

Scenography in the staging / on the stage / in the mind of the audience

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Introduction

Scenography can be 'a sensory as well as an intellectual experience' (Butterworth/McKinney 2009:4), and can be defined as 'the seamless synthesis of space, text, research, art, actors, directors and spectators that contributes to an original creation' (Howard 2009:130). The contemporary theatre is changing, and part of that change is an appearance of more blurry division between the individual components within a performance. What then becomes the role of the scenographer? Does scenography lose its specific qualities and becomes interchangeable with dramaturgy – or is it quite the opposite, that it is within the contemporary theatre that scenography gains a revitalized position? If the latter is the case, what does it imply?

In this article we wish to explore how scenography relates to the performance as a whole and scenography's participatory role in the production of meaning, with focus on the visual and sensuous aspects in the process of production. This investigation has been done through interviews¹ with three different pairs of theatre and performance creators, all within the Norwegian contemporary scene:

- **Verdensteatret: Lisbeth Bodd, Asle Nilsen and Piotr Pajchel** (www.verdensteatret.com)

The art and theatre company Verdensteatret are known for their performances which can be perceived as much as an installation as a performance, and can be experienced both as a concert and as a theatre performance. They have toured much internationally. Recent performances: *The Telling Orchestra*, *Louder*, *And All the Questionmarks Started to Sing*.

¹ Interviews was conducted after a semi-structured, qualitative method as described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Questions concerning the particular scenographical strategies of the artists were thought out, but the interviews were conducted as conversations, where the artists freely spoke of their artistic process and their thoughts on scenography, dramaturgy, and modes of communication. All citations have been authorized.

- **Heine Avdal and Yukiko Shinozaki**

Avdal and Shinozaki are contemporary dance developers creating site specific projects in collaboration with different crews. They work both inside and outside traditional theatre venues, but lately perhaps more in non-art environments. Their dance projects could also be seen as performance projects, creating gestural and auditory situations that interferes with everyday life. Recent performances: *Field Works*, *Nothing's for Something*, *Borrowed Landscape*.

- **Eirik Stubø and Kari Gravklev**

Director Eirik Stubø and scenographer Kari Gravklev have worked together on several productions, within different theatre institutions. Despite working with very different textual starting points, their performances have a very distinct look. Performances: *Sorga kler Elektra*, *Eg er vinden*, *Rosmersholm*.

These three teams represent different positions within the contemporary theatre and performance scene of Norway. They also work with different methods and within different styles and contexts. Our intention with these interviews was to explore how significant Norwegian artists within contemporary theatre and performance work, in order to find different scenographic perspectives and processes that are at work in current theatre and performance production.

Verdensteatret seeks a flat hierarchical structure, where the roles are shared within the group. Who is in this situation the scenographer and how does the scenography occur? Avdal and Shinozaki enter existing contexts, being aware of them precisely as contexts. How do they relate to or interfere in the existing environment, and can we at all speak of a scenography when the setting already exists? Stubø and Gravklev usually work within theatre institutions, where the premise of the performance is the text and the director is seen as the interpreter of this text. How and when does the idea of the visual rise? How do director and scenographer influence each other?

Concert for Greenland and The Telling Orchestra: Two works from the same material

The Oslo based theatre company *Verdensteatret* was founded in 1986 and their work can be considered to be cross-art and multi-media. Their productions are defined both as theatre performances and as art installations, and are performed/exhibited in art as well as theatre contexts. Verdensteatret refuse to use the word 'scenography' on their work, and consequently use the word 'material' instead. A sound, a piece of wood, a text, a picture, a movement -- to Verdensteatret all of these things can be the material for a performance or an installation. The process from the first 'piece of material' appears to the opening night can take several years, and in the end result all the elements are considered inseparable (Bodd & Nilsen & Pajchel 2012).

Their latest production *And All The Questionmarks Started To Sing* (2010) was developed both as a stage performance and as an *electromechanical installation* with performers. In the room one finds objects that are connected to motors that are running, as well as video projectors, electronic and acoustic sounds. The components are interconnected to trigger each other by digital signals, causing chain reactions. The room can at any point be entered by performers, who hook off the motors and make the objects move, thus creating sound and generating video projections. After approximately forty minutes they hook on the motors again and leave the room - an installation turned into a performance before it is left as an installation again.

