

Curating as Placing Stones to be Picked up: Interview with Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland

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by Anette Therese Pettersen

May 24, 2021

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Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland

Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland currently serves as artistic director of Black Box teater in Oslo, which includes the artistic direction of the yearly festival Oslo International Teaterfestival. Sibué-Birkeland grew up in Savoie, France, before moving to Nantes in Bretagne and later to Paris. She is a graduate of l'Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Nantes and holds a Master's degree in Arts Management from Paris 8 University.

She began her professional journey as general manager and producer with independent organizations and companies in the field of performing arts. In 2004, she started her own production office, Bureau Cassiopée, where she collaborated with many interdisciplinary artists such as Jonathan Capdevielle and Gisèle Vienne. Parallel to producing, she has also worked with various organizations as a mentor, trainer and consultant. For almost five years, she worked as international artistic advisor for the programming theatre Nouveau Théâtre de Montreuil. At that point, the timing felt right to apply her varied experience to become an artistic director and oversee the development of a theatre. She applied for the position of artistic director at Black Box teater and has worked there since 2016. The theatre is a small programming venue that hosts both national and international performances, as well as an academic program consisting of talks, seminars, publications and reading groups.



Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland. Photo: Anna Penkova / Black Box teater

One of the responsibilities assigned to the director the Black Box teater is to oversee the artistic direction of the yearly festival Oslo International Theatre festival. The festival, first established in 2009, takes place every year during the month of March. It was originally called *Marstrandfestivalen* (The Marstrand Festival), named after the street where the theatre is currently located, but was renamed Oslo International Theatre Festival in 2013. The change of name also coincided with a change in programming, running from a weekend to approximately ten days and including a broader international program. During the last three years, the festival program has further expanded, taking place in various locations throughout the city and including artists such as Trajal Harrell, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, El Conde de Torrefiel, Ligia Lewis, Annie Dorsen, Gisèle Vienne, Mette Edvardsen, Dries Verhoeven, Maria Hassabi, Eisa Jocson and many more.

Note: The interview took place on 6 April 2021, 16:00 via Zoom.

How would you describe your curatorial style or aesthetic?

One of the key points is listening, trying to listen to the artistic community as a whole as well as to individual artists, to hear what they are expressing and to get a sense of their urgencies. A lot of my work is based on conversations I have with artists and colleagues in Norway and abroad. I see myself as more of a facilitator rather than a curator who dictates a vision from the top. My approach is to facilitate and to create agencies. I nurture a willingness to accept various aesthetics, while tending to artists who challenge the boundaries of art and give voice to significant issues of our time. I clearly value artistic risk, whether it is in terms of formats, expressions, contents, or working methods.

As a curator you place some stones, you unwrap a discourse, but you don't always say everything. Some of the curatorial contents and some of the invisible threads may be grasped and some not. I like to think of the audience as active spectators, making their own journey through the program.

Veronica Bruce — Carrie — Bojana Cvejić / Daniela Bershan — Mallika Taneja — Maja Roel — Deise Nunes — Varamo Press / Mette Edvardsen — Maritea Dæhlin — Chiara Bersani — Mia Habib Productions — Karmaklubb* feat. Anushka Rajendran, Antonio Cataldo, Daniel Mariblanca, Draglab, Kaeto Sweeney and Nikima Jagudajev — Dagmar Schultz — On Audre Lorde: Grace Tabea Tenga, Louisa Olufsen Layne, Marjam Idriss, Bruce Barnhart, Shadi Angelina Bazeghi and Mohamed Abdi — Ramona Salo with Katarina Skår Lisa — Ingri Fiksdal / Fredrik Floen / Mariama Slåtøy — Namik Macic, Mia Habib, Ashkan Sepahvand, Marie Kraft

Oslo International Theatre [festival program 2021](#). Photo: Oslo International Theatre festival banner for 2021

In this specific and somewhat strange year of 2020–21, what has seemed most urgent to you?

