

Encounter of Body and Material

Meryem Bayram's Emancipated Scenography

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Large pieces of ordinary cardboard, carefully shaped, have been laid out on the stage to form an abstract image. As part of the theatrical landscape they look like a board game or a rescaled landscape, inspired by children's art games. What is striking is the horizontality of the arrangement, with its references to the floor and the board; it will be broken only by the presence of the performer.

The form of *Autonomous Scenography* (2014) – created by the visual artist, stage-designer and choreographer Meryem Bayram – draws on pop-up books and that most visually enticing branch of mathematics – geometry. Bayram explains that the creation of the *Autonomous Scenography* was a watershed moment in her artistic practice.

Form

Before moving into stage design and her own theatre projects, Bayram studied sculpture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. In the course of her art studies she developed an openness to form and material and a sensitive insight into theatrical space, while changing her perception of the intrinsic nature of objects.

Bayram began to wonder how the relationship between form, body and material could be re-thought, how the notion of theatrical scenography can be redefined today, going beyond the concept of a space subordinated to the traditional rigours of plot, prop and actor.

In Bayram's performances space is created by simple means – from materials such as cardboard, wood and rubber – becoming a kind of visual score, a 'screenplay' activated by the performer in the course of the action. The invited performer takes ownership of the set of forms and shapes it in an individual way – through improvisation investing them with meaning and building individual sequences of events.

Modification

The creative process thus begins with an initial form. Bayram first creates basic, geometric shapes, leaving it to the performer to develop an interpretation. The actors explore how the body feels in a given situation, activate the forms and add their emotions. Bayram admits that some objects are created as a result of the encounter with the performer. Thus, what shapes Meryem Bayram's visual language is her curiosity about the person.

The autonomous scenography develops with every gesture of the performer. The precise folding and unfolding of the cardboard scenography, the dismantling of the space, and the layering of material which is continually re-formed into ever new, more or less epic situations evokes many cultural references, a number of which are related to the field of education. Others can be considered more abstract, such as the idea of space, architecture, landscape or communication – accompanied by the visual language that emerges from this plastic, multi-layered situation.

This playful engagement with paper and geometry understood as a means of organising our visual reality harks back to the artist's early memories related to didactics. In this work Bayram is addressing her own identity shaped by her background. Bayram draws on the predicament of being in-between, using the metaphor of 'unpacking' and the concept of creating one's own identity anew. For the artist, language is a set of abstract visual signs; communication takes place at the level of imagination, both that of the viewer and the performer. The gesture of 'unpacking' the space relies on the idea of openness, on the hiding and discovery – or revelation – of

what lies between the layers of scenography. It is also a moment of building the tension between the body and matter.

Sound

The subtle and barely audible sound of the paper itself plays an important role. As do the mundane sounds of the wrapping and unwrapping of the presents, of the material – subjected to occasional deformations – scraping the floor or rubbing against the body and clothes. On the stage, the sound made by the material is superimposed on an equally abstract musical composition, the task of which is not to ultimately define the situation, but rather to expand the scope for interpretation that accompanies the manipulation of form.

During Meryem Bayram's collaboration with Gaetan Bulourde (*Autonomous Scenography*, 2014) human speech appears spontaneously in the performance. This is all the more surprising since Bayram does not base the performances on a plotline or text, nor on telling a story to the viewer, so the introduction of human speech is a counter-intuitive element of the game. Gaetan Bulourde's vocal intervention had the character of an improvised language, devoid of meaning. There is similarity with the artistic novel *Espador Ledet Ko Ulluner!* (1973), written by the French artist Guy de Cointet (pen name: Qei No Mysxdod) which has on many occasions been read out loud by various artists, in which abstract words and even whole sentences create an illusion of a plotline. In order to confuse the performers, De Cointet introduced into the text words suggesting the names of characters, such as 'Giselle'. In contrast, Bulourde supposedly describes – in improvised language – the process of transforming space. The expansive body language and intonation of the voice undoubtedly trigger the imagination of the audience watching this futile burst of enthusiasm on stage.