(Figure 1)

Concert for Greenland (2004) is a performance that lasts sixty minutes, with six performers. It is an audio-visual composition where visual art, sound, video, text and theatre try to unify into one composition. In the middle of the room there is a construction of wooden planks with several plateaus in different height and depths. Figures made out of driftwood and other things chosen by coincidence are also in the room, as well as video projectors and light. The performers in this setting can be seen as moving objects, placed on wooden boards in the center of the room. Although they wear microphones and speak during the performance, it is impossible

for the audiences to understand the words since the sound is distorted through computer-generated processes. Approximately seven other persons sit on the side of the installation controlling the preset programming and live manipulation of the sound, video projections and light output of the computers.

The Telling Orchestra (2006) on the other hand is an electro-mechanical installation which doesn't include performers, but mounted in the same room as *Concert for Greenland*. This means the movement of the figures is done by machines such as small, silent dc-motors, power transformations and micro-processors. Each figure has its own 'voice' and a repertoire of movements and sounds. The movement of the figures is scripted and programmed after a text-based score, so that each sequence constitutes a complex lapse of movement of figures, sound, video projections, light and shadows. There are several versions of the story about the start of the transformation from performance into the installation of *The Telling Orchestra* (Bodd & Nilsen & Pajchel, 2012). One of them is that they started as a speculation about what the figures were doing at night after the artists had left.

(Figure 2)

Synaesthetic anti-scenography

One might compare the process of Verdensteatret to the processes of artists working without a deadline for publishing or gallery opening. So, it is clear that the process of Verdensteatret differs much from the process of the traditional theatre productions with a tight production plan. Verdensteatret tells us that a production often starts with a research period that takes place in a foreign place. When they return home the impressions stored in the memory come to the surface.

Each production involves about fifteen persons; some work full time while others work more periodically. In the last two months of production, all the artists are present. The room with all parts of the performance/ installation is available during the whole period and it is developed parallel with all media. But who then is the scenographer in the group? 'We are many people who write together, make a piece together – a work together. We have people from different professions, but when we work together we are only Verdensteatret-workers' (Bodd & Nilsen & Pajchel 2012).

The group confirms that they have intense discussions, especially in the beginning of the processes. When there are disagreements, they decide about directions based on discussion. On the other hand there are tasks that only some people can do, like programming. But the overall impression from the interviews is that in groups where there are no official roles according to profession, there might be more room for coincidence and personal preferences than within conventional theatre structures.

Verdensteatret relate to the physical presence of objects, sounds and images in the room. When working on all media at the same time, they discover each media's qualities and possibilities, but also how each media can 'borrow' qualities from another media. To Verdensteatret it seems that the auditive, physical and visual characters of objects cannot be separated, and that each object in the performance space is a part of the whole. Although refusing the term 'scenography', one could perhaps say that Verdensteatret makes performances where everything is a part of the scenography: The auditive, physical and visual 'characters' can just as easily be seen as scenographical elements. Their catch phrase - 'seeing the music, hearing the pictures' (Bodd & Nilsen & Pajchel, 2012) shows this *synaesthetic* approach to production and perception, where the different sensuous elements come together and get confused. This opposition to the theatrical institution combined with their research based production strategy, could thus be characterized as both anti-scenographical and scenographically overloaded.

Borrowed Landscapes: Heine Avdal and Yukiko Shinozaki

Working in the area of spatial connections, the Norwegian-Japanese dance duo Heine Avdal and Yukiko Shinozaki, have created several site specific dance projects that partly transcends the concept of scenography. They do everything in relation to the actual performing space, both respecting and manipulating the existing physical, social and psychological conditions. In the series of projects *Field Works* from 2009-2010, they more explicitly developed spatial investigations of an existing environment. The spectators were lead through office spaces, where actual workers were working, but the fact that they were accompanied by dancers and sounds created bigger or smaller gaps with the existing modes and realities. In the latest project series *Borrowed Landscapes* they have continued this search for nuances in

everyday life by relating their art production to an already defined, non-art environment, such as a supermarket.

