





FRI KUNST /  
Artistic Freedom

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Introduction —  
*Art under pressure*  
Anne-Cécile  
Sibué-Birkeland

Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland is the Artistic & General Director of Black Box teater since 2016.

She began her professional journey as general manager and producer with independent organizations and companies in the performing art field.

In 2004, she founded Bureau Cassiopée, a production office in Paris, where she collaborated with many interdisciplinary artists. Her approach has contributed to encourage expanded artistic practices, productions in a diversity of contexts and long-term partnerships.

Focusing on transferring knowledge and empowerment within the independent sector, Sibué-Birkeland has initiated many innovative mentorship programs, which has also led her to be guest lecturer at various art schools and training organizations.

From 2012 until 2016, she was the international consultant for the Nouveau Theatre de Montreuil and worked also as an artistic advisor for the sector. Her collaborations included a broad range of venues, festivals, theater/dance companies and independent artists across France, Norway and further afield.

Sibué-Birkeland was a board member of IETM, International network for contemporary performing arts, from 2013 until 2019 and its president from 2017–2019.

In recent times, artistic freedom in Norway has been under pressure. We have watched the gap between free democracy and censorship narrow significantly. The performing arts field has been exposed to direct threats of censorship, false narratives and misplaced definitions that widely circulated into significant storms on social media. The combination of right-wing populist rhetoric and clickbait media is explosive. Moreover, the lack of a collective apparatus in Norway contributes to making artists and art organizations more vulnerable and exposed.

### **A powerful collection of texts about artistic freedom**

In March 2020, Black Box teater (within the framework of Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020) took part in FRI KUNST (“Artistic Freedom”), a national action week between the 2nd and 8th of March 2020. Initiated by Safemuse, the aim of the action week was to raise awareness and knowledge about the importance of artistic freedom. We marked FRI KUNST by inviting the artists participating in the festival to share their viewpoints on what artistic freedom means to them. Their respective texts were published online during and after the festival. The sixteen interviews are now gathered in this publication, preceded by a commissioned essay written by the poet and activist Asieh Amini. Together, the texts emphasize the importance of artistic freedom and the fact that we cannot take this freedom for granted.

This body of texts is powerful and enlightening. It brings together a singularity of approach, context and perspective. The collection of voices conveys an

in-depth reflection upon artistic freedom. While it acknowledges the singularity of each artistic practice, it points out the articulations between the individual and the collective. The idiosyncratic characteristics of these texts open up the field of artistic thinking, as well as share specific understanding on how art, society and politics relate to each other. While emphasizing the uniqueness of each artist's voice, I wish to highlight some of the common points and shared concerns among these texts. Many artists underline that artistic freedom is connected to other liberties, first and foremost freedom of speech and respect of fundamental human rights. Several artists refer to the individual responsibility of using and activating one's artistic freedom by setting one's own premises, by taking risky paths, by being honest, by challenging integrated limitations, by negotiating between individual approaches and a social/political context, and by contributing to a political dissensus. It appears that creation is a way to increase one's freedom. Several artists were born, live or work in countries where freedom of speech is restricted. They point out how political censorship affects one's own body and may take place through strategies that impact the economy of the art, which is a way to indirectly silence. Moreover, censorship may be used as a political agenda. In such cases, art is used as a political weapon and becomes the instrument of political battles. When reading the texts of artists based in Norway, there is a striking paradox: while freedom of speech is promoted to be an untouchable principle in the Nordic countries, the artists address strong concerns about increasing

attacks on art. Growing hate speech and racism are present in the public sphere and social media, without proper safeguard. Many voices, those who are unheard and invisibilized, are still silenced – then who is the freedom of speech for? This situation contributes to the experience of fear. Several artists share similar concerns on how art should better reflect multiplicities and listen to indigenous voices. As a whole, these texts implicitly evoke reflection on power, unbalanced political structures and counter power, indicating the declining role of the media as a “fourth estate”.

More than ever, there is a clear need to safeguard artistic freedom. In order to be stronger at protecting freedom of speech, it is important to investigate the trigger points, mechanisms and strategies where artistic freedom is under pressure.

