

Taking Space: About Spaces and Things in Leyla Aydoslu's Sculpture

In architecture, the term space is clearly defined. It refers to a limited, self-contained part of a building that is made up of vertical and horizontal elements such as walls, columns, ceilings, or facades. Exterior space is also marked by boundaries, which might be hedges, streets, walls, or bridges. Things do, however, become more complicated with the philosophical definition which has repeatedly altered since Classical Antiquity and explains space briefly as a receptacle for things that can be arranged in it, that expand and displace space in the process.¹ Thing and space exist in a mutual dependence; one cannot exist without the other. We can also apply this idea to art if we start from the things being the artwork, or more precisely a sculpture. Art historian Gottfried Boehm has considered Modernist art and its relationship to space in detail and describes it as follows: "The relationship between thing and space does not involve any mutual determination; the thing alone as little articulates as vice versa. [...] One can only make the absence of space apparent in the thing. The spatial void without any object would not give the eye any possibility of perception. It passes through it until it encounters something material in some sense, be this air or vapor."²

So, when you look at Leyla Aydoslu's "things" i.e., her sculptures in the exhibition space, you can only see them in interaction with the respective space, because without this specific space they would not be what they are. The artist begins her work for an exhibition by addressing the space in question. What are its walls like in relation to the height of the ceiling, where are there passages between spaces, how do visitors move through the space? What sort of atmosphere does it produce and how do the artworks contribute to all of this? Leyla Aydoslu's sculptures are typically created from found materials and seen situations. Each and every piece that she finds on the street or buys and frees from its original purpose –(wood, discarded furniture, paper, inflatable rubber tires, cork panels, not to mention memories of scenes, structures, signs) brings its own properties, textures, and requirements to which she then responds. It is not initially clear what will ultimately emerge. The focus is always on the material with its formal language; how it feels, what surface and colour it has, how it can be worked and combined. Every trace of her efforts is part of the finished work and this also goes for the physical movement, the making, building, gluing, fashioning with one's own hands.

Leyla Aydoslu came to sculpture via painting. Once she started experimenting with different materials on canvas, her works automatically became three-dimensional and abandoned the given limitations of the stretcher frame. Working in space meant that the limitations of pre-given measurements no longer applied, the empty space replaced the pictorial space. Her own body and its limits, the span of her arms, the weight they can carry serve as a new frame. This reference to the body is an essential aspect in Leyla Aydoslu's work both in the active role she plays during the process of creation, as well as in the physical experience that an object triggers in space, which is more immediate than that in front of a painting. You become part of the work itself is how Aydoslu describes it. "I was not interested in the possibilities of illusion that painting offers. Rather I am interested in creating physical

¹ Cf. *Metzler Lexikon der Philosophie*, online: <https://www.spektrum.de/lexikon/philosophie/raum/1728> [last accessed on 18 Oct. 2023].

² Gottfried Boehm, "Plastik und plastischer Raum," in: *Skulptur Ausstellung in Münster 1977*, exhib. cat. Münster 1977, (Cologne, 1977), pp. 23–44, here p. 26.

experiences, which is what I found in sculpture. I want viewers to be able to see my working process, to move around the sculptures and subject themselves to them.”³

In his “Notes on Sculpture” (1966) the artist Robert Morris, one of the most important representatives of Minimal Art, names the human body as a constant in the contemplation of modern sculpture. “In the perception of relative size, the human body enters into the total continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale. One knows immediately what is smaller and what is larger than himself. [...] The quality of intimacy is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself. The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself.”⁴

Intimacy and its opposite, “publicness”⁵ are sensations one feels towards a sculpture in space, and it is precisely with such spatial sensations that Leyla Aydoslu experiments. The tower-like structure in the middle of the exhibition space comprising six rings or discs stacked on top of one another unites these two poles. Measuring just under two meters in height, it is too tall to be seen from above, too large to be viewed from all sides at once, but very balanced in terms of proportions. Though solid and sturdy it can still be “embraced” by a human body, it places itself in view but without blocking the entire space. The key here lies in the basic shape that the artist has fashioned and multiplied from acrylic plaster, jute, fiberglass, and wax: An inflatable swimming hoop that fits snugly around the belly of a standard human body. In this instance, intimacy is not created by the size of the sculpture per se but rather by the physicality that serves as a point of departure.