At the international theatre festival in Stamsund in the north of Norway in June 2012, they interfered, but also communicated with, the local supermarket Mini-Rimi (a Norwegian chain of supermarkets). Avdal and Shinozaki thus 'borrowed' the shop landscape, though leaving it open for regular shopping, and developed a specific spatial dramaturgy based on the objects and physical structures in the room. In *Borrowed Landscape: Mini-Rimi* one had to book a time, and only four spectators at a time were given headsets and invited into the store for an art-enhanced supermarket-tour². The shop was however open to regular customers as well, thus creating several levels of spectator- and actorship within the same performance. Entering the shop, a rather calming mix of supermarket-noises was sent through the headsets. But the headsets were not closed off, so they also let in noises from the outer environment, such as the actual beeps of the counters and the talking of other shoppers. Having entered this soundscape and started to wander around, the spectator was after a while approached by the dancers. These were dressed regularly, some with shopping baskets, some with charts. With noticeable, but very subtle gestures, they indicated that the spectators were to follow them. In the meantime, other noises, both triggered by the dancers and made by loudspeakers placed in the shelves around the shop, were filling and confusing the space. The spectators were then gathered in the center of the shop, dancers passing, doing regular chores, putting groceries in their baskets or charts (one of the dancers was also dressed as a Rimi employee) filling the shelves with products. After a certain time the actions and movements of the dancers were getting more absurd in the shop setting and thereby more noticeable -- they started to stand out from the shopping environment, becoming more obviously 'art'.

In the middle of the performance, lines from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* were sent into the headsets. Some of them were illustrated by the dancers' actions, for example when holding up a big piece of plastic-packed red meat when the words 'this bloody thing' were pronounced. At one point the dancer dressed as an employee was slowly falling onto the floor, creating a schism with the performance and the

² The format of *Borrowed Landscape* varies and has later also been performed in bigger supermarkets where the audience does not have to book a time. This was the case with *Borrowed Landscape* at the festival Oktoberdans in Bergen in the fall of 2012. This allowed for a more general mix of spectators, including the festival audience and the regular shoppers in the same way.

actual shopping space at once. The body lying on the floor made the situation more real and more illustrational at once. Associations might lead to the actual medical situations that occur in the public sphere, but was also a very 'artled' or made expression in this environment. In the end the dancers disperse, and the spectators are left at the counter -- the beeping of the counter becoming louder also in the headsets.

(Figure 3)

Shakkei: Revealing the Existing Place

The work of Avdal and Shinozaki touches upon the site specific as described by Miwon Kwon (2004:2-3) and Nick Kaye (2000:1), it uses and creates relations to an existing environment. Their project localize and slightly distort the different dynamics of this space, merging everyday and art strategies. 'Borrowed landscape' is a translation of the Japanese gardening concept *shakkei*, a technique where elements surrounding a garden is included in the garden as a prolongation or visual communication with the overall landscape. This strategy is above all relational, connecting already existing and constructed elements, physical, social as well as psychological. This coincides with the philosopher of space and place Michel de Certeau's perspectives defining the human practice as closely linked and intertwined with physical and social structures already existing in the space (De Certeau 1984:117).

However the term 'specificity' can be read to mean not only something existing, but something *specific*. Avdal and Shinozaki transcend this specificity, making the place more commonly human through the reflexive glasses of art: The interaction of bodies, social and cultural structures of supermarkets, urban spaces, private domains, etc. are all aspects with a more universal value. In our interview with Avdal and Shinozaki (2012) they emphasized two aspects that we see as particularly relevant for these ideas on pre-existing and constructed space. One is their artistic approach to the site of performance as a given or already existing space. First they seek to understand and not overpower the already existing environment, but slowly they manipulate or distort some of these given structures, thereby giving them a different appearance. In *Mini-Rimi* they asked themselves when the space changed

from being a regular shopping environment to becoming an animated or performative environment. In their artistic process they rehearse *in situ*, searching precisely for these nuances and materials that can be explored artistically -- walking slightly too close, steering slightly too intensely, humming slightly too loud, making slightly too obvious patterns -- exaggerating first finely, then more overtly.

