

# PRESS FILE EXHIBITION:

## AN ETERNAL GAZE

- > from 22 October 2021 till 16 January 2022
- > PARCUM

An initiative from:

- > **KU[N]ST Leuven, stad Leuven & KU Leuven**

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# AN ETERNAL GAZE

## PARCUM

> 15 OCTOBER, 2021 - 16 JANUARY, 2022,

From 15 October, 2021 to 16 January, 2022, PARCUM presents the exhibition *An eternal gaze*. This exhibition is part of the Leuven city festival BANG!

*An eternal gaze* explores our inherently human longing to understand our world and our place in it. Using religious heritage as a guide, it leads us through stories of creation, transience and hope.

Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? The enigma of our origin.

Questions about the meaning of life and the mystery of our ultimate destination have been asked since time immemorial. *An eternal gaze* examines how religion tackles such existential questions and the meaningful role that religious heritage can play in this. The exhibits in this exhibition reflect mankind's unceasing desire to map out and shape the world and the cosmos.

But then again, aren't all religions simply dialects of a single language, facets of a single approach? Will we ever truly understand the mystery of our existence? Is our deep-seated human longing to grasp the ungraspable doomed to remain unsatisfied? And if so, what does that entail for our existential questions?

Drawing on these mysteries, Dutch writer Marjolijn van Heemstra engages in a fascinating dialogue with the themes and exhibits of the exhibition. With apt observations, reflecting current issues, she considers our world view and our transience. Her reflections can be heard in the exhibition.

Marjolijn van Heemstra: *'This exhibition brings together two of my areas of interest. Usually my commissions are either about religion or about space; this combination of the two themes is a welcome exception. I rarely get commissions that so closely mirror my own way of thinking – this exhibition might well have been one of my own devising.'*

Liesbet Kusters, curator of PARCUM: *'Our museum presents thematic exhibitions at the confluence of religion, art and culture. But we also find it important to widen our perspective to include the present-day significance of religious heritage. We want to show our visitors that we don't always have to approach this heritage from the traditional religious angle. Our collaboration with Marjolijn van Heemstra is a striking illustration of this.'*

# ROOM TEXTS AND REFLECTIONS MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA

## INTRODUCTION

Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? The enigma of our origin.

Questions about the meaning of life and the mystery of our final destination have been asked since time immemorial. The answers we formulate give us something to cling to. They help to us to comprehend the incomprehensible and grasp the ungraspable. They give us a foothold, a place to call our own, in the infinitely larger cosmological narrative.

*An eternal gaze* explores how religion tackles such existential questions and the meaningful role that religious heritage can play in this. The exhibits in this exhibition reflect our unceasing longing to understand our world.

It will soon become clear that the explanations put forward by religion simply make us pose new questions. Will we ever truly understand our existence? Moreover: do we even really want to unravel that mystery? On the audio tour, author Marjolijn van Heemstra shares her thoughts on this conundrum.

This exhibition is part of Big Bang!. This Leuven city festival explores the wonders of the cosmos and their depiction.

## ROOM I: THE VOID

### MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA

The beginning before the beginning: the state in which nothing yet exists. Or better said: in which everything already exists, but not yet separately. That Creation was all about creating is a misconception, it was more of a separating. Genesis is not a creation story, it is a separation story. Light and dark, water and land... everything was separated, detached from that one great whole.

Before the beginning there is this: a compact darkness, in which, if you listen very carefully, you will hear the murmur of possibilities, of seas, stars, horizons... and beyond them cities, trams, flat screen TVs and plugs. This is the Nothing, brimful of Everything, a shimmering emptiness on the verge of fracturing.

There is a creation myth in which everything begins with a vessel full of primordial light, a vessel that one day will shatter into pieces. And that's the beginning: of time, of us, of fragmentation. According to this myth, creation is nothing but a scattering of countless sparks of light. And all of those sparks yearn for the vessel in which light was One.

Imagine: each of us a spark of light, longing to be reunited with the others. Every meeting of two sparks magnifies the light. Because of our separation - says this myth - our world is a world of longing.