In her collaboration with the visual artist and performer Guy Rombouts, in *Fourfold Autonomous Scenography* (2017) – a project that is a development of her *Autonomous Scenography* from 2014) – Meryem Bayram employs form and sound generated by AZART. This is the alphabet that Guy Rombouts and his partner Monica Droste created in the 1990s, which is based on the principles of synesthesia – a harmony of colour, shape and sound.

Each letter of the alphabet has been assigned a shape, line, sound and colour. The name 'AZART' has connotations of the alphabet (A-Z) itself, gambling – whether with happiness or fate – and, in Russian, 'azart' means 'ardour', an enthusiasm and passion for play. With the AZART software it is possible to generate words and sentences in visual and sonic form. In the performance the words 'Here!', 'Now?', 'No!', 'Where?', 'Nowhere!' and 'Fourfold' are transformed by AZART into music.

In contrast with the colourful AZART, in the *Fourfold Autonomous Scenography* (2017) and the *Autonomous Scenography* (2014) colour is almost entirely absent. It makes only a timid appearance, more like an after-image. Sometimes the earthy, neutral colour of the cardboard is replaced by a patch of colour. Thus, a yellowish circle resembles the sun, a blue square a pond or a fragment of architecture. The function of light is also important in the construction of form and colour in the performance. In *Autonomous Scenography*, the total stage blackout implies the end of the action, and in *Fourfold Autonomous Scenography*, the profiled lights co-create and transform the forms set out on the floor.

Emancipation of scenography

The forms in *Autonomous Scenography* are abstract, but they stimulate the imagination – especially when we observe closely the relationship between body and matter. The performance includes an idiosyncratic form of dialogue between the performers. For her actors, Bayram has prepared a variety of forms. Gaetan Bulourde and Clement Layes with a specific situation work in a different way (*Autonomous Scenography*, 2014).

Gaetan Bulourde is more playful. He operates with larger sheets of cardboard. Bayram has adapted the 'geometry' to Bulourde's personality, with fewer squares in his repertoire. Bulourde's preference for story-building stems from the way he approaches set design, combining forms to generate situations.

Layes's approach to cardboard is more philosophical and abstract. He controls a situation where sheets of paper – the majority are basic squares – lie on top of one another. During his performance, he spreads them on the floor, in a composition that is more horizontal, harmonious and rhythmical.

The performance Autonomous Scenography is pivoted on repetition. The size of the paper sets out the limits of the form. As Bayram points out, the 'material looks like wood, but it is more delicate.' Occasionally, the performer's body becomes heavy or freezes. At times, the situation resembles something more concrete, such as a landscape or architectural forms... But perhaps we only subconsciously look for something familiar in the abstract systems carefully laid out on the floor. As we do in the objects created by the French artist Guy de Cointet, where, in the outlines of the props, we seem to decipher the shapes of books or pieces of furniture, and in abstract sequences – signs, letters and numbers of codified stories. All this is a result of emancipated form of art, where it is easy to confuse the work of art with a prop or stage design, and the painting – with performance.

Book

In 2019 Meryem Bayram and Hans Demeulenaere together created the project W hole. The realisation takes the form of an artist's book whose point of reference has been the creators' shared fascination with the relationship between object and space. During their residency at the Frans Masereel Centrum, the artists collected various objects with holes, with the intention of assembling them into a single work of art. For Bayram, the book W hole is a possible departure point for a performance, an instrument or a score. The book functions a little like an 'autonomous stage design.' The objects that it consists of can be distributed in the space and used to create new relationships. The book is a form of re-scaled stage design, a set of handy props and simultaneously a board game.

Apparently, 'autonomous stage design' is based on an infinite number of algorithms of various sequences, with the number of instances dependent on the imagination of the performer. The sequence of forms is also a kind of record of the work carried out by the body during the performance, and the final effect is extremely sculptural and becomes an end in itself. It is surprising how scenography can emancipate itself – as William Forsythe might put it – by becoming a kind of 'choreographic object' – a sculpture, an installation or the record of a simple, banal action performed using a geometric form.¹

¹ Choreographic Objects: William Forsythe. William Forsythe and Emilio Montevideo in Conversation. <http://moussemagazine.it/choreographic-objects-william-forsythe/>