

# Performance Documentation 2:

## *Excavations: Fresh but Rotten*

### The creation of the perfect imperfect

A physician told Marijs Boulogne how he fell into a depression for years after having suffered the loss of his newborn baby. ‘How can it be that he, as a physician, does not have an answer to that?’ Boulogne wondered. ‘How come he has so much trouble finding ways to deal with this event?’ His account made her notice the lack of narratives around this topic. It made her decide to create a story about it herself.

She began by asking herself: ‘What would I do if it happened to me? In what way could I prepare myself for such an event? How would I be able to find consolation?’ In reaction to these questions, she started to make a dress



*Excavations: Fresh but Rotten* by Marijs Boulogne (2006). Photo: Giannina Urmeneta Ottiker.

that, in case it DID happen to her, she would be able to put on her own baby. She spent three months working on the dress, driven by the colours she was using for the embroidery. By the time she had the finished dress, it occurred to her that this was only the beginning. She decided to create the baby as well.

The preparation of this project took a couple of years. Boulogne experimented with imitating little pieces of skin and organs. The process was slow and very expensive: she soon ran out of money and material. But then she accidentally inherited piles of embroidery thread and crewel from a woman at whose deathbed she sat for months and from her grandmother, who was losing her sight. The thousand colours of this new material encouraged her decision to really start with her project, which she named *Excavations*.

Boulogne made an enormous effort to create all the baby's organs in full anatomical detail, and to correctly shape its little bones out of salt dough. For more than a year she studied anatomical manuals and read accounts of surgeons to learn about the organs she was imitating, and to become acquainted with the vocabulary of the medical discourse. Travelling frequently, she kept working on the baby. She made the placenta in Copenhagen, the kidneys in Italy, and continued her work on the intestines in Sydney. As the features of the baby began to grow, she started to get inquiring looks when screening her baggage at customs.

After ten months of work, when she finished the head and attached it to the body, she was herself astonished. The baby was beautiful. But it was also the saddest thing she had ever seen. The positive reactions of audiences to the *Excavations* performances, which she had begun to stage during the creation process, convinced her that this anatomical embroidery could nevertheless enable her to address the questions she had set out to ask: 'How to cope with the event of a stillborn baby? How to deal with the perfect imperfect?'

In *Fresh but Rotten*, the fifth phase of the *Excavations* project, Marijs Boulogne, as 'Moedere Hein' (Mother Hein) carries the baby on stage, wrapped in her arms.<sup>1</sup> 'This is the body of a new born baby. It is a girl. I called her Pas. But she cannot live. I made her in more than ten months. And that is way too long.'<sup>2</sup> On a table in the centre of the stage, she tenderly washes the baby, and subsequently examines the different colours of the baby's skin, explaining their meanings to the audience. Through a hand-held camera that is employed by the 'image nurse' Julia Clever, the details of the embroideries are shown on a big screen behind the table. Moedere Hein's examination soon moves beyond the baby's skin. 'But today I want to know. My baby is old already. Today I want to enter, and to look straight into the lungs, because I want to find out whether she has breathed.' With a scalpel, she makes a 'Y'-shaped incision, over the chest

and the length of the torso. Subsequently, she displays the various, brightly-coloured organs of the baby, alternately filming them in close-up with the hand-held camera or a rigid endoscope, which results in a kind of fantastic medical imagery on the screen. After this autopsy, she puts the organs back in the body and puts a brightly embroidered dress on the baby.

### **The grotesque quality of an embroidered baby**

*Excavations* presents a dissection of an embroidered baby. The prohibition of the transgression of the natural borders of the body can be regarded as a cultural law in our society, violated in the act of dissection. In medical practice, the dissection of human bodies is an everyday activity. It has often been argued that the violation of the body in medical practice is disguised by the authoritarian status of this discourse. In discussing the body in medicine, Katharine Young makes a similar statement. She argues that medicine is an aristocratic discourse, using its high status and sacralized vocabulary to hide the grotesque quality of the dissected body (Young, 1997). According to Young, the act of dissection implies a destruction of the conventional order of the body and therefore features the defining quality of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called 'the grotesque' (Bakhtin, 1984). The acknowledgment of the grotesque quality of the baby in *Excavations* offers an interesting perspective on this theatre performance. The actions of turning things upside down, inside out, and transgressing the boundaries between various discourses characterizes *Excavations*, especially in the playful approach toward the 'high' medical discourse, and in the presentation of the corpse as a vital and fertile substance.

In performing the role of Moedere Hein, Marijs Boulogne represents both the mother of the baby and the pathologist who is conducting the autopsy. The combination of these roles in one actor's character has a complex effect, due to their contrasting qualities. On the one hand, the pathologist with the scalpel, who commands the anatomical vocabulary, represents the authoritative medical discourse. Young observed that during an autopsy '[t]he particularity, the possible personhood, of the corpse is elided by the passive voice, which not only banishes agent and perceiver but also objectifies the object of perception' (Young, 1997, p. 116). On the other hand, the maternal nature of the alternative side of the character Boulogne performs seems to partially thwart this effect. Our awareness of the mother and child relationship between the pathologist and the dissected baby shifts our experience of the autopsy. It is no longer fully possible to objectify our perception of the baby or to disregard its 'possible personhood'. This surprising transgression, using two such widely different discourses, intensifies both our perception of the intimacy between mother and

baby, and the violent nature of the dissection. By creating this double character, Boulogne challenges the emotional detachment that is usually associated with medical practice.