But if it begins with light, it also begins with darkness, because how else can one distinguish light? ... Or was this light so all-encompassing that it also included the dark?

The primordial flash took place in silence. Sound is carried by waves of particles. Sound can't travel through empty space. Imagine: the whole cosmos shattering apart in a silent flash. Billions and billions of sparks - with among them, all the information that would one day come together to form that one individual, that person who is now standing here in a room in the Northern Hemisphere. Maybe full of expectation? Maybe brimming with questions? Or who knows, maybe simply bored? An individual full of extraterrestrial building blocks that made their way to the third planet from the sun via comets and cosmic rain.

An individual underway from beginning to end, from broken to whole... or vice versa. An ephemeral miracle in a universe that reveals no end and shows only the barest hint of a beginning. A silent bang. A flash, in which the One shattered apart into the All.

## ROOM II: CREATION

Where do we come from? In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, two creation stories answer age-old questions about our origin and the origin of our world.

Genesis Chapter 1 describes how God creates Heaven and Earth. In just six days He transforms a dark and empty void into Earth and all of its plants and animals. He then creates mankind in His image. On the seventh day He rests.

Genesis Chapter 2 retells the same story slightly differently and adds a bit more detail. In this account God creates the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, and places them in the Garden of Eden. In religious imagery, these two chapters are generally combined.

These Biblical stories were an explanation of the origin of the universe and the existence of mankind. They gave, and still give, believers a sense of order, tranquillity and validation. After all, the text repeatedly states that God 'saw that it was good'. The Biblical explanation of Earth and of mankind is part of a long tradition of creation stories. Over the ages, and across numerous cultures, hundreds of creation myths have been told, retold and handed down.

## ROOM III: THE CREATION OF MANKIND

Religion is a way of understanding and ordering the world. The creation narratives in Genesis evoke an image of an omnipotent God transforming primordial chaos into a structured cosmos. But what is our place in that cosmos. What is our role as human beings?

In Genesis Chapter 1 we read that God created humankind, male and female, on the sixth day and gave them dominion over the animals He had created earlier. Genesis Chapter 2 gives a different account. In this version God forms a man, Adam, from the dust of the ground and plants a garden for him in Eden. He then creates the animals to be Adam's companions and helpers. When He sees that Adam is still lonely, God then creates the first woman, Eve.

There has been much debate about the differences between these two texts, but there are also similarities. Both texts tell how God imposes order on chaos and creates a world that He puts at man's disposal. There is a bond between God and man.

### **MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA**

The Creator is the Separator, and with that separation comes hierarchy. Clean - unclean, high - low, on a self-devised ladder. Human above animal, man above woman. That tendency to see the world vertically, as if we aren't all living horizontally, on the same plane, coexisting with all that gives us oxygen and warmth.

I recently read that fish don't really exist. The creatures that we call fish obviously do, but not Fish as a classification. For years, scientists have toiled away in their labs, organising all those underwater wonders hierarchically. Turning sea and river life into a collection of categories, ranked from valuable to worthless. Just as we've done with people. Sexism and racial theory. From soft to hard, from white to black.

But in the early 1980s, that notion of Fish as a scientific classification was torpedoed. Fish turned out to be a fabrication. All of those underwater creatures are only loosely related. They certainly can't be grouped together as descendants of a single ancestor. Fish are not a class. The lungfish is more closely related to humans than it is to salmon.

In our desire to bring order to chaos, we tend to oversimplify. Forget the hidden kinship between land and sea, the countless gradations between man and woman and black and white... Call it the curse of the hierarchy. The curse of vertical.

## ROOM IV: FROM THE FALL TO THE FLOOD

As Genesis progresses, it turns out that Adam and Eve's stay in Paradise is short-lived. When God creates the Garden of Eden for them, He forbids them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Tempted by the cunning serpent, Adam and Eve disobey God's command. This makes God very angry. He banishes Adam and Eve from Paradise and curses them to a life of toil and pain. After their fall, Adam and Eve struggle through their now much harder life and eventually have two sons:

Cain and Abel. This proves to be a mixed blessing. When Cain murders Abel, things go from bad to worse for mankind. God finally decides enough is enough and cleanses the world with the Flood.