Oslo has had the toughest COVID-related restrictions in Norway. This year we were closed from the 9th of November until now, and last Spring we were closed from mid-March until mid-June 2020. During this period, one of our priorities has been to support artists by making sure that rehearsals can still take place. There are very few spaces for rehearsals in Oslo, but it is important for artists to complete their productions, so that they are ready to be presented when society opens up again. Another priority has been to find meaningful strategies to keep the conversation going with the audience.

From the very beginning, we assessed that it would be challenging to stream shows or performances created for the stage. We work with somatic experiences, and most artists activate the room as a dynamic space. Given our resources and budget, it would not pay tribute to their works to stream performances. We've focused on trying new formats instead.

The COVID lockdown was imposed locally during last year's festival. It seemed like a dramaturgy playing out within the festival week, as festival events were progressing in full force when suddenly everything had to be cancelled or postponed. If the festival had taken place only one week earlier, the entire festival would have gone according to plan. How did the experience of organizing last year's festival during a pandemic affect you as you were planning this year's festival?

We worked on three different scenarios. I structured the program in such a way that risks would be minimized, and I focused on the remaining accessible spaces. We designed a section of the program that would be preserved intact, no matter what. This part included an outdoors performance with one performer by Fiksdal/Floen/Slåttøy, but, in the end, it was not allowed. I don't think anyone expected the restrictions to play out this way again, especially just a few days before the festival opening. I had thought we were prepared, but it turned out that I was not pessimistic enough.



From Fiksdal/Floen/Slåttøy's (cancelled) performance *Fictions of the Flesh*.
Photo: Fredrik Floen

You also had quite a lot of the program online. I've read some of your previous interviews in which you talked about the importance of the "sublime" as a reaction that sometimes takes place within the performance space, in the situation of people meeting in a room. But how do you curate for the non-sublime or the online sublime?

We have been working with strategies for people to meet virtually. Mallika Taneja's performance *Allegedly*, with 16 performers online from India, as well as an audience from Norway and other countries, was one of them. It felt genuinely live. We had many opportunities to experience the *now* during the festival. While reading one critique of the festival in Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift, I felt gratified to see how the program had an impact on the critic's life and experience of her city. It was important for us that the audience had some ownership of the program. I was happy to witness that sparks of the sublime appeared here and there.



Photo from Mallika Taneja's *Allegedly*. Photo: Mallika Taneja

This festival was more of a discursive platform, gathering a community of thinkers for the curating of the festival as well as for its actual implementation. Claiming the collective has generated a sense of community, even though we deeply missed the live and physical experiences. I don't want to have to use such a festival format again, but I am happy that it allowed us to talk together and interact across Norway and internationally.

Next year, I want to celebrate togetherness and collectivity. We will investigate these notions in terms of contemporary issues and spectatorship. We will look at forms of collective action as we explore the means of gathering and engaging with others and each other.

This year we have also witnessed a number of political and social movements, globally with #Blacklivesmatter and nationally with heated debates about performing arts as well as Black Box teater. For better or worse, I think these debates have introduced Black Box teater and some of the associated performances and artists to many people in Norway who didn't even know it existed, at a time when the theatre has been physically unavailable to most of us. In this togetherness, we are talking about, what is the role of the theatre? How do we come together, and what do we do once we are together?

There are many questions to consider here. The theatre functions as an agent of change that challenges the norms. Questioning representations, de-centering the gaze and including post-colonial perspectives, I have undertaken my professional journey which has led me to the projects I've developed at Black Box teater.

In 2017, in the first festival I curated, we presented *#negrophobia* by Jaamil Olawale Kosoko in order to raise awareness of racism, violence and loss through a work that was confrontational for a white audience. Several female artists of color were part of the festival this year, but their ethnicity was not emphasized. We do not need to create more boxes. We should rather acknowledge that identity is multilayered, and we should work to ensure that multicultural artists, BIPOC and those who have been silenced have a voice and an audience. *#Blacklivesmatter* has called our attention to the ubiquity of structural racism.

