

Scenography as Ecology (Being Scenographical)

As a consequence of this years research with the Material Strategies artistic research project I would like to think *Scenography as Ecology*, and perhaps *Being Scenographical*. These formulations derive from how my understanding of material has developed throughout the research as well as my deepened engagement with the philosophical view called Object Oriented Ontology. This text is an outgrowth of a lecture which I held at The Literature House in Fredrikstad with the title *Scenography as Public Dialogue* in May 2019. Preparing this lecture I realized how my thinking around scenography and public space had been influenced by the Material Strategies research, which in turn encouraged me to write this short reflection. This is intended as a gentle opening up of possible thinking, an opening into future explorations of scenography material.

Scenography as Ecology as thought here has nothing explicitly to do with recycling or environmental protection. It is rather a question of *being ecological*, which as I consider the basic characteristics of practicing scenography, might be further explored as *being scenographical*. I am being influenced here by the philosopher Timothy Morton who writes about *ecological awareness* and I would also propose that one might think *scenographical awareness*. It was through thinking awareness of public spaces when developing scenographic works for public spaces that this thinking was further developed. When thinking *Scenography as Public Dialogue*, public space, in all its manifoldness, becomes the material of the scenographic work and I would propose that a certain kind of *scenographic awareness* is necessary for it to exist.

Ecological awareness is knowing that there is a bewildering variety of scales, both temporal and spatial, in any given context (Morton 2016, 180). As proposed by Timothy Morton: "in an age of ecological awareness there is no scale to rule them all (Morton 2017, 113)." Scale has always been the basis of any practice of architecture or scenography, but the sovereign scale has always been the human scale. With a non-anthropocentric aspiration, as implied with *ecological awareness*, our understanding of scale needs to be reevaluated. This also means reevaluating the relationship between scenography and material. *Scenographical awareness* might thus also imply expanding our attention towards and understanding of the bewildering variety of scales, temporal and spatial, when practicing scenography.

Scenography can be traced to the theatre of ancient Greece, through its description in Aristotles *Poetics* as 'Skenographia'. From the Greek roots '*skēn-*', meaning stage or scene building, i.e. context, and '*graph-*', meaning processes of representation such as writing or drawing, i.e. describing. Contemporary scholars have translated it as 'stage painting' or 'scenic writing' (McKinney and Palmer 2017, 4). The *Skēnē* was a simple structure at the back of a theatre stage from early ancient times which gradually developed into a more complex structure. Precisely what the word, 'Skenographia', meant at that time is of course unknown and different scholars have different understandings of it. My intention here is not to delve deeper into interpretations of this words origins and meaning. In the online Merriam Webster Dictionary the first definition of scenography is as follows: "the art of perspective representation especially as applied to the design and painting of stage scenery". A definition like this is not necessarily relevant to refer to, but in my talk *Scenography as Public Dialogue* I chose to consider different definitions of scenography to create a backdrop for the discussion. The key words for me here are *description* and *perspective*. The simple, open, definition of scenography as *describing the stage*, i.e. *describing the context*, seems ambiguously appropriate when thinking *Scenography as Ecology*, as I am thinking it here. This also applies for the simple definition *perspective representation*, where I choose to emphasize *perspectives* in plural, not necessarily bound to a

one point optical perspective representation, but rather the intention to represent manifold *perspectives*.

In *Scenography as Public Dialogue* I proposed that scenographic work in public spaces have certain basic characteristics. Scenographic work in public spaces does not create a proposal for how things could or should be, i.e. scenography does not need to be going anywhere in particular, not from a specific known A to a specific proposed B. Scenography rather works through an actual 1:1 dialogue with context and all its involved characters (beings). It does so through attempting to represent manifold perspectives. Scenographic work in public spaces is about letting things happens, rather than doing something. This kind of work is never explicitly active or passive, it is letting things happen with an intrinsic intention of openness. Scenographic works in public spaces may encourage new understandings of current conditions and expose potentials. It may also create incentives and initiate dialogues towards possible futures of public spaces. The work is always impure and perforated, always being with something else and always blurring the border between art and architecture. Scenography is never one or the other, either/or, it is rather always both/and, simultaneously part of and separate from context. As a form it really does not exist in itself, only in relation with or perhaps rather in symbiosis with something else. Scenographic works in public space can generate awareness of the bewildering variety of scales, temporal and spatial, in our shared public spaces. Awareness of the diversity of ways of being in, with and of these spaces, i.e. awareness of co-existence.

On movement Timothy Morton writes: "Minimal movement is *stillness*. Stillness isn't static. Stillness is alive, quivering. This shimmering, like the light sparkling on a lake in the twilight: that's the basis of movement. It is like how listening is the basis of music, how listening is the basis of language." (Morton 2016, 168) In response to this I propose to think sensing as the basis of scenography, i.e. sensing context, or a perhaps constant sensing of the friction between work and context. Sensing includes all possible ways of perceiving a context. Scenographic practice exists in a space of attunement one might say, again paraphrasing Morton. *Being scenographical* is a mode of continually tuning in relation to context, being with it, sensing it.

When thinking scenography as public dialogue, one becomes aware that this work is ambiguous, it is not clear what is influencing what. The scenographic work is influencing context and context is influencing work. This is also a basic scenographic characteristic, as the scenographic work only exists in symbiosis, i.e. through co-existence. There is always some form of distinction between work and context, but there is no clearly distinguishable border between the two, no matter how close one looks. The edge between work and context, between scenography and public space, is always blurry. Scenography is waving, undulating, vibrating, continually colliding with context, but never fully merging with it. This is part of the dialogue when thinking *Scenography as Public Dialogue* and it is this vibration, this friction between work and context, which may initiate change. Which as mentioned earlier may encourage new understandings of current conditions and expose potentials, as well as create incentives and initiate dialogues towards possible futures of public spaces. Again, *Scenography as Ecology* is less about doing something and more about letting things happen.

Further feeding from Mortons *ecological awareness* and writings on aesthetics, one might propose that if the basis of scenography is sensing, then the basic scenographic experience is a feeling of solidarity with what is given, with any given context. If scenography only exists in a continual vibration, back and forth, between work and context, the feeling of solidarity with what is given would be difficult to avoid. *Being scenographical* means having solidarity with the given context.

If *scenography* is *describing the stage*, i.e. *the context*, which one might consider an act of solidarity with anything part of this stage and *scenography* is attempting *representation* of manifold *perspectives*, acknowledging a bewildering variety of scales, temporal and spatial, then thinking *Scenography as Ecology* seems engaging. Co-existing with material is a basic act of *being scenographical*, as scenography only exists in symbiosis with something else. Scenography may be context and context may be scenography, in a OOO understanding of context as material. Scenography is never itself.

Reference list

McKinney, J. and Palmer, S. 2017. *Introducing 'Expanded' Scenography in Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*. Methuen Drama.

Morton, T. 2016. *Appearance is War* in J. Brouwer, L. Spuybroek, S. van Tuinen (eds.) *The War of Appearances: Transparency, Opacity, Radiance* (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing).

Morton, T. 2017. *Being Ecological*. Pelican Books.