The Flood narrative appears in several different cultures and religions. Its powerful message – God wiping the slate clean – appeals to the imagination, but there is actually no physical evidence to support it. After the Biblical flood, God promises Noah – the righteous man he has saved – that He will never again send another such flood, even though evil will always reside in the heart of man. As a sign of His covenant with Earth, God sets a rainbow in the clouds. The relationship between God and mankind is restored and humans once again spread across the world.

### **MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA**

The Flood... always that mythical Flood: Sumerians, Greeks, Maoris, Zulus, Jews, Sino-Tibetan Kirati... that very same myth is floating around in every culture. And it's a myth that may well be rooted in fact. Perhaps it all began as an eye-witness account of a real disaster that was told and retold until it became a myth. Whatever the case, it's a tale that has been handed down from generation to generation, repeated across the millennia. For those who may be wondering why that is, the Hebrew language has an answer.

The Hebrew word *teva* means 'ark', but it also means 'word' and in Ivrit Hebrew specifically 'the literary word'. In the Book of Genesis God commands Noah to build an ark 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high. In Hebrew each letter has a numerical value. The dimensions of Noah's ark are the values of the letters Shin, Nun and Lamed, the same letters that form the word *Lashon*, which means tongue, language.

The dimensions of the ark are thus the dimensions of language, of the literary word.

In the Bible water often symbolises time. So in the story of Noah and the ark, time engulfs and destroys existence.

History washes us away, drowns us in oblivion.

But in the ark, says Genesis, there are 'two of all living creatures, male and female'. In the ark the essence of life is preserved. The ark - the language, the word - carries that essence across the destructive sea of time, bears it safely into the future, and in so doing, saves us from oblivion.

Those who don't want to disappear, those who want to preserve the link with those who have gone before them, must therefore retell the myths. Hand them down, pass the essence of existence to new generations. That is the only way we can stay afloat, by telling each other the story of ancient people and animals who survived disaster, which tells us that it is also possible for us to defy destruction. That is a lifeline, along which we can move both backwards and forwards. Because as long as the myth exists, as long as we can keep telling stories, our species will exist. From Flood, to Flood, kept afloat by language.

## **ROOM V: THE THREE-PART WORLD**

Our quest to understand the world and the cosmos raises new questions. What is the nature of our world? And what is the relationship between good and evil? The cosmology of the Hebrew Bible depicts a three-part world, with Heaven at the top, Earth in the middle and the Underworld below.

This Biblical worldview is part of a long tradition of similar views, found in many other cultures and religions. These cosmologies were developed when science was still in its infancy by people who were trying to understand their world, the cosmos and their role in it.

Nowadays, thanks to the influence of science and a more critical reading of the Bible, the Biblical worldview is generally regarded as being a product of its time. It is nevertheless an interpretation that offers believers a cosmology that gives them a place in a whole that is so much bigger than themselves.

### **MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA**

Our first God was a tree. Before we bowed down to the sun, our ancestors, or seas and stones, we worshipped the tree. Sacred for its double direction: growing up into the sky, and down into the earth. What else does that? Unites worms and birds, fungi and wings? What else unites light and darkness? When Heaven and Hell were separated, those trees were felled.

There had to be distinction, no wooden link between the high and the low. No bridge that could give us the idea that Heaven is even remotely accessible. Nothing could exist between Good and Evil. There could be nothing in between. Well, perhaps Purgatory. Where one could wait for judgement. Eternal flames or ethereal, eternal bliss.

Research has been done into the origins of Purgatory. It turns out that Purgatory is actually a real place, a stretch of rugged Irish coast, dotted with pitch-dark caves. Anyone brave enough to enter such a purgatorial cave, and stay inside it for a designated time, would – if they survived – come out again with their soul purged of sin.

