Bēton

BAHAR TEMIZ

Concrete Foundations

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Concrete structures shape our world, forming the naked framework for our existence. We trust them to hold and support us. And yet, in ‘Bēton’ by Bahar Temiz, this apparent stability already contains the seeds of its own undoing. Temiz, together with musician Alan Van Rompuy (Azertyklavierwerke) and scenographer and light designer Pol Matthé take this paradox of concrete as their point of departure. But what begins as a precise inquiry into the mirage of concrete gradually loses focus, as the concrete core is hidden under ornamental layers in a performance that casts its net too wide.

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The stage itself is a composition. A white rectangle cuts into the black floor. At its centre stands what looks like a brutalist pillar made of grey concrete blocks. The uppermost block is blueish, and on that rests a single blue cushion, slightly misaligned. The mind drifts to the domestic softness of a bedroom, held together by a hidden concrete scaffolding. The pristine stillness already foreshadows what follows: scrolls of text drape the back wall, indecipherable in the half-light, a battery of synthesizers lines the left wall, and a circle of spotlights hangs suspended above.

Light as an actor

Before a body appears, light begins to act. Beams of light fall onto the pillar, casting elongated shadows across the white floor like a sundial. The grey column is doubled, its shadows gaining an independent presence. This is architecture in the second power, an architecture of ephemeral light and shadows rather than firm structures.

Temiz enters cautiously, as if observing this room for the first time. She approaches the tower, bends down before it. When she touches and holds the

structure, the central artifice of the performance is revealed: the seemingly sturdy and unyielding pillar of concrete isreveals itself to be made of soft foam cushions. Body and structure now mirror each other's vulnerability, as if the body transfers its soft logic into the previously rigid matter. Then it collapses. The structure disintegrates into fragments, and she remains within it, on the ground, no longer outside the material but partially absorbed by it.

Nothing disappears; everything persists in altered form.

Alan Van Rompuy steps forward from the shadows to take his position behind the mixing console on the left. Melodic techno beats interspersed with distorted howls and glitch-like percussion run through the space. The body shifts accordingly, moving from tentative contact with the (im-)materiality of the (in)concrete. Temiz now submits to the rhythm and shape of the electronic beats. Sitting among the debris, she moves in small lateral pulses, miniature twerks aligned with the sound vibrations. She rebuilds new constellations from the fragments. Nothing disappears; everything persists in altered form. Meanwhile, light continues to flicker, multiplying perspectives although it lacks a clear relation to the action.

Reciting and singing
The first scenes pass in silence, but soon Temiz begins reciting and singing in a mix of Dutch, English, and French. The remainder of the performance will continue in this vein, and the dense verbal layer soon dominates our perception, overshadowing all other layers of meaning. The initial clarity dissolves under the weight of words. Upon exit, a booklet awaits us: '6 songs for 1, 2, 3, 4 walls the ceiling and the floor'. The booklet contains more than five hundred verses.

Where language expands, the body contracts. It moves with the words, miming, demonstrating, supplementing the verbal cues. Temiz has a lot to say, yet the textual material oscillates between the overly explanatory and indistinct platitudes. One wonders what might emerge if less were said, if the body were allowed its proper space beyond the literal.

Throughout, new structures emerge: a square that becomes a house or a tomb – or both. The performer inhabits it, as if testing its limits, while she hums a lament of invisibility: "They are not welcome / so they have… / no home. / There is only / connection nowadays / but still … / it feels so lonely, / so left out".

(In Dutch: "Ze zijn niet welkom / Dus hebben ze / geen thuis / Er is zoveel / verbinding tegenwoordig / maar toch / voelt het zo eenzaam / zo buitengesloten")

Bulldozer
In one of the more resonant and accomplished scenes, a remote-controlled toy bulldozer enters the stage and begins to tear down the cushions that are placed upright around the stage like a miniature city. The addition of the toy adds a childlike playfulness, but beneath it, layers of meaning emerge that are at once local, intimate, and deeply political. I catch myself smiling while thinking about the endless construction sites in Belgium, constantly reappearing, never quite finishing – almost an architectural trait of its own. And yet, at the same time, I cannot help but think of other sites of destruction, and the all-too-familiar sight of yellow bulldozers razing homes to the ground.

They did not speak each other's language, but understood each other in the end because they wanted to.

In the final scene, Temiz explains her choice through a beautiful story, told in an engaging and intimate way. She creates another square out of the pillows – this time flat, like a bed, which she positions in one of the corners – and narrates a personal anecdote about her Ukrainian immigrant teacher, Nina Abramov. About the fact that they did not speak each other's language, but understood each other in the end because they wanted to. The story serves to illustrate how understanding crosses boundaries, yet the preceding performance has worked in a completely opposite register.

What is at stake is not simply translation between languages, but between regimes of sense: material, verbal, physical. And here they do not fully cohere. Words, objects, movements, sounds, light – all insist on their own register and presence. But somewhere in this accumulation, the raw expression that is so beautifully present in the first and last scenes is forgotten. The performance disperses across several narrative arcs and surfaces. One is drawn outwards, away from the centre. And amid all this, the concrete – 'Bēton' itself – fades from view.