Leyla Aydoslu’s sculptures are dependent on both points of references, the body, and its proportions as well as the space with its parameters, in other words, its limitations but also its emptiness. They take the space, stand, hang, displace it, connect walls to one another or squeeze themselves between floor and ceiling, in mutual dependency. The sculptures need the space that surrounds them in order to be viewed, they require its horizontal and vertical planes, because their appearance and dimensions relate directly to them and in the physical sense, they need a space in order to exist as material. This surrounding space is as important in Leyla Aydoslu’s works as the shaping of the works themselves. Like a third form, intermediate, hollow, and negative spaces assume their function in the composition of Aydoslu’s stagings of space. This also becomes apparent in the example of the stacked rings. Although it can only be observed from the outside, the structure also exists inside, and though invisible for us is, nonetheless, present. The smooth, matte surface with its bulging seams also has an inner side, a material that impacts on its external appearance. The casting mould is the equal of the impression made, a positive becomes a negative and vice versa. Gottfried Boehm describes the surface of a sculpture as the “skin of the material; it is simultaneously the opening and enclosing of all sculptural things”.⁶ However, the surface assumes an additional function for him since on it a phenomenon develops that he calls “sculptural space”: The thing that emerges when in Modernist art the sculpture abandons its original task of representing or interpreting something and incorporates the space around it.⁷ In sculptural space, matter, which in Aydoslu’s work with its formalist

³ Leyla Aydoslu in conversation with the author in September and Oktober 2023.

⁴ Morris, Robert Morris, “Bemerkungen zur Skulptur II,” in: *Robert Morris - Bemerkungen Zur Skulptur*, ed. by Susanne Titz and Clemens Krümmel, (Zurich, 2010), pp. 33–41, here p. 34. First published in: *Artforum*, October 1966.

⁵ This is the term used by Robert Morris, *ibid.*

⁶ Boehm 1977, as Note 1, p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–30.

understanding of material constitutes the essence of sculpture, is “at once limited and set free by form [...] itself the place and medium of the sculptural representation of meaning.”⁸ In this context, Boehm speaks of the “spatial energy of expression,”⁹ which is released from the mass of the material. So, something happens in the space, when you look at and experience the sculptures, at the moment when you relate to them as a human being. Aydoslu’s sculptures develop this energy and force when they measure out the space, extend from wall to wall, or as in the case of her new cork works stretch from floor to ceiling, almost five meters high, stabilized by small wooden wedges. Who is supporting whom here, is the space supporting the sculpture or is it the other way around?

The same principle is followed in her most recent piece: a sculpture made of grey papier-mâché created on a wooden structure reminiscent of a supine “H”. On the left and the right sides, the ends of the long sides are held by aluminium sections without which the sculpture might collapse. Simultaneously, the metal bars themselves require support, a ceiling or wall to hold them up. Space and sculpture are inextricably intertwined. And in turn the positioning in front of the corner ensures that the sculpture can only be viewed from the front and from the side; though there would be enough space behind it the structure itself bars our way. The sculpture claims the space for itself and excludes us viewers from it.

The grey and black sculpture similar to a balcony, that was created in connection with the New Folkwang Residency in Essen, also interacts with the space and the people who spend time in it. It hangs in an elevated position on the wall; as a viewer you can position yourself beneath it and look through it from below, but if you want to view it in its entirety you have to take several steps back. As a balcony the structure does not serve its purpose; lacking a floor it is pure form without any function. However, it needs space to function, to dock against its wall, and seemingly float in space. In turn, the space it was made for has a very specific task, namely to bring people and works of art together, and its dimensions are adapted to precisely this purpose.

The larger an object the more distance is needed to look at it, and so the more space it claims for itself. Leyla Aydoslu is also interested in a wider context in the concept of taking space. Who does public space belong to, who shapes it, what traces does it contain, how can it be limited and measured? What do we associate with spaces and how do we move and feel in them? What does “taking space” mean in a broader sense in society, as a woman, as an artist, in the history of art? Who is granted this space and who is excluded from it?

As a child, Aydoslu travelled a lot with her family, she spent several months a year in Turkey, was accustomed to living in changing spaces. She recalls passing landscapes blurred into shapes outside the car window, what she calls a “traveling gaze”. Today, she still uses this gaze to move through her surroundings, noticing enclosures and markings like chalk lines on the concrete that she stores as a visual note and later incorporates into her work as form. She also looks very closely at functional architecture such as bridges that become objects and define public space or the landscape. More recently Leyla Aydoslu has devoted herself to intensively studying the formal language of Communist monuments. Futuristic, strong, and emotive in appearance they were erected in the countries of the former Soviet Union, sometimes in remote locations to glorify military victories and the regime or to commemorate fallen fighters. They dominated and defined the landscape, were blatantly conspicuous, man-made things dominating nature. After the countries in question collapsed, the

⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

⁹ Ibid. p. 29.

monuments were left to rot and crumble, and today bear the traces of people's reactions. The landscape reclaims its space. Once again, Leyla Aydoslu is concerned with the bigger picture: The dynamics between taking space and winning it back; forms and materials in space that came about in relation to people, bear traces and themselves constitute a trace in space.

Leyla Aydoslu's sculptures take exactly the space that they need. Rough and rugged but not forbidding, strong and powerful but not intimidating. They are simply there, in their place, inviting us to respond to them. Confident and at ease.

Leonie Pfennig