So Purgatory was a real place. Until the caves were forgotten and only the story remained. Heaven and Hell also once had geographic coordinates. There are maps of them. Hell is one of the layers of Heaven. Place became story. Story became a weapon to be wielded by the powerful.

For many of us that story no longer has any bearing on our lives. Who still really fears the flames of Hell, or longs for the Pearly Gates?

Hell has simply returned to Earth. In the camps, and the fires, among the rubble and the desolation. And Heaven? That depends. According to Islam, it lies beneath your mother's feet.

## **ROOM VI: (IN)FINITE**

We are finite and our time on Earth is fleeting. Ever since mankind became self-aware, we have been confronted with our insignificance and our transience. We are but tiny particles in a much larger universe. The portrayal of man as a microcosm within a never-ending macrocosm regularly features in Christian imagery.

When we are faced with our own mortality, our transience becomes very tangible. In times of war, disease, famine, poverty and infant mortality, death is never far away. Rich or poor, none of us can escape death and death can strike at any time. It is hardly surprising then that death is omnipresent in Christian art. Miniatures, paintings, gravestones, prayer cards and all kinds of paraphernalia are brimming with allegorical representations, skulls and even entire skeletons.



## **MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA**

We live, so we die. Death: our greatest certainty, our greatest fear. We are always being told how to live. But how to die? Without any hope of immediate resurrection? How to really die, decay, disappear? Nobody knows quite how to process that. And so we focus on our life beyond our life, our extension, our legacy, the story we become. In countless fleeting little stories and posts, we fashion who we hope to be, recording who we wish to remain. Look at me, look at me. The more little hearts and thumbs-up, the greater the confirmation that we exist. The more followers, the smaller the chance that we will disappear. Our middle finger to mortality.

In the book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, a palliative nurse reveals the most common regrets her patients had as they faced the end of their lives. Number one was: 'I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.'

You can say what you like about the prophets, but each of them trod their own path. And maybe, even now, that makes them worthy of being followed: those radical choices, that faith in their own story, regardless of likes and shares, regardless of the number of followers. ... Jesus had twelve.

We are born to die, so we have to live. And maybe there's an example we can take from the leaders without any followers. Not necessarily because of their message, but because of the courage it takes to dare to be different, to dare to deviate, to dare to take an untrodden path.

## **ROOM VII: LIFE AFTER DEATH**

Can we escape our mortality? For Christians death is not the end of the line. It is simply a border crossing between earthly life and eternity. Mediaeval Christians therefore had no fear of death as such. It was even regarded as being a liberation from the toils and troubles of Earth. What they were afraid of, however, was dying suddenly and unprepared. Depictions of death in religious art provided the necessary reminders and warnings. To avoid Hell, or a lengthy stay in Purgatory, and ensure their joyous welcome into Heaven, believers were urged to live a pious and godly life.

Other religions also have versions of an afterlife. They offer believers an escape from their inevitable demise. They are a goal they have to keep constantly in mind during life, because there is always a catch: you only get to enjoy them if you have lived a 'good' life. The Christian heaven and its other faith variants thus become cosmological extensions that give earthly life an aim. Because what else could be the meaning of human life?

## **ROOM VIII: THE HEAVENLY PARADISE**

At the end of a 'good' life, and after possible purification in Purgatory, the gates of Heaven beckon. Behind them lies Heavenly Paradise, the Garden of Eden, the City of God... But what does that heaven look like? What exactly might one expect?

The Bible describes Heaven as a dome or a vault, but also as a cloth stretched out by God like a tent, or a scroll He has unrolled. It is inhabited by angels, the heavenly hosts, and by stars. Christian texts go into more detail. In them it is an idyllic garden, with rippling rivers, the most beautiful flowers, the

sweetest scents and the most delicious fruits, or a golden city, with magnificent towers and gates, set with precious stones.

In religious depictions of Heaven imagination runs riot: the afterlife is realm of abundance, a delight for the senses. What does your heaven look like? Maybe it is always springtime? Maybe you are eternally young? Or maybe you eat rice pudding there with a golden spoon...

