

## ON THE ABILITY TO SENSE THINGS BEFORE THEY HIT YOU

When I enter Meryem's house, a certain magical spirit comes over me. It may have to do with time, with slowing things down, with the concrete countertop in the kitchen. All the elements in the space are centered around a large wooden table. My eye is caught by a coral cactus; that I find particular. This melding of two succulent varieties into one unusual cactus-like plant is a striking object. It remembers me of the very first art piece Yoko Ono made. At the age of 4 she had all these ideas, she thought of taking one seed from a fruit and another seed from another fruit, and halve it and put it together and bury it.

Meryem had been listening to Yoko Ono that morning.

We sit down. We drop some names, Antwerp is small, Belgium is small, small world in which we feel a lot, in which we see a lot of images. Meryem comes to talk about the images people have during a conversation and she wonders how people give language to these images. She is currently looking into virtual reality and how you can make someone speed up his/her tempo with a headset during their virtual reality experience. From virtual reality we come to the topic of trust, from trust we come to the voice of Meryem.

Meryem attended the Sculpture Department of the Royal Academy of Antwerp, after an additional year of Illustration, where she experienced a lack of manual labor. Around this time, at the Turkish choir she was occupied with, there was a call for theatre makers. Meryem was the only one interested, and this is where she met Mesut. They founded the amateur company 'OnderHetVel', a breeding ground which developed into a valued and appreciated company, bringing together theatre and visual arts. Quoting the first italic sentences of their website: *"Prior to the creation of a piece comes an image, a thought, an inspiration... As a seed for what in time can become a piece."* Alongside, Meryem attended the Advanced Performance and Scenography Studies. A post-master's programme of POPOK at De Singel (International Art Campus in Antwerp). Meryem came to realize that the sculptor in her was still actively engaged, encompassing diverse materials and contexts for the expression of ideas in space. The voice of the sculptor never actually left; she purified it; the relation between body, space and object. She started to reflect on her identity. What was the meaning of her Turkish identity in her work as a sculptor? In her graduation year she decided to execute her final project in Turkey to research the installation art in the 80's. She spent 6 months in Istanbul, where she started with simple movement actions. By connecting streets, -based on the elastic game she played as a child that resembled rope skipping,- Meryem started to relate to the people in the street as human landscapes. Just like the variety of patterns and moves of the rope game, she wondered about their state of being, their patterns of thinking. This inquiry into people and the patterns of everyday life, encouraged to develop her understanding of how the city worked. Everything came to her, appeared by itself.

Back in Antwerp she and Mesut started up Kunstenfestival 0090, where Meryem curated the visual part. Their first event took place in the cellars of De Singel. For this exhibition she invited artists from Istanbul and students from HISK (Higher Institute For Fine Arts). They collaborated with AIR Antwerp and Extracity and Kunstenfestival 0090 grew from a temporary underground festival to a sustainable platform: Platform 0090, focusing on research and transdisciplinary art with attention for interspaces and hybridity.

Besides her work as a curator, Meryem practices scenography for choreographers, museums, movies, ... ***Her skill lies in assembling objects and materials that stimulate experiences perceived in time and space by living performers.***

Materiality plays an important role in her practice, reminding me of Peter Brook's definition of a scenographer: *"Cutting dynamic material in shapes, before this material has yet come into being."* Meryem's main material is cardboard, which she allows herself to use because of its natural feeling. The colour reflects its materiality.

The project titled 'Autonomous Scenography', demonstrates what happens when scenography does not emerge from a story of choreography, but comes from its roots. Meryem developed a series of pure basic forms made of cardboard sheet, which can be unfolded from an apparently empty flat surface to a whole repertory of evocative scenic elements. It derives partly from her fascination for geometry. The pure basic geometric forms activate a game, that can resemble child games. Different artists are invited to use their imagination on the material, which evokes a series of authentic performances. The sound is seen and approached as a layer that triggers a certain abstraction by creating images and another kind of imagination. The result is a kind of quest in which as an audience member you see a figure in space which deals with a structural study. It reminds me of Oskar Schlemmer who was through his ballet helping to spread the ethos of Bauhaus, by geometrical representations of bodies and space.

And there, - like in many discussions in our field -, arises the question if we need a narrative when something *live* is happening in a black box. ***Do we need logic, connected events that make sense in a way people expect people to make sense?*** What are the possibilities when you want to present visual art in the black box? When you derive from the object and things happen that you couldn't expect or are not scripted: the scenography is created though of different parameters. Scenography begins to carry content through its notion of a sensitive yet evocative game of forms, spaces, objects and worlds. In the performance 'FOURFOLD (Autonomous Scenography)', we see a piece of paper (un)folding, two bodies constructing and deconstructing, shapes are shifting, language is being approached as if it is sound/scapes, landscapes of conversation. Who better to ask to collaborate than visual artist Guy Rombouts, who works with similar mechanisms to generate images? The duration and notion of time are reflected through light arrangements. Classical theatre conventions are questioned. 'FOURFOLD (Autonomous Scenography)' is not a performance or theatre-piece, but a generator of changing scenography. *"We should never forget that artists have always sought new ways to do old tasks"*, wrote Darwin Reid Payne in his book Computer Scenographics. That exactly pinpoints my feeling about Meryem's work after our conversation, in the space of her home in which all is arranged around the center of the room.