#### **The common pattern of right-wing attack on art**

In 1996/97, I was a student at Paris 8, one of the universities established in the aftermath of May '68 and its intellectual and educational effervescence. In 1995, the French right-wing party, le Front National, won local elections in a few cities in the south of France – one of them was Toulon. In the suburbs of Toulon, Châteauevallon was an important theater established in the 60s and mainly dedicated to contemporary dance and performance. In 1996, the right-wing mayor began an attack on the program of the theater, decided to fire its founder/director – against the will of the minister of culture – and to dismantle the non-profit organization

that was running it. A huge movement for supporting the theater took place. It included ongoing debates in the theater and a big demonstration. Artists, citizens, students – I was one of them – came from Paris and from different parts of the country to support artistic freedom, democratic citizenship, the idea that the theater must remain an agora; a space that contributes to reflections, where it is possible to discuss openly and have different opinions. Everyone knew that a very important ideological battle was happening, which considerably exceeded the present case.

While the demonstrators were passing in front of the city hall, the wife of the mayor was on the balcony together with the mayor and one of his advisors. She raised a toast of champagne over the crowd, indicating her privilege, her status and expressing contempt for the demonstrators and their message. The significant support was exemplary and contributed to a broad awareness about the situation. Although the director was fired in an offensive way, the organization was maintained, and the employees could pursue its mission with the original spirit. For the record, Châteauevallon celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2015. This case happened more than 20 years ago. It illustrates the premises of a pattern that later became familiar in different countries in Europe: attacking contemporary art institutions.

Right-wing and populist parties have systematically attacked art and culture – in the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, among others. In order to dismantle

art and culture, public funds have been cut as a main leverage, as a tool to silence art and the artists. Through drastically cutting public spending, there is no doubt that a political and ideological battle is taking place. Artistic freedom goes hand in hand with freedom of speech. Media has also been silenced in the aforementioned countries. In other countries, such as Germany or France, we have witnessed cases of censorship with politicians or their representatives interfering with specific productions.

### **The spread of populist narratives:**

#### **Art instrumentalized as a political tool**

In Norway, there is clearly a before and an after of *Ways of Seeing* (a production that premiered at Black Box teater in November 2018)<sup>1</sup>. The period of autumn 2018 and the beginning of 2019 was marked with a media and political storm for both the artists of *Ways of Seeing* – Pia Maria Roll, Sara Baban and Hanan Benammar – and for Black Box teater. The piece acted as a catalyst for a debate that raised a number of crucial questions – the role of art, the function of political theater, power structures in society, racism and surveillance. We experienced a narrowing of the gap between free democracy and censorship.

A Norwegian member of parliament tagged one of the performers in a Facebook post and, by doing so, threatened her security. The Justice Minister wrote a chronicle accusing Black Box teater of moral bankruptcy. A local politician from the Progress Party proposed at the city council to cut the funding for Black Box teater. The

Prime Minister accused both the artists and the theater of making the life of Norwegian politicians more difficult. Politicians were provoked and stepped out of their positions in an offensive way, indicating a lack of intellectual integrity. By speaking out loud, politicians can intimidate and contribute to a chill out effect, not only for those directly involved but also by preventing possible allies and alliances. Such practices are unacceptable. Freedom of speech must be ring-fenced by securing an arm's length principle.

In December 2019, a Norwegian anonymous Facebook page, literally translated as “the commission of waste,” published its annual advent calendar, which attacks and ridicules contemporary performing artists in order to underline how public funding is misused. In this case there were some posts about several artists and specific parts of performances went viral. These were discussed in Norwegian mainstream and populist media as well as on international ultra-right online platforms. A member of parliament from the progress party addressed the Minister of Culture on how art containing nudity, faeces and body fluids should not get public funding. A surreal debate on NRK (the main public TV channel/radio) took place discussing for or against “peniskunst” (literally translated “penis art”). Supposedly serious media grasped the semantic contents without even questioning them, turning aesthetic matters into a simplified battleground, taking elements out of context and not looking at the artists' works as a whole. This is the steamroll of populist rhetoric: oversimplifying and polarizing, while being

conservative. And it is quite compelling – even worrying – that mainstream media don't sufficiently play their role as a “fourth estate” and a critical force in public debate.

These two cases share common mechanisms. Through the shredder of media and political power, art productions would shift from the cultural section in newspapers to politics, news in brief, society and with journalists who do not have any specific knowledge about art. By decontextualizing the work, artists and artistic directors are then evicted from their own language and medium; they have to comply with a forum that does not leave any room for complexity. On social media the line between freedom of expression and racist, abusive and hateful messages is becoming thinner, increasing the need for clear content moderation. Moreover, the right-wing communication apparatus is very solid and carries a powerful ripple effect: interviews, commentaries, trolls, all with clear punch lines. Since their apparatus is fully in tune with fast online communication mediums, the media battle is unbalanced per definition, with brief contents and articles that are constructed by piling up different layers of opinion and with little commentaries that emphasize conflicted positions. All this feeds the spectacle of political views that are ideologically opposed, contributing to increased click-baits. In such cases, art is instrumentalized as a political tool by politicians who use it to have their agenda heard.