The second aspect they mention to be of importance, is their wish to make something else appear in the already existing environment, to show us some of the *sensuous landscapes* that have disappeared, been suppressed or that just are less visible than others. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2000) speaks of these sensuous strategies as some of the most important for artists today, the making visible of other things than those we normally notice. Rancière sees this as a political matter – literally, what we see and what we hear is not a matter of indifference or personal choice, it is always also a matter of power and politics, of what we emphasize and take into consideration. This, in the end, becomes a scenographic strategy, though it transcends the institutional structures given by theatre rooms and black boxes. Scenography for Avdal and Shinozaki is thus about a negotiation with a material, both pre-existing and potential, both physical and mental, and the concept of scenography becomes simultaneously important and irrelevant. On the one side, they work like scenographers, revealing the dynamics of existing places. On the other, they merge the roles of dancer, dramaturg and scenographer, creating works that free the work from the institutional setting. At the same time, they work within the arts, using art as a natural frame for reality.

(Figure 4)

Less is more: Eirik Stubø & Kari Gravklev

Norwegian director Eirik Stubø and scenographer Kari Gravklev have been collaborating on numerous productions for more than fifteen years. They have a literary orientation, but despite working with very different textual starting points their performances have developed a distinct look.

At first glance, what might appear most striking in several of Stubø and Gravklev's performances is the apparent lack of scenography -- at least conventionally

speaking. In Jon Fosse's *Eg er vinden* (I'm the Wind) from 2007, the audience met two actors standing and barely moving on a huge, empty stage. This scenographic approach is similar to *Rosmersholm* by Henrik Ibsen, which they did in 2008. As with *Eg er vinden*, the performers were moving about on an empty stage, and the actions were kept to a minimum. Sliding doors were used to make perspectives and open up or narrow the stage.

(Figure 5)

Both *Rosmersholm* and *Eg er vinden* were performed on the main stage at the National Theatre in Oslo. The spacious approach was combined with a manipulation of the room, as well as a close relationship with lighting designer Ellen Ruge. *Eg er vinden* is a text about two men sailing together. During their journey, one of the men commits suicide. The light was partly set in a random shuffle mode, which meant that the actors were as likely to be standing in darkness as under a spotlight. The light also had a scenographic part in sketching up something that could look like a boat, or at least the shadow of a boat. As with *Rosmersholm*, the main visible scenographic element was the use of smoke that filled both the stage and the audience auditorium.

(Figure 6)

Their most recent performance, *Jeg forsvinner* (I Disappear) by Arne Lygre, also has this characteristic Stubø/Gravklev-look. The stage is empty apart from some simple chairs, and the entire room is as usual painted black. But the performance is staged at 'Malersalen', the National Theatre's smallest stage. Located on the top of the building, in the attic, the room is more intimate than the spacious main stage. When the audience arrive, all of the doors and windows leading in to the stage are being kept open -- and as the performance is about to start, one of the actors close them. The room is being sealed off, and as the plot thickens on stage so does the air in the room. In the official press photos of the performance we see projections of text, which is an element that has been removed in the actual performance. The projection of text upon the actors is now only done indirectly through the style of acting.

(Figure 7)

Stubø and Gravklev have developed an almost non-verbal relationship over the years. But they share an interest in telling a linear story in the performance, and Stubø compliments Gravklev on her ability to *read*; that is, on her interest and understanding of the text. It can be hard to detect whether the relationship between these two artists rely on scenographer Gravklev's literary orientation in her work -- or Stubø's visual and spacious approach. Is the text the premise of the performance, or does it play a more postdramatic role as 'a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition', as described by Lehmann (2006:46)?

