

**A City, a Site**  
Hild Borchgrevink

While the word “public” refers to people, the corresponding Norwegian word *offentlig*, as does its German source, literally refers to an open space. A black box theater can contain both. It is a physically and often economically delimited space, yet also intrinsically public; a producer of publicness by gathering us, the audience, for a shared experience.

However, several performances during this year’s Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival (OITF) take place outside the black box. As we shall see, their contents to a certain extent bleed into each other, perhaps due to the ways in which they activate the city as context. What happens to live art and performance when they leave the black box for the city? How can a performative situation be established and negotiated outside the walls of a theater, and how do performative artistic expressions relate to processes, layers and changes inherent in the city itself?

In her article “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity”<sup>1</sup> art historian and curator Miwon Kwon traces how the concept of a *site* for an artwork is transformed in Western thinking in the last half of the 20th century. From referring to an actual physical and spatial location in a modernist paradigm, sites of art expand throughout

*A City, a Site*, an Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2018 commission, was presented as part of the festival seminar program. It provided a reflection on four performances happening in public spaces: *Diorama* by Ingri Fiksdal, *Fare Thee Well* by Dries Verhoeven, *Stranger Within* by Jassem Hindi & Mia Habib and *Radio Oh So Slow* by Tormod Carlsen.

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1 Miwon Kwon. “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity”. *October*, Vol. 80. (Spring, 1997), pp. 85–110.

the 1960s and 70s and begin to encompass immaterial, processual, nomadic, phenomenological, social and discursive qualities, although this development is never linear. Site-oriented art is also informed by a growing range of non-artistic disciplines. This expansion is not limited to art itself but also affects the public, who are challenged to broaden their usual visual, linguistic or cognitive focus into a more phenomenological one. The location of meaning in an artwork is also on the move from being considered intrinsic to the work to being derived from its context, to the point where context itself might be considered the core.

Implicit in this development is the exodus of art from institutions. In visual arts, this institutional critique is often conceived as a performative shift and labelled theatrical – a word that becomes less useful once entering the perspective and history of the performing arts. But both in leaving the institution and in broadening the concept of site, there are significant parallels between white cubes and black boxes.

### Mobile auditoria

Middelalderparken, Oslo's medieval cradle at the river mouth of the Lo valley, is the planned site of the Oslo version of director Tormod Carlsen's series of projects *Radio*. At first sight, the *Radio* performances take place in a small, mobile black box, a theatrical spaceship that in principle is able to land anywhere, apparently modernist in

its autonomous independency of context. Last autumn, Carlsen's radio shows landed on an abandoned ferry quay in Fjaler on Norway's west coast (*Radio Fjellom*, Teaterfestivalen i Fjaler) and on a more industrial quay in Bergen (*Radio B-town*, Meteor). In the latter case, it landed with its back to the ocean and its front directed towards an unspectacular street crossing, located close to the possible future site of Bergen's temporarily homeless independent theatre stage, BIT Teatergarasjen. In both these *Radio* versions, the audience entered the box to sit down on benches in a standard auditorium setup, facing what initially appears to be the traditional fourth wall of the stage. In the course of the performance, however, reality replaced representation in a fascinating way. This gesture of replacement elicits among other things a history of scenography – the perspective stage and the landscape backdrop – and challenges the physical delimitations of a theater space, revealing the black box as heavily influenced by its context.

In 2004, Black Box teater made its own spaceship leap. It left its original location in a shopping mall at Aker Brygge and moved into a refurbished chocolate factory in Rodeløkka, part of the gentrification of one of Oslo's former workers districts. The year of establishment included in the theater's new logo (Oslo 1985) involuntarily evokes a resonance in me of the commercial hubris of the 1980s and 90s that one had to pass through to enter the black doors of the theater at Aker Brygge.

By moving, Black Box teater also crossed the river that divides the center of Oslo into two parts. This division is still, not least in the minds of its citizens, a geographically, socially and economically distinct border. Although differences have gradually been ironed out in central areas of the city, contrasts still prevail. Consider the contrast within the dance field for example, between the many self-organized, independent, young hip-hop dance crews practicing in the northeastern suburbs of Groruddalen, and the large group of young dancers training in the professional educational system of the Norwegian National Ballet at its waterfront home in the opera house. At any rate, the physical move of Black Box teater from west to east enacts an important part of Oslo's geographical and social layout. On one level it also represents a dematerialization, making it necessary to understand Black Box teater not only in physical and architectural terms but also in a more immaterial way, as the line of activities that connect its first location with its second.

As a geographical site, Middelalderparken allows for gazing in many directions: back in time to the establishment of the city of Oslo around year 1000; down below the layers of soil that have been carefully removed to reveal the ruins of a medieval church; into the future towards the hectic development of the neighboring waterfront area and the large-scale institutional attraction it has set it in motion: a new opera, a new Edvard Munch museum, a new public library.

When thinking about mobile theaters and performing arts in this area, and the interaction between cities and performing arts, it is tempting to take a wider, national perspective and touch on the story of the theater ship M/S Innvik. Its last haven happened to be a quay at the waterfront facing Oslo's new opera house. Until 1987, M/S Innvik had for 20 years called at rural societies in the fjords on the west coast of Norway. It arrived complete with a small stage and auditorium, as well as professional actors and theater technicians who lived in the cabins of the boat. The idea of housing a theater in a boat was conceived by the regional theater in the county of Sogn og Fjordane, both for practical reasons and to align with the cultural policy of the period which aimed to spread high quality performing arts from the geographical center to the periphery. Coincidentally, M/S Innvik retired more or less at the same time as Black Box teater was established, one conception of theater seemingly replacing another. As the Norwegian population grew more heterogeneous, the boat came to serve a new group of citizens: From 2001 to 2010 it became the home of Nordic Black Theatre, a multicultural theater and theater school. Because of its location by the quay, M/S Innvik obtained rights to give input to the redevelopment of the waterfront area. As a result, some of the people running Nordic Black Theatre ended up advising the public art program that accompanied the waterfront refurbishment, through which a number of temporary, performative projects have been presented.