As an art institution, we first need to examine our structures, disentangle them and transform them throughout the entire organization, including the program, the audience, the creative teams and the governing board. The process is slow but gradual.

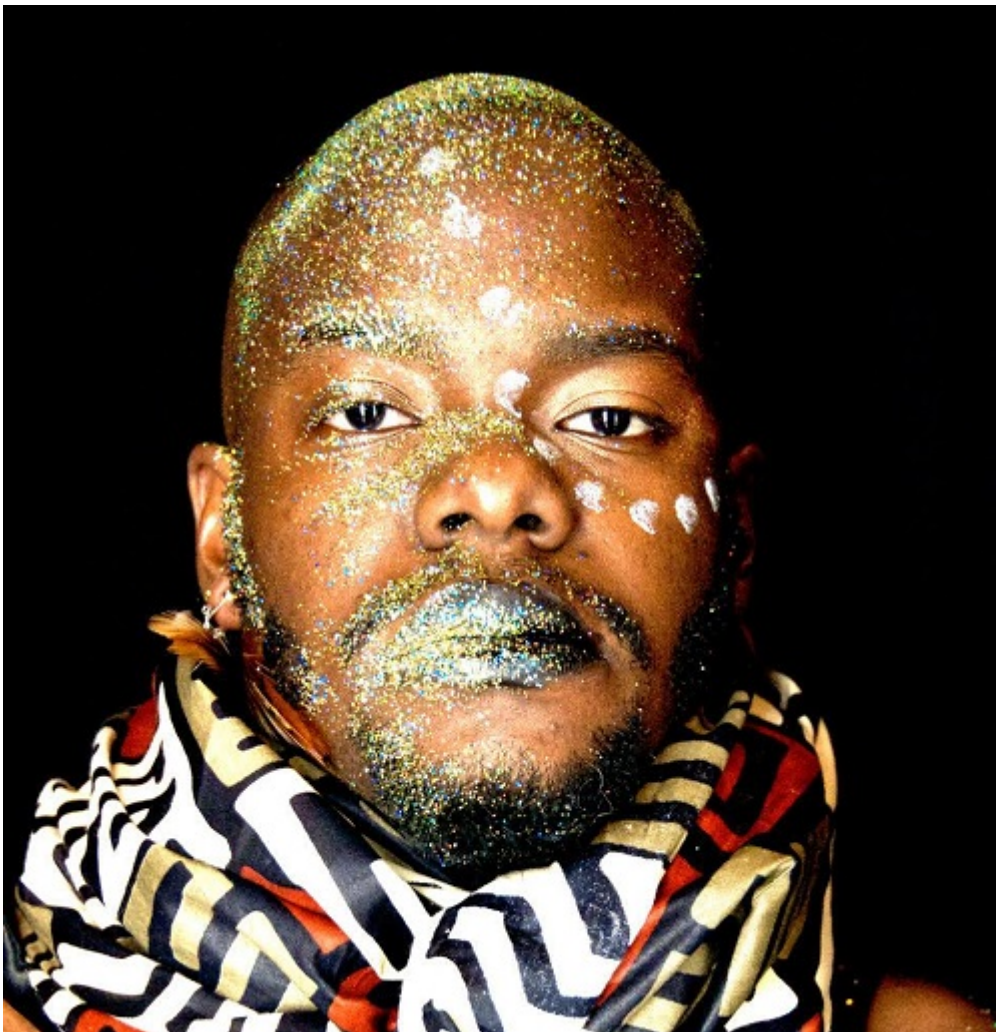


Photo from Jaamil Olawale Kosoko's *#negrophobia*. Photo: Umi Akiyoshi

The arts, particularly the performing arts, carry a unique sense of collectivity, combining strength and vulnerability. A show can be both a powerful and a disarming experience; it touches upon profound existential components. Filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once said of the movies something to the effect of “*When you watch television you look down, when you go to cinema you look up.*” This quote could be used to characterize theatre as well.

When we raise our heads towards the stage, our horizon expands immediately. The theatre opens our gaze, perspective, senses, understanding and imagination. It would have made sense to prioritize the normal functioning of art venues during the pandemic, at a time when our lives have been particularly challenging. They are places where you can be alone with others, where everyone has gathered for a collective yet subjective experience in the here and now.



Photo from Deise Nunes' *Decolonizing the Performing Arts II: The Gaze, Colonialism and Aesthetics*.
Photo: Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival/Black Box teater

But it's also difficult to know how these performances, bodies and stories are received by the audience. How do you listen to the responses to a work?

This is an ongoing challenge. In facilitating between artist and audience, we draw on rhetoric as we ask how to introduce the work. Many of the works have not yet premiered, and this adds another challenge in presenting them for the very first time. How do we respect the artist's voice while finding ways to communicate through the available language? From my experience as producer, I remember this as a conflict between artistic expression and production. In the late 1990s, I worked with the French-Vietnamese choreographer Ea Sola. She broke new ground in developing a singular contemporary body of work rooted in Vietnamese traditions. But it was often exoticized, and her role as an artist was overlooked. When I was working with Gisèle Vienne, I was tough on the theatres with detailed communication. I disliked how some were promoting her as a provocative artist and taking shortcuts that would help to sell tickets. We of the Black Box teater are extremely careful with our language choices, and we try hard to avoid instrumentalizing and directing the audience's experience. But finding a common

ground between the needs of the theatre and those of the artists is not always given. In my experience, I have seen that artists don't always foresee how their language will create a distance between themselves and their audience.



Photo from Mia Habib's (cancelled) performance *How to Die—Inopiné*. Photo: Tale Hendnes

To gauge how the work is being received, we find that informal conversations with the audience in the foyer are enlightening, as well as discussions with the artists in which spectators and artists interact. Critics are also important for the artists, producers and audience. It is essential that works are reviewed by several critics, as a multiplicity of voices is needed. Unfortunately, the space for art and culture in the mainstream media has been drastically reduced over years. In many ways, the theatre both as an experience and as an actual physical space is an agora, a space for assembly where members of the community engage in debate and critical thinking and are free to express a range of opinions which may depart from mainstream norms.

You stated once that you see your main role as that of the spectator. Do you still see yourself in this way or has your view changed, due to your more recent experience as theatre producer?

The context in which I work now is very different from circumstances that defined the period five years ago when I first began producing. Nowadays, conditions are more difficult for artists and the artistic community in general. The pandemic has revealed our vulnerabilities; the more urgent question is how can we listen more carefully and truly care? I say we because I work cooperatively with an entire team at the theatre, and we have a strong sense of collective responsibility. It has become more difficult in recent years to be an artist in Norway. Several major changes have been implemented at the

Arts Council, a heated public debate on art and culture is in progress, and artists have been harassed. The liberal and populist forces are powerful, and the artistic community is not well enough equipped to resist their effects. I come from France, where we are more accustomed to joining forces and shouting out loud, and the individual seldom feels alone. However, this is not the case in Norway. The main question for us to address is how we can produce a better collective exchange._

***Anette Therese Pettersen**, born in 1979, is a critic, editor and curator whose research focuses on theatre and dance. She is currently a PhD research fellow at the University of Agder, Norway, and has co-founded a number of organizations, such as Writingshop, Critics in Conversation, Dansekritikerrørsla (Dance critic movement) and Performing Criticism Globally. She has also served as editor of a books series on criticism, theatre and dance, such as *Criticism for an Absent Reader* (2018).



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Critical Stages/Scènes critiques e-ISSN: 2409-7411



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