In the beginning of a project, Gravklev and Stubø start out by reading the text out loud together. They explore the words and the text together, and allow for the text and the material to mature through time. In the institutional theatres in Norway one usually has to hand in a scenographic plan for the performance as much as seventeen months before the premiere. And if a scenographer wants big objects on stage, this usually has to be decided very early. In the case of Stubø and Gravklev this appears to often (though not always) result in a lack of big scenographic elements. The stage in itself is not supposed to represent any particular place. Both Stubø and Gravklev are interested in materiality, but the elements on stage usually don't have a specific reference to neither time nor place. This way everything becomes open to interpretation.

Between precision and potentiality

According to Stubø, one of the ideal ways of perceiving theatre is to be found in the ancient Greek theatres. The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens creates a distance between the audience and the performers, which appeals to Stubø. The Greek theatre did not serve as a replacement of the political community it existed within (Fischer-Lichte, 2008:56), and the same can be said of Stubø and Gravklev's performances. They create spaces where a theme is explored, but it is very much up to the spectator how she interprets it. The room in itself is not supposed to represent any particular place. Both Stubø and Gravklev is interested in materiality, but the elements on stage usually do not have an obvious reference to neither time nor place. Stubø is further more interested in who the actors are as persons than the

characters they are supposed to play, which can be said to open up a gap between the actor and his/her role. Therefore, the actors usually present or tell their characters more than impersonating or 'becoming' them. This way the performers also occupy a 'gestural space', as described by McKinney/Butterworth with reference to Pavis (2009:123). The choice of actors is very essential, and according to Stubø it is they who define the space.

Stubø and Gravklev create performances where they open up texts and show them to the audience. Instead of presenting a specific reading of a text, the text is laid open for the audience to explore. At the same time the performances are carefully orchestrated and arranged, and it becomes unclear whether the scenography is to be seen as a dramaturgical element that works for the text – or if the performance as time, space and bodies works as a scenographical site where the text is only one of the elements in a non-hierarchical whole (Lehmann, 2006:86). Stubø and Gravklev seemingly work very traditionally, with the text as their common starting point. But their sense for timing and rhythm, combined with an almost musical approach to orchestrating both actors and the rest of the elements in the performance, merges their dramaturgy with scenography, and results in performances that resemble poetry more than unambiguous stories.

Conclusion

Of the six artists interviewed, Kari Gravklev is the only one working with the title 'scenographer' -- all of them however, can be considered working within the scenographic field. Verdensteatret's resistance towards the term scenography, might be a reaction to a rigid definition of the term. But as Butterworth and McKinney defines scenography as 'the manipulation and orchestration of the performance environment' (Butterworth/McKinney, 2009:4), this approach might fit with the strategies and methods of all of the artists we've described here.

We have interviewed only artistic teams that have worked together for a long period of time, which might be part of the reason for their close relationships and almost flat

structures. And it is interesting to learn that they all experience that the idea to a new production is usually born within the previous project. In other words; one production is pushing them forward into the next. So, the institutional structure, with all its practical rules and challenges, might have a bigger influence on each production than the development of continuity in their artistic development.

The conventional understanding of scenography as stage design and props has for the three production teams that we have interviewed been 1) a point of opposition, 2) an already transcended concept and 3) a natural framework and institutional function. Overall the concept of scenography seems to have become more prominent, functioning as a visual dramaturgy (Lehmann 2006) and seen to produce larger parts of the conveyed meaning within a performance or theatre situation. Scenography today then on the one hand becomes an increased spatial and sensuous awareness developed through the late twentieth and early twenty first century aesthetics (Böhme 2008:525), and on the other hand is a more specific institutional framework and function, working as both a facilitator and an anti-thesis.

Starting with an ambition to research the position and potential of scenography on the Norwegian contemporary scene, we were surprised to find that the actual term 'scenography' was not as specifically used anymore, but had indeed become a part of the stage production more widely. Further, some of the artists defined themselves in opposition to the theatrical 'division of labor', claiming this to interfere with the organic and synaesthetic contemporary mode of production. Addressing a field of stage production that more extensively than ever before has incorporated the room, the context, the costumes as well as the staging itself, we see the need to develop a more precise vocabulary for scenography in the staging, that would work both inside and outside traditional theatre institutions, that would seek to meet the complexity of interdisciplinary production processes, as well as grasp the interaction between the components of a performance.

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