### **MARJOLIJN VAN HEEMSTRA**

If there is a beginning, there is also an end. And something after the end. I see it as the event horizon of a black hole, the area surrounding the edge of that hole. Anything that passes beyond that horizon, and is swallowed by the hole, is lost to us forever. Impossible to perceive. Vanished into an absence of time and space beyond our understanding. Lost in the opposite of existence. Lost in absence. Ever-present absence. Made visible by the ring of that event horizon.

There is a way of describing God by what God is not. The idea is that you can get to know something otherwise unknowable by very precisely mapping out what it is not, by tracing the contours of its absence. God is not the world. God is not time. Not space. Not man, not the sea, not the cosmos.

By determining piece by piece what God is not, a shape is sketched out around the void. An event horizon.

And we are the mass, being drawn inexorably towards that black hole. Our whole life long. Gravity is irresistible.

There we go, in ever decreasing circles, seeing those who have gone before us disappear.

And it is never like in the films. There is no music. There are seldom inspired, or beautiful last words.

Sometimes, something is cleared up, put right... but usually it isn't. Most of the time it all flits by incidentally, quickly, appallingly unremarkably. As if somebody suddenly stepped out of the sunshine and into the shade - pfff, gone.

Or not. Still present in something beyond our understanding. In nothingness. In absence.

## **RECEPTION MUSEUM**

In the museum's reception area stands **Patrick Van Caekenbergh's *The Multiverse*** (2020). This intriguing work of art consists of a bubble gum vending machine filled with 107 numbered plastic capsules, each of which contains a self-made gumball and leaflet. The work combines a haptic micro-experience with a cosmic macro-perspective. Each of Van Caekenbergh's self-designed gumballs is a unique simulation of the planetary wonders and beauty that surround us. But simultaneously, they also confront us with our anthropocentric, destructive relationship with nature and creation: our human urge to master, contain and control, and its flipside, our inability to keep on doing so successfully and non-destructively... just like a gumball, which becomes viscous and unpleasant if you chew it too long, or a bubble-gum bubble that bursts and sticks to your face.

# PRACTICAL INFORMATION

## AN ETERNAL GAZE

15 OCTOBER 2021 - 16 JANUARY 2022

### PARCUM

Abdij van Park 7  
3001 Leuven  
016 27 44 80  
[bezoek@parcum.be](mailto:bezoek@parcum.be)

### OPENING HOURS

Tue - Sun: 10:00 - 17:00  
Mon and Bank Holidays: closed

### OPENING WEEKEND BIG BANG!

15 October 2021: 18:30 - 22:00  
16 & 17 October 2021: 10:00 - 22:00

### NOCTURNALS

28 October 2021, 25 November 2021, 30 December 2021: 17:00 - 21:00

### TICKETS

Standard: € 12  
Concessions: € 10  
- 18 years: € 7  
- 12 years, museumPass, ICOM: free  
Advance booking is required via [www.parcum.be](http://www.parcum.be), maximum 15 persons per time slot.

### GUIDED TOURS

Duration: 1,5h  
Price: 14 euro p/p (including tour and entry)  
Min. 10 en max. 15 persons per tour  
Bookings min. 2 weeks in advance via [bezoek@parcum.be](mailto:bezoek@parcum.be) or 016 27 44 80

# ABOUT PARCUM

At PARCUM we believe that religious heritage can be a source of inspiration and an invitation to dialogue, for everyone.

In our museum you discover the PARCUM heritage collection and you get to know the history and the collection of the Parc Abbey. We also present temporary thematic exhibitions at the confluence of religion, art and culture. These latter introduce you to the often unseen heritage of our churches, abbeys and monasteries. In today's multi-religious and highly diverse society, particular attention is paid here to promoting dialogue.

PARCUM is an initiative of the Flemish dioceses, the City of Leuven and KU Leuven, with the support of the Flemish government.

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## **Pictures**

[www.flickr.com/photos/parcum/albums](http://www.flickr.com/photos/parcum/albums)