

## **I can smell the scenographer!**

This staged discussion on the nature of scenography took place in the Reithalle of kaserne Basel, at the last day of the festival. on Sunday, 5 December 2010.



I can smell the scenographer!  
Do we all smell the scenographer? It stinks!  
Being a scenographer is a very embarrassing situation.....  
But remember, scent guru Sissel Tolaas told us nothing stinks.....  
Until thinking makes it so.  
We, are all scenographers, I presume?  
How does it feel to be one? Great! Right?  
Now that our spectacular society tends to lose cohesion,  
getting together in this warm bath of professionalism feels good.  
But what the hell is scenography? What is it supposed to do?  
And how does it affect me once it is done?  
Good morning!



In the old days, dramatist Anna Viebrock and architect Jacques Herzog talked about the other day, the days of Joseph Beuys, everybody was an artist. A work of art was the individual expression of a profoundly personal emotion. Now, in our days of the spinning spectacle, scenography (this atavistic phantom of the opera) has expanded its ubiquitous theatre of operation to such an extent that every single human being (in a way) has become a small-scale scenographer in the all-encompassing larger *mise-en-scène* of society.

In such a context, the individual is not a scenographer out of free will but out of necessity. One has to stage one's own life! Right? That's the parallel: scenography on a smaller scale acts as a narrow band filter blocking the noise. Any act of scenography on a larger scale (looked at from *the thousand plateaus* of individuality) must be understood as a personal translation of a confusingly complex situation. Flattening complexity as an act of survival! Right?

Now, the situation might be LOUD. Loud scenographic sign systems function in an overheated mode, trying to fill their fundamental emptiness with a substance that isn't simply there. QUIET, however, entails that a system's noise is consistently filtered out to the point where the complete picture of the content can be perceived in all its overwhelming but calm complexity.

Each situation is a total of space, time, and narrative. Consider these three elements to form a polygon. It would be the polygon of the locus, the core of any staging. Architect Alexander Schwarz was talking about that when he stated there is always a clue in location. For him, the museum typology was a conceptual sandwich of two layers. Beneath: the basement, the haven of recollection. On top of that, there was the lantern and the nervous searchlight of selection.

Schwarz interpreted his task as a museum architect to provide protection and accessibility. For an architect, that level of engagement might be enough. On the other hand, it's merely a point of departure for a scenographer. True, it lies in the etymological nature of the phrase that scenography offers shelter to an idea. But once that shelter is constructed, like David Chipperfield's museum in the desert of Sudan, at some point, a hungry nomad will almost unavoidably knock at the door of the deserted hut. And I assure you, there's no architect around to answer the call. That's the point: the scenographer coming next has to do the dirty work. That's the difference: the architect generates spaces with a low profile in terms of identity. The scenographer subsequently has to charge that space with narrative potential so that SPACE becomes PLACE. Architecture may live with voids and untouched surfaces. In scenography, however, every square inch of surface bears narrative strands waiting to get activated. That moment, narrative in action supposes a spectator. The spectator is the instance of TIME. Without a spectator, any scenography is timeless. Speechless!





Of course, there are time-based streams of information. But those are governed by the time of the clock. I'm talking about a different sort of time, the curved time of experience, about DURATION. That's time with an arrow. Irreversible. Not so clocktime, like the runtime of a movie, which may be played backward at equal length. I'm talking about the cycle of memory and imagination, which is triggered in any experience and, therefore, involved in any act of scenography.

As to the flow of events, in terms like past, present, and future, I have to extend our notion of TIME with a text from the dramatist Samuel Beckett, published in his famous essay on PROUST in 1931. Beckett is talking about the cancer of time, by which he means the hopelessness and the destructive force of a fundamentally bleak future approaching us daily.

Usually, the future is seen as the vehicle of hope. If the present is sad, people project their hope for an uncertain future that might not come. Who knows? Not for Beckett, though. Vladimir and Estragon are Waiting for Godot, who will never arrive. In Endgame, Hamm is waiting in vain for Clov to leave. So, for Beckett, the future is grey, without any hope or promise. That's what he calls *the suffering of being*, which comes down to the unavoidable daily RE-invention of our situation - let's define this as small-scale scenography. Like personal stagings that allow our present to appear as colorful and optimistic instances of time. Such a personal act of scenographic reinvention and responsibility might be called *the manufacture of meaning*. And that's what we're here for.

frank den oudsten, 5-12-2010