When condemning contemporary performing arts, the far-right would always point to the (mis)use of tax

money while claiming “this is not censorship”. They pretend that “they do not wish to ban the performances; simply they don’t want public money to be spent for supporting and presenting these productions”. This rhetoric is a smoke screen that hides the true goal, which is actual censorship, knowing that without public funding these productions would not exist. Moreover, it can be that right-wing politicians are truly offended and wish that such works did not exist in a public space.

### **The speculative power of art**

In an article published at the end of 2019, Jemimah Steinfeld reflects upon the crisis of freedom of speech: “As the experience of other countries in Europe and around the world shows, the arts are often the first lines of attack by populist leaders keen to shut down alternative voices and lifestyles. But the arts play a crucial role in society. At their best, they draw on and celebrate the stories and experiences of everyone. And they’re often instrumental in driving societal change.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to deeper understand what is at stake when the far-right puts art under pressure, one can observe a common ideological background at stake among nationalist movements, ultra-conservatives and the right-wings. In 2010, the European Court of Justice ruled on the murder in Istanbul of the Armenian intellectual, editor and activist Hrant Dink. The Turkish linguist Necmiye Alpay commented on the judgment: “Writings containing irony, metaphors and figurative expressions are less likely to be understood. In particu-

lar, when one has prejudices (...)”<sup>3</sup>. This quote unfolds brilliantly the mechanisms of offense that would lead to censorship - and in extreme situations to murder. Irony, second degree humor, the speculative power of art, the so-called “dirt” (associated with nudity) and body fluids are triggering entry points for censorship. Religion, sex, and political statements are the most frequent targets of censorship crusades. Artists are being accused of provoking and according to the censors, provocation should be banned – or at least should not be funded. Actually, even although they convey uncomfortable contents, most artists are not necessarily driven by the intention of provoking. They make consequent artistic visions that imply meaningful choices, often in dialogue with art history, intertwining past, present and future. In any case, this is the role of art; to be disruptive and produce changes of representation. Right-wing populists put themselves in the position of being offended, while their tone is offensive and accusatory. Their position aims at bringing the moral and normality into the public sphere, as if it should be a criteria of proper behavior. In the art field it pushes us into a reactive mode and a defensive position, where we are “fighting against” instead of “fighting for”.

Art is being attacked as being irresponsible, provoking and representing a misuse of tax money. In reality, art conveys a realm and a set of values that are considered as inappropriate for far-right positions. Art is a speculative room that cherishes the unknown and the anew; and constantly pushes the limits of representation. It

carries challenging ideas and experiences a multiplicity of viewpoints. Theater and art rely on core humanistic values and contribute to promote diversity and inclusion: cultural diversity, diverse gender and sexual orientations, different bodies, a diversity of mindset and expressions. While acknowledging that diversity in the art field is still under construction, it is important to underline the significance of these core values in art. Therefore, in order to protect the speculative and transformative power of art, artistic freedom should be a supreme value for any democracy.

### **Reclaiming the narratives**

Our battle, as an art field, is to (re)claim the narratives in a time when “not-so-subtle political policing and censoring in parallel to social media shit storms seems to be the new concept of THE PUBLIC”<sup>4</sup>, as Trond Reinholdsen nailed it well in his text about artistic freedom. Reclaiming our narrative implies the implementation of collective and individual strategies, based on content production, communication tools, solidarity and activism.

The example of “Die Vielen” (The Many) in Germany is inspirational, as a platform for collective action and solidarity. By joining forces between various institutions, artists and freelancers, in order to support those under attack and “who understand theater and art as a means of participation in creating a society made up of people of every skin color, gender, sexual orientation, diverse needs and abilities, of every faith or non-faith and based on their equality”<sup>5</sup>.

Attacking artists and art institutions has become a familiar pattern in several countries, including the so-called democratic ones, with direct or indirect forms of censorship. Core democratic principles are in such danger that may threaten artistic expression, and artistic freedom is under increasing pressure all over the world.

There is a need to stand united, in order to ensure that artists and institutions – in all countries – are able to create and practice their art freely without suffering threats and persecution, and to safeguard artistic expression.