Although Moedere Hein starts with the objective to find medical evidence of life in the body, the primary function of the autopsy seems to be to bring the beauty of the baby to the fore. The hand-held camera and the endoscope used in this process function not so much as medical, but as theatrical tools. The body is not only opened to the external world through its natural orifices, the organs are lifted out and held up to be admired. In addition, the endoscope offers up even the smallest details to public view. Despite the taboo against the act of explicitly showing the body interior, the double-layered character of Moedere Hein creates a private sphere for the spectators, one in which they can admire the beauty of what is shown, rather than feeling like an uninvolved onlooker at a controversial or intimidating spectacle.

This intimate spectacle continues when the autopsy has ended. After Moedere Hein has dressed the baby, she begins piling grey, brown, green, yellow and white skeins, and yarns of different textures, onto the small body. It takes a while for the audience to realize that the process of dressing the baby at this point is transforming into the mimesis of the rotting process of the dead body. This subtle, but at the same time radical transition not only once again



*Excavations: Fresh but Rotten* by Marijs Boulogne (2006). Photo: Giannina Urmeneta Ottiker.

draws attention to the beauty of the body, but also demonstrates the vital quality of the dead material.

During the autopsy the skin is cut open, and afterwards the mould starts to seep and to grow through it. This erasure of the boundary of the baby's skin emphasizes the grotesque quality of the body. The cloth skin disappears as a discrete boundary, resulting in a blurring of the distinction between the inside and outside of our conventional body orientation. Apart from its imitation of this biological process, this scene also has a strong ritual quality. As Moedere Hein starts the performance by putting the dress on the baby, this later act of covering the baby with colourful layers can be interpreted as a ritual act of decoration, which helps her to mark and cope with her loss.

When the baby is completely covered with the colourful and mouldy textures, caterpillars and snails, made out of pieces of cloth and salt dough, slowly conquer the body, making it their playground. Moedere Hein creates a miniature paradise for the small creatures, by placing a white skein of milk coming out of the baby's mouth: 'These are the places of milk and honey, there is plenty for everyone, and everything is beautiful, and tasty, and free.' The caterpillars mumble happily in reply: 'We can stay and live here! We can hide here forever. We are free. We can enter and exit, and play anywhere we want.' The hand-held camera close-ups of the animals playing hide-and-seek between



*Excavations: Fresh but Rotten* by Marijs Boulogne (2006). Photo: Giannina Urmeneta Ottiker.

the fantastic cloth structures emphasize that the baby has transformed into a wondrous landscape or microcosm. It has become a small fantastic universe, reminiscent of the anatomical cabinets created by seventeenth-century Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731). Ruysch was a pioneer in preserving techniques of bodily organs and tissue and made artistic tableaux using baby skeletons and injected and coloured veins and arteries to suggest a botanical environment.<sup>3</sup>

The vitality and fertility of dead material that is displayed stresses once more the grotesque quality of *Excavations's* imagery. The 'conventional view of the corpse as absence, barrenness, and stillness' is fully denied by this playful, dynamic scene (Young, 1997, p. 114). Then, all of a sudden, two birds that look like two golden stork-shaped scissors appear in the air above Pas. They scream: 'Feast! Feast! Feast!' diving down to devour the caterpillars, the snails, and the soft, tasty tissues the small creatures were playing in. When the festive dinner of the birds is over, Moedere Hein wraps all the animals, together with the baby, in a white cloth and takes the loose bundle back into her arms. 'Hear, the birds are singing for us, and the butterflies have come out.' As the lights fade, she carries Pas offstage. A hint of silhouettes of butterflies can be perceived, and the chirping birds continue.

Text by *Laura Karreman*

The Belgian performer **Marijs Boulogne** (1978) studied theatre direction at the Kunsthogeschool RITS in Brussels. With Manah Depauw and Bart Capelle she founded the group Buelens Paulina. *Endless Medication*, the graduation project created by Boulogne and Depauw, was staged at the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts 2003 in Brussels. In her second graduation project Boulogne made an installation, *Fuck me dead / Foreplay*, with a doll and a dress, in which she combined embroidery, performance, and video for the first time, working together with Julia Clever.

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## Performance Data

The *Excavations* project was first presented in 2004. Since then the following phases have been staged: *Pregnancy, Excavation, Episcopcy, In Memories, Fresh*

*but Rotten, Report, and Pas*(\*). The project was first performed in Belgium and the Netherlands. The French-language version premiered at Belluard Bollwerk International 2006 in Fribourg (Switzerland). The first English-language version is due to be performed in 2007, in Oslo (Norway).

More information about this performance project and Marijs Boulogne can be found at [www.excavations.be](http://www.excavations.be) and [www.buelens-paulina.be](http://www.buelens-paulina.be).

Concept and embroidery: Marijs Boulogne

Video: Julia Clever

Performers: Marijs Boulogne, Julia Clever, Tom de Roy, Jan Philips, Pauli Taes and Wilfrieda Stroobants

Production: Buelens Paulina a.s.b.s. and Vicky Vermoezen

Dramaturgy and coaching: Marianne van Kerkhoven and Lotte van den Berg

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## Notes

- 1 This documentation is based on the particular phase of the *Excavations* project shown in the Huis aan de Werf during Festival aan de Werf 2006, in Utrecht, the Netherlands, May 18-27, 2006.
- 2 All quotes are my translations from the unpublished Dutch script for this phase of *Excavations*, written by Marijs Boulogne: *Pas maar al rot. Tragedie van Handen*. (*Fresh but Rotten. Tragedy of Hands*).
- 3 Some examples of etchings of Ruysch's work can be found at the Dream Anatomy Gallery of the US National Library of Medicine. See for example [www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/dreamanatomy/da\\_g\\_I-C-1-09.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/dreamanatomy/da_g_I-C-1-09.html).

## References

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