Perhaps it is a kind of playground, within which the principle of giving is exercised, and a place in which connections are made visible. ‘Zenita Universe’ aims at contributing toward the emergence of an altruistic society. Each person assumes the emotional guarantee for their own perceivable environment and thus becomes, thereby, aware of the band that binds the disparate parts of reality together. Upon finding ourselves in Zenita Universe, we acquire the ability to connect everything that exists there into a single reality—one which already exists within our souls. Unfortunately, there is currently no degree of progress to be seen on the level of our

collective consciousness: we need to direct our attention toward a new level, which is located outside of our present spectrum of perception. Thus, this society ought not to be viewed as a concrete objectivity but rather as a space for subjective activity. Accordingly, individual development is not finalised as any specific social entity. Rather, the final consummation of each party is dependant upon each and every member of the society as a whole. 'Love thy neighbour' ought to be a decision that is made upon a daily basis.

JR: How do you view your own capacities, as a young artist, toward perseverance within the system of art? After all, you are an exceptional example in support of the notion that it is possible to 'make it' without having to boast of all too many wounds ...

ZK: I do art, and I deeply contemplate both my work and my own existence. My feeling, therein, is one of receiving in order to give. I work and learn every single day in the attempt to better understand and do justice to the world and all of its aspects on a continual basis and in all honour. The most beautiful moments are, of course, those in which the muse suddenly graces one with a kiss. There are times in which it seems that I can truly feel the spirit of the creator. Much is comprised of nothing other than hard work, however—of the many weeks of preparation that are required in order to prepare the fields for a good harvest. It is not the question of survival that interests me so much in art; it is rather a deep urge within me that motivates me to do what I do. I view this primeval sense of trust as a great gift—one which is freely given and is readily accessible to all.

JR: In the artist index 'Younger than Jesus' from 2009 (Phaidon Press), you have been listed as being among the 500 best artists worldwide. I mention the title of the index because, with the reference to the age of Jesus, it recalls the notion of youth—not in any obsessive terms but rather in those of that certain insistence which is necessary for effecting change in the world. When encountering you and your work, I sometimes get the feeling that I would be wise to make haste—that these aspirations, this intimacy, and this openness could, with the course of time and over the years, easily become submerged.

ZK: Yes! We all ought to hasten toward making this world a better place—an imperative that can only be realized by the initiative of each individual person.

JR: With '*God is nothing*', you would be sure to find a wealth of colleagues to wrangle over an interpretation. However, you have inserted a 'not' before the nothing.

ZK: Not is not NOTHING!

JR: One essential aspect of your work is a certain notion of healing. Your virtual signature is invariably penned as 'Art is a doctor!' ... Sickness is not merely a state of the body but often connected to a soul. To what extent have you found a way to handle this with art? '*Schuld ist Scheiße*' [Shame is Shit], for example, has already been sewn into the surface of one your images ...

ZK: Art, whether in sound or as image, opens up the possibility of thinking with the heart. For this reason, artists are obligated to accept responsibility for that which they bring forth into the world. The mediums that artists use have frequencies, which reach and move us on deeper levels. Involvement with spirituality, or the attempt to peer behind the set, as it were, constitutes the most momentous kind of exposure to healing that is to be had within the human experience. In fact, I even go so far as to maintain that the attainment of holistic healing constitutes our purpose altogether and remains our greatest task. As it is, we find ourselves to be experiencing what are highly intense times for the whole of humankind: we are in a time of spiritual revolution.

JR: In your multi-part installation ICH VERZEIH MIR UND ALLEN ANDEREN [I FORGIVE ME MYSELF AND EVERYONE ELSE], you speak to a theme that breaches the very borders thought to exist between art and the conduct of everyday life. The multi-piece, space-claiming installation addresses the senses with intense immediacy: seven holy substances (frankincense, myrrh, camphor, amber, sandalwood, sage, and mint) are burnt upon an untreated, raw granite slab, which rests upon a mound of sand. How do you view the connection between ritual practice, the role of the actual self, and that of the 'deity'?

ZK: People tend to dwell too long upon the accusations of others and get caught up in their own self-reproach. Once we have realised that we are all sitting in the same boat and are connected with one another, our situation would rapidly improve! The holy substances are there to draw more attention back toward the essential basics. Each person who comes into contact with them is made aware of the senses and begins to reflect: rejection and acceptance alike are positive reactions, as something has been set into motion thereby. Rituals are acts of inner contemplation. As a work of art, symbol and memorial, this piece serves to remind us of what, momentarily, so desperately needs to be done.

JR: When thinking in terms of the phenomenology of religion, your 'Altarplatte' [Altar Stone] is to be cased among the notion of sacrifice. How do you perceive of the 'parallel action' of art—is it identical with that of religion; is it somewhat different? Can, or should, the next step be: 'Art is a priest!' ?

ZK: I concern myself with the heart, as it is the primary residence of my soul. That is where the altar is to be found, and everything that I need is there: the possibility of connection and the perception of the 'others' as outsourced parts of my own being. I am not into spiritual coffee chatter. Art has always had the task of awakening, challenging and questioning. In an awakened state of consciousness, we could modulate the sentence ever further, into 'Art is a fisherman!', for example, and continue in this way. The term doctor is coupled with the desire for healing; that is why I have selected it. But perhaps we will be lucky enough to encounter someone who transforms the formulation into 'The priest is a doctor!'

JR: 'Spirituality is not shopping' was the title of your most recent major exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Vienna. It was a wonderful spatial installation, linked together by an oracular inquiry and more than 100 drawings and collages. 'Spirituality', according to the show's title then, is something else. Phrases are to be read, thereby, such as 'Liebe deine Feinde, denn sie geben dir die Möglichkeit zu lernen' [Love your enemies, as they provide you with a possibility to learn], 'Wer seiner selbst voll ist, in dem hat G-tt keinen Raum' [Those who are full of themselves have no room for G-d], and 'G-TT(Vater) losigkeit, Geschichte und Gegenwart einer fixen Idee' [G-d(father) lessness, history and presence of an idée fixe] ...

ZK: I experience my own personal involvement with spirituality as a very intense process of learning and working—a few steps forward, a couple of steps back, a few forward again, and thus continuing. Now and again, I even quarrel with God—question my own beliefs. I have had to abandon many of my convictions ad acta, before aspiring onward. My momentary relationship to spirituality reflects my present state of consciousness, which is constantly undergoing transformation and experiencing growth. In some ways, my drawings document this process. I will not rest until I have unveiled the very principle of creation.

JR: Would you care to allow us a glimpse into the artist's studio? How are formulations such as these engendered? Where do you find the historical pictorial elements of your collages?

ZK: Formulations are like materials—like sand, stones or colours ... One encounters them, or they

occur to one; and then the process of documentation begins: uniting oneself with the material, becoming sensitive to it, measuring its dosages, and so on ...

JR: You work with widely varying mediums. The panel pieces are recognizable as such through their dimensions: 150x110 cm. However, they are usually constructed using a variety of differing materials: garments, clothing, sand or letters, for example. How would you describe your approach to your various mediums, formats and materials?

ZK: The unchanging dimensions of the canvases signify an equivalence to the human being: a kind of artificial anatomy. The changing materials are synonyms for transformational and developmental processes. I view my cycles of work in terms of stages: each step preconditions and legitimises the next stage of development.

JR: Text, in particular, plays a fundamental role in your work. There have, of course, been a great number of artists who, since the 1950s, have devoted their endeavours toward this element, often resulting in illegible, purely gestural forms. You have chosen to retain the semantic function of the text in your work, while employing it likewise as a formative, graphic element. It would seem that conveying messages directly is important to you, as opposed to releasing, as it were, veiled meaning for subsequent decipherment ...

ZK: That is true in part, whereby the less explicit meaning in my work is deeply interwoven—not always revealed, and not to every beholder. Each person sees exactly that which they are ready to see! Presumably, there is a level of epiphany upon which we will no longer be in need of language at all. For this reason, I have expanded the languages employed in the ‘text-images’ into a sign-language alphabet, the words of which are cast in wax. ‘Le Chaim’, ‘Schöpfung’ [Creation], ‘Liebe Deinen Nächsten’ [Love Your Neighbour] ... as long as we have not yet attained these, we will continue whirling words about in order to unfold their meanings and consequences ... Our main problem is that we underestimate the power of thoughts and words, but that would be a much longer discussion ...

JR: Your handling of art history is very playful and, at the same time, deeply subversive. Man Ray’s well-known back of a female figure is transfigured into the pregnant ‘Woman Ray’ ...

ZK: What was that saying of our colleague? Nothing new under the sun? I find myself in constant dialogue with other artists—both physically and psychically. There are certain languages that have been developed by artists, which are determined by material as well as formal aspects. I make recourse to these languages time and again, as one adopts a foreign language in the attempt to improve communication between the various parties.

JR: In closing, I have one more question: Your work is very personal; particularly, in part, through the text, you impart a great deal of your own view of the world. How do you understand your relationship to the public sphere? I LOVE GOD is the title of your next upcoming, major exhibition. To me, there is an incredible intensity of aura that resounds in this formulation, and such a great degree of insistence. Would you like to speak a few words to the courage that must have been involved in your arrival at this title?

ZK: I am utterly convinced that everything and everyone is connected with everything and everyone else. The ‘personal’ thus becomes universal, as these all are questions that concern

the whole of humankind and not simply Zenita Komad. My coming exhibition in a Minorite monastery will unveil further aspects, however.

I love God. Really!

This discussion was led by Johannes Rauchenberger