1. More information about the case is to be found online on [blackbox.no](http://blackbox.no): “Norwegian theatre-makers under political pressure for criticizing politicians in power”, Ragnhild Freng Dale. April 2018.
2. Steinfeld, Jemimah. “There’s a new free speech crisis gripping the world —and governments aren’t helping.” [prospectmagazine.co.uk](http://prospectmagazine.co.uk). 2019.
3. Manteau, Valérie. 2018. *Le Sillon*. Editions Le tripode.
4. See page 84 of this publication.
5. More information is to be found on the website [dievielen.de](http://dievielen.de)

*The birth of a poem*  
Asieh Amini

In this commissioned essay, Asieh Amini reflects around freedom of speech and artistic freedom, and brings a story about the birth and the journey of her poem *The Middle East*.

Asieh Amini is a poet, journalist and human rights advocate born in Iran. She has an MA from NTNU in culture studies, focused on diversity and equality. In 2005, her first book of poetry, *Hey, ... You Who Have Gone* was selected by UNESCO's office in Tehran as the best poetry collection by young and emerging Iranian poets. In 2012, she received the Oxfam Novib International PEN award, and in 2014 the Ord i Grenseland award. She has been an ICORN guest writer in Trondheim.

In Norway, Amini has published two poetry collections; *Kom ikke til mine drømmer med gevær* (Do not appear in my dreams with guns) and *Jeg savner å savne deg* (I miss missing you), in Norwegian and Persian, and has participated in literary anthologies like *Under samme himmel* (Under the same sky). Amini works at the the House of Literature in Trondheim as the cultural aspirant. She is a board member in the Norwegian PEN. Through her life as well as artistic practice, she fights for freedom of speech.

The essay is translated from Persian to English by Fereshteh Vaziri Nasab.

This is the story of a poem, which was supposed to be a love poem before its birth. How do I know? I cannot say how. Perhaps by a feeling, settled in my heart, which reminds me of good memories. It was supposed to be a poem about touching the body in the hottest moments of love making. The burning of those moments still runs in my veins. The fate of the poem, however, changed its course. When the enthusiasm of writing reached its climax, it was like the moment of orgasm. I was not moving on earth, I could neither hear the surrounding sounds nor smell the odours in the air. The people around me were moving like mute ghosts. I was present and absent. That was the heavenly moment of writing a poem. Has anybody described the birth of a poem yet, the very moment of its emergence? Despite the pain, which overwhelms your soul, you are the most content creature in the whole universe. When the poem emerges, you turn to be God. This moment is the purest moment of life; writing in no other genre resembles it. Since I cannot remember the birth of all my poems, I write the date and place of each beneath it. The birthday of poems that I bear with much pain, however, generally remain in my memory. For this reason, I expected that the birth of that painful poem would remain in my memory. Nevertheless, the only thing that I remember is that it was supposed to express the mood of love in me, but it did not. Like a wild feral horse, it was intractable and took me wherever it wanted. It was tough, ruthless, and upfront.

I wrote: “The guns stiffen in the Middle East!” I repeated it several times in my mind. Perhaps I wanted to write about a love affair in the Middle East, or about

the nights of Tehran, burning bright. I do not know. The poem left without satisfying me. It left me alone, dismayed, and unfulfilled. I can only remember the bitterness of the experience. Under this poem, I have written, Trondheim, 12.03.2014, and nothing more. I can remember that many nights I could not sleep, waiting for this poem to come back. I wanted to know why it had turned its back to me, but it did not appear.

It is about a 40-minute walk from Tempe, where I live, to the city centre. I walked this route so many gloomy autumn and winter days, among snow and ice, with the hope that the poem would appear from behind a tree or a star or a snowflake, but it did not. The stubborn unwieldy poem wanted to play with me. It beheld my restless love desire and turned its back to me.

I cannot remember exactly if it was day or night; if I was sitting at home or in my office in the library; or I was walking beside Nidelva. It has remained only a date in the calendar of my poems, which indicates the birthday of this poem. Nonetheless, I remember the ecstasy of the moment; that it flowed, like the rain on a thirsty night. The first word that came out of my pen rode me forth without ceasing. The savage horse had been domesticated. The 12th of March must have been a special day. I expected a love poem, which can express my emotions; instead, a warrior was born, in which I fell in love with from the first moment. I cannot remember the details of this day. I do not know where I was and what I did. I do not know if I was happy or sad, alone or among people.

I only remember the days and nights after that. I had written the poem on my iPad, which was under my pillow the whole time. Many nights I read it before sleeping, which I had not done for a long time. I wanted to be sure that it had finally appeared. That it had been born and had given birth to me. So is poetry; it is a moment in which you are simultaneously a creator and a creation, a mother and a beloved.