### Landscapes and layers

When leaving the institution, the idea of a pure, idealist space gives way to the materiality of a landscape. Westwards across the Oslo fjord from Carlsen's *Radio Oh So Slow*, choreographer Ingrid Midgard Fiksdal has chosen the public beach Huk as the site for a version of her work *Diorama*, in which landscape becomes scenography. As Fiksdal elaborates in the presentation of the piece on her website, the word "diorama" can refer to a three-dimensional model of a landscape, often displayed in museums of natural history. The word also has a theatrical reference in the diorama theater invented by Louis Daguerre in France in 1822, a theater space in which landscape paintings are transformed through manipulated light, sound effects and live performers. Fiksdal's *Diorama* premiered in the fishing village of Brixham in England in 2017, where it took place by an outdoor pool with a view across the sea. Fiksdal's choice of the beach as site is simultaneously both specific and generic.

Fiksdal's recurrent use of multi-layered textiles that completely cover her performers' bodies, may open a paradox for a local audience familiar with Huk. During the summer, a section of the beach is reserved for naturists, which itself is some sort of performative position that makes any accidental passer-by very conscious of how ordinary clothing is also a convention. The public access to Huk is all about layers too. It is a consequence of a protected area that was established there in 1988 to preserve Oslo's geologically unique seashore

sediments. These sediments had petrified about 470 million years ago, and their preservation keeps alive an awareness of the slow-moving, geological time that surrounds us.

### Shifting perspectives

The name Huk is a simplified version of the Dutch word for corner or angle. The name was allegedly projected onto the stone formations of the beach in the late 16th century, as Dutch seamen tried to sort out the landscape from their vantage point at sea without the aid of a map. At OITF in 2018, the Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven's project *Fare Thee Well!* projects its gaze towards a more urban landscape, from further afar. The project reveals how the immediacy normally implicit in vision and observation, human sight as the basis of objective knowledge and scientific evidence, is always a temporal phenomenon. The artist invites his spectators to look through telescopes directed two kilometers away, where a text is moving on the walls of a city building or some other physical surface. Passers-by can also see it, though upside down. A telescope directed towards the universe looks back in time. Verhoeven's telescopes show how distance might be a prerequisite for understanding. The written words, accompanied by melancholic music from the baroque era, encourage the viewer to say farewell to things that disappeared a long time ago or might disappear at some point in the future. How is it possible to pay attention to things that we are about to forget?

### Defining strangers

In choreographer Mia Habib's *Stranger within*, co-created with Jassem Hindi, the explosion of the site becomes apparent in the project's processual character, its collaborative creation and potential multitude of materials, formats and locations. It builds on a preceding project called *We Insist*, which has been on the road since 2007, as performances, workshops and visual installations created with artists from all over the world. In the presentation of *Stranger within* on Habib's website, the creators explicitly declare themselves as double outcasts of a sort, who work "outside of institutional networks [and] conventional performance spaces" as well as "on the fringe of public spaces". An important idea in the project seems to be a reversal of the conventional hierarchy between performer and spectator. "Instead of being the hosts of a performance," the artists write, "we will be the guests of a social network, holding on to a myriad of possible material to perform with."

In the visual field of art and public space, one sign of the dematerialization that occurs when artists challenge modernist practice, is that the presence of the artist replaces the presence of the conventional art object. The risk inherent in this move is the commodification and trade of this presence. Again, this shift is less clear in the performing arts, since the artist's presence, or at least her negotiation of that presence, could be said to *be* the art object. Setting out to

challenge this presence is a bold move. To find out how this shift is actually carried out, the audience has to be present in the private apartment in Oslo's Tøyen district where *Stranger within* will take place.

Tøyen has an ambivalent connection to the site of other projects during the festival. For one thing, the original Munch museum has been located in Tøyen since 1963 but is now moving to a new landmark building near the waterfront. In exchange for depriving Tøyen of the new museum, the city council promised to strengthen economic support for the Tøyen area. Public squares have since gotten a makeover and the former post office has become a local pub. What were formerly municipal apartments have also been renovated as part of this deal, forcing some inhabitants to move. In a recent television documentary, the manager of a local football club for youngsters with mixed cultural backgrounds revealed that no economic support had come their way. Immaterial social activities still lose the fight for political attention to tangible buildings and monuments.

In this context, what does it mean for artists to proclaim themselves strangers? What does the notion of an apartment as a peripheral public space mean? Habib and Hindi label their work micro-political and micro-economical, but also state that their language is formal, not political. How can performing arts connect to the political struggles surrounding it?

### Resistance or adaptation?

All of the projects mentioned above, *Radio Oh So Slow*, *Diorama*, *Fare Thee Well!* and *Stranger within* are conceived as series. They may be revisited and repeated in a potentially endless number of locations and contexts, each feeding into the content of the artwork. The different sites in a series are thus connected intertextually, rather than spatially, and are perhaps better represented by an itinerary than by a traditional map. In this way of working, the consistency of an artist's engagement with her themes or projects itself becomes a site.

Miwon Kwon discusses whether the performative is an effective way of resisting commodification of the "critical" dimension in art practices, in a time when capital and power also embrace the nomadic, temporary and precarious. To what extent do site-specific performances generate publicness, challenge an environment, challenge the performing arts as such? And to what extent are they imperatively necessary ways of organizing artistic work in order to survive as an artist in a "festivalized" art market and community? And what does it mean to live arts and performance if it is both?