### **The trip**

I am sitting on the plane by the window, reading a book. Kari sits beside me and waits until the aircraft changes to take-off mode and she can turn on the camera and start shooting. I ask: "Are you going to speak with me, or will you only be filming?" She answers: "Just shooting, nothing else." When the airplane is in the horizontal position, Audun stands up and pushes the start button. I go on reading in the same position. When they turn off the camera, I take out my iPad. Recently, I have started playfully translating my poems, word by word. I know that these words, being arranged in lines, are not a poem, but searching for words has always been my commitment. I have written the words in Persian, English, and Norwegian in three rows and show them to Kari to ask her opinion. She reads the lines and I see that she raises her eyebrows reflexively and smiles. "I'm not a translator and can't rate the translation, but I think the concept is daring and interesting. I can ask my mother Odveig, who is a poet and translator, to correct or to translate it for you." I accept with delight and say: "You'd do me a great favour."

## Paris

To describe Paris, you do not need to speak about the bright nights, the crowded streets, the stylish people, the touristic areas, and the historical squares or even its unique art. It is enough to say 'Paris' to include all that, or even more. 'Paris' can also be the description of a situation or a person. For instance, if you say that someone is 'Paris', you mean that s/he is open and easy-going. If you say this strawberry tastes like 'Paris', you mean that it has colour, beauty, and taste altogether. If you say a piece of music is 'Paris', you mean it is enchanting. Therefore, to describe Paris, you just need to say 'Paris' and nothing more.

Paris is both revolution and peace; it is simultaneously uproar and rebellion and equality and security; it is both restriction and unconditional freedom. Paris is Paris, the collection of contradictory things. I came to this charming city first in 2008.

The ambassador of France in Iran had invited me as a special guest to participate in the program "Future Faces." Before my trip, I was summoned to the embassy in Tehran and the ambassador, Bernard Poletti, explained the reason why I was chosen. He told me that this program had existed for a long time in the embassy. They would invite those who were supposed to play a role in the future of their countries to meet their French counterparts and discuss their fields of interest, a mutual acquaintance. My engagement with literature and human rights was the main reason for their choice. I should confess that they were wrong about my influence

on the Iranian future society. Now that I am writing these lines, I am miles, mountains, and seas away from that society to be able to affect it.

My visit program had been arranged in accordance with my main activities in Iran. Some meetings were with people who had dedicated their lives to literature, feminism, equal rights, and abolishing death penalty. On the meeting list were names like *Julia Kristeva*, *Robert Badinter*, *Gilles Kepel*, the French ambassador for peace and human rights, and several women and human rights organizations. Visiting a youth detention centre outside Paris was added to the list of my requests. I completed the program by visiting the Louvre and Versailles.

I was more excited about meeting Kristeva than the others, who I, to tell the truth, did not really know. Shortly before meeting Robert Badinter, I came to know that he was responsible for the abolishment of death penalty, both in France and other countries.

On this trip I realized that Paris is the completion of all tastes. It is a unique wine, which first intoxicates you and then reveals the elegance of its art, its power and beauty to you, so that you can only describe its splendor by asserting that Paris is Paris.

## A Homage to the Freedom of Speech

On this particular trip to Paris on March 29th, 2016, we stayed at City Hall Hotel and my room was on the fifth floor. A couple of days before my trip I came to know that we had been invited to lunch by the mayor of the 4th arrondissement of Paris on the second day of our trip. All around the beautiful building of the town hall,

big pictures of the members of ICORN, poets, writers, and artists, are hung on the fences. Mine is one of them. On each portrait, there is a brief biography.

We registered for the conference and received the program in the evening after our arrival. They told us that the next evening there would be a special dinner party at the hall of Foreign Ministry with the presence of the French ambassador for peace and human rights. I had been invited to read a poem at the beginning of this ceremony. Well, then Paris still had some unveiled enchantments for me! I accepted the invitation. It was a delight for me that I got a chance to read poetry among writers and poets from around the globe. These people were close to me in spirit and their backgrounds were even closer to mine. We were all members of ICORN; many of the guests were children of the Middle East, like me. They smelled like Orient and one could sense the sunlight rising from their words. It was clear that I was delighted to read a poem which I have already decided. Yet the translation was not as perfect as I wanted. I struggled the whole night to make a better translation by sending it simultaneously to three friends of mine for translating or editing. I corresponded with my friend Soheila in the USA till 3:00 am, and finally I came upon an acceptable translation. Then I showed the poem to a couple of participants in the conference to be sure about my decision about reading it. After reading the poem, they first raised their eyebrows and then smiled. Finally, they certified and admired it. One or two laughed and another said: "How daring!" The one, whose view was

particularly important to me, said: "This is the best place for reading this poem."

Wherever I go, the microphone of Kari and Audun, which is attached to my collar by a wire, accompanies me. They stand at a distance so that their presence does not affect my behaviour or that of others around me. I forget the microphone and camera after a few minutes.

Kari contacted me in spring 2012 and proposed to make a film about my life. She wanted to make a documentary film about the lives of four authors settled in Norway. These Authors came from Yemen, Kenya, Chechnya, and Iran: Mansur Rajih, Musa Mutaev, Philo Ikonya and me. Kari had accompanied me on a couple of my trips and had recorded a part of the film in Trondheim. The film had taken much longer than expected. Now, they were accompanying me to complete their documentary.

I arrived at the dinner party along with some other friends. One of the hosts of the conference was waiting for me. She approached me and said, "Finally you're here!" I sensed the anxiety in her look, but anxiety is the shadow that pursues us everywhere and is quite natural in such conferences. She went immediately to the subject matter and did not let me suppose it: "Asieh, I should give you a message. It is suggested that you read another poem tonight."

I looked directly in her eyes and exclaimed unbelievably: "Who has suggested that?" "The people who arranged the conference." Her tone was very gentle, so gentle that it made me worry. "Thanks for the sugges-

tion; unfortunately, I should reject it.” She was looking at me the same way as before. After a second, the smile came back to her mouth. “I expected this answer, but I had to give you the message. It’s up to you.” We had not finished our conversation yet when a group approached us.

There was a man in this group with a thin, small face, who wore an elegant suit and a tightly tied cravat, which made his face look very decisive. With heavily French-accented English he asked me: “Madam Asieh Amini?” I answered: “Yes.”

You should read the rest of the story in fast-forward. Although I remember every detail of what happened that night, I prefer to relate to it with double the speed. One should not remember unpleasant things with detail, rather one should swallow them in one gulp, like bitter things.

I tried to keep calm. I tried to hide the flashes in my eyes, which were able to light a lamp, and the trembling in my knees. Everything began with a statement: “Madam, we can not let you read this poem; you should choose another poem.” He looked me directly in the eyes. However, he could neither see the sparkles in my eyes, nor the shaking of my legs. I tried to answer calmly: “Who are you to decide for me?” He blushed. From the colour of his earlobes under his short brown hair, I could see that the blood was rushing in his veins.

“I...” He introduced himself, explained his position, and expressed his regret for what he would say. I do not know if he was sorry for me or for himself? He

explained that he was just doing his duty and the decision was completely impersonal. He added that the hall was a political place, a political place belonging to the Foreign Ministry of France. He spoke and spoke, and I was only looking in his eyes, trying to realize what I could hardly understand. I asked: “What is the problem?” He muttered: “This poem is about the Middle East. It does not fit in here.” He uttered “here” such that I realized that he meant the building. I doubted for a second if we were standing in a holy place. I said: “Poetry has no border. It is just a poem.”; then I stressed “and my favourite one”. He just emphasized: “Not here.”

“Why?”

“Because this is the Foreign Ministry.”

The same Foreign Ministry that had invited me a couple of years ago as someone whose activities had been influential and should be honoured! Now that this honourable person was in France, she was not allowed to read her poem!

“Do you know why I am here and why we are all gathered here?” I asked him. He paused, gulped his saliva, and went on repeating the same excuses a thousand times. My answer was one word: “No”. He said: “You should not read this poem.” I said: “Well, I won’t. I won’t read any other poem either.” He said: “But you should read a poem. Your name has already been announced.” Then he pointed to a paper in his hand and said: “You can read this poem.” It was my poem: A poem on censorship! The strangest paradox that might occur. I did not even trouble myself to look at the paper. I knew my answer. I told him: “I won’t read

this. Here is Paris, the cradle of freedom! You should be more concerned about losing this freedom than me and others.”

The ceremony began. The man was still standing beside me. I do not know if he felt obliged to, or if he was worried. It seemed that my anxiety had affected him too. I patted him gently on the back with a smile. He only shook his head with a strange look in his eyes. The name of the French ambassador for peace and human rights was announced and he stood behind the microphone. Silence overcame the hall. Those who were observing us turned to the stage. I turned to the man and whispered in his ear: “Why did you think that my poem should decorate your nice dinner party? Literature is no decoration for politics.” He was agitated and only looked at me. In his eyes, I could see embarrassment and regret together with persistence and obedience of commands.

The ambassador was quoting a statement about freedom of speech by Montesquieu. We were not performing in a movie by Charlie Chaplin and I am not retelling a funny memory. This bitter joke was my real life. I asked myself: “Does this man who is standing beside me and treats the building of the Foreign Ministry of his country as a holy temple, at all understand my poem?” Now I could see much more regret in his eyes. I murmured: “If I wanted to be commanded by politicians I would have stayed in my lovely Tehran and listened to Mullahs; they were more sincere in their censorship. At least I had the chance to be with my family.” There was a tumult in my heart, but I knew that

I had no other choice. I had paid a lot to get the freedom of speech and choice.

I looked around me. This was the same hall where I had been invited 8 years ago. I had a meeting with the ambassador for peace and human rights in a room on one of the floors of this building. He had granted me a thick book about human rights. I was invited to the party because of my challenges for human rights and now in the same building they prevented me from reading my poem.

I asked again and again “why”? and he answered again and again: “Because this is the Foreign Ministry and the poem is about the Middle East. You cannot...”

I interrupted him and said: “You don’t know what you do. This is Paris!” He stared at me and I could see the unconcealable fluttering of his eyelids.

I had no doubt that the reading of my poem had already been cancelled. We were standing side by side, listening to the Ambassador’s speech about the freedom of speech and its importance for our world. After his speech, I suddenly heard my name being called from the speaker. The administrative manager invited me to go on stage. I looked at the man. His eyes were questioning. I said: “Only the Middle East.” And walked towards the stage. I passed the ambassador of peace and the representative of the Foreign Ministry. Peter, a member of the ICORN association board, was standing behind the microphone. We were supposed to perform the poem

in two different languages; Persian, and English. I had barely reached the microphone when the woman manager of the program covered the microphone with her hand to stop our voices being broadcasted in the hall. The audience saw us but could not hear us. Of course, she did not know that a microphone was attached to my collar and recorded everything. She bowed her head and asked me: “Which poem are you going to read?” I said: “The Middle East.” She shook her head and said: “Sorry! That’s impossible.” Peter was looking at me with an open mouth. I did not wait anymore. I was facing the audience. My knees could hardly hold my weight. I could not say any words or do anything; therefore, I started clapping and walked off stage. Some people clapped together with me, but most of them, astonished, were looking at the whole thing with their mouths open. Someone asked me: “What happened?” I said: “I was censored.” When I went off stage, some of the authors surrounded me. Someone went to the microphone and invited the audience to another hall for entertainment. A few of my friends insisted I read the poem for them. With a lump in my throat, I began:

### **The Middle East**

The guns  
Stiffen in the Middle East  
The guns  
Ejaculate in the Middle East  
The guns reach orgasm in the Middle East

The stimulation point is very low  
in the Middle East  
And the sky  
Always bears a new prophet

In the Middle East  
The merchants turn to prophets  
The prostitutes to saints

God  
Comes in the Middle East

Shall I call it the heart of the world  
Or the Earth’s vagina?  
When the border between  
Love and lust  
Is just a shoot.

### **My dear children**

The air in the hall was heavy. I crawled out silently and walked away. The sounds and pictures were mixed in my head. I had barely left the building when I started crying loudly. The whole way to the hotel the tears streamed down my face involuntarily. My friends, the coordinators and writers from different countries came to visit me at the hotel. They embraced me and expressed their regret, as if they had gone to a mourner to sooth her.

Kari’s camera was off. I told her: “You came here to make a poetic documentary and you confronted an action movie, but so is my life, so is my poetry”. Some-

times, I want to express my enthusiasm in a love poem and the poetry rebels. Conversely, sometimes, disgusted by all restrictions and follies, I want to protest, and my heart takes refuge in words, but a delicate, erotic love poem emerges.

Leaving Paris, I am holding *The Middle East* in my arms in the same way I was holding my daughter in my arms while fleeing my country.

## Interviews about FRI KUNST / Artistic Freedom

## Wichaya Artamat

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

In my perspective, artistic freedom in Thailand is always at risk. We have some sensitive issues that we cannot question or discuss publicly, so we have to find circuitous way to talk or make art about it. It is sad to say that this kind of self-censorship is in our flesh and blood. In my country, it may be more important to protect physical freedom before protecting artistic freedom.

Dramatist Wichaya Artamat is one of the most promising theater makers in Southeast Asia. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, he presented the piece *This Song Father Used to Sing (Three Days in May)*, where ancient culture is mixed with contemporary pop-culture and the current political challenges of Thailand.

## Gutta

– *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

Artistic freedom defends our right to say what we want, whenever we want to say it.

– *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

Artistic freedom is important so that we can experience each other in a more honest, naked, true and complex way.

– *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

*What are the possible actions to protect artistic freedom?*

Artistic freedom is put at risk when we are not listening, really listening, to each other and to our surroundings. At one occasion, we did experience being censored. Words were put into our mouths.

Possible actions? Don't sell yourself too cheap. Set your own premises. There are strong commercial forces out there; shapeshifters that are putting chains on the gods

we call artists, pretending to help them. Obedience and silence are like walls built to keep the waves of the ocean away from the shore. Slowly, the water will seep through the brick wall, crumbling the straight, dry line flooding the dried up soil, the colorless grass. Moisturizing and fertilizing, bacteria will grow and stubborn parasites will flourish again.

Gutta is a drag king-group and a female masculine community. With performing arts as a starting point, they move back and forth between their own masculinity and male stereotypes through shameless sampling. Larry, Robin, Lavrans and RichHard are infamous for their wild stage performances. At Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, they got us all in a festive mood by kickstarting it all with their show *GUTTA GETS CONNECTED* and a following DJ-set.

## Volmir Cordeiro

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

Artistic freedom can be a principle if we understand principle as a strong rule applicable with trust to any creative situation. I try to think of freedom not as a conquest or something that we can achieve after many overcome obstacles. It's not outside, it's not far, it's not over there... The point is more about how freedom reclaims me; how freedom presents itself to me as an address, as a call, as a place for living. The possible answers imply the invention of different sensorial conditions in the formation of the artistic subjectivity – which, to me, is the base of the gesture in the case of dance. Freedom in creation is not just a strategy or a tool, but a permanent field of fight: fighting for the idea that freedom is a social determination that depends on our ability to gather.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

People often associate freedom to a kind of economic security or prosperity – or, still, to a suspension of responsibility. I prefer not to think this way. Artistic freedom is to situate or to interrogate the negotiations between the individual processes and the social conditions. As an artist, I am interested to know how the normative life tries to penetrate myself, to disturb me, to destroy my feelings and how I can invent resistance mechanisms through collectiveness, being able to fight for a good form of political organization and for good sorts of feelings in the face of a good kind of freedom. When I decide to cope with these normative interferences, I feel the empowerment of freedom.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk? What are the possible actions to protect artistic freedom?*

Artistic freedom is put at risk whenever we lose the capacity to choose how we drive our lives. To think about my artistic freedom, I need to conceive what kind of life, creative process, economy and modes of narrative I want to construct. It is the condition in the face of the risk of feeling that I drive my life and the limits of my freedom – and remember that my life and my freedom can also drive me. So, I can know only partially about my artistic freedom – and I need to consider this in the organization of the world powers: it is a project to produce risk, precariousness and vulnerability everywhere, all the time. And it is impossible to think about

freedom outside of this frame. By asking myself about artistic freedom, I start to negotiate with some different forms of power and their incisions on me.

Volmir Cordeiro was born in 1987 in Brazil. He created the duet *Époque* with Marcela Santander Corvalán in 2015, and *L'œil la bouche et le reste* in 2017, which also happened as an exhibition. He has just published a book based on his phd thesis, *Ex-corporo*, in Carnets collection. *Trottoir*, his last piece for 6 performers, was recently created in *Festival d'automne* (Paris) in December 2019. At Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival, he performed *Street* – a piece which can be seen as a carnivalesque portrait of everyday life in the street.

# Tanya Beyeler, El Conde de Torrefiel

*– What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

Freedom is always a very tricky concept, I think, because we speak a lot about freedom – but actually, when you live in a society, it is very difficult to really be free. Being free means to really open yourself with all you have inside; good or bad. To me, being free in terms of artistic freedom means to try to be honest with myself as much as possible. This way, the pieces we deliver to an audience are responding to something that I am experiencing as a human being in that moment of my life – according to me, and not according to what people might expect of me. This is, for me, the maximal freedom I can desire in artistic terms.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

Basically, because art is one of the few expressions that allow you to be honest, despite social rules. For me, art is not politics. Art can be political, of course, but art is always working in the field of possibilities, abstraction, imagination, games; a field that is not real. Politics is real. Political acts have direct consequences in real life. Art has a consequence, but only indirectly. It enters your brain; the brain of the artists performing it or the audience receiving it, and therefore, it might affect your acts in real life in terms of politics. But art in itself is not politics. Art can create political acts, but is not political itself – to me, that is.

So, artistic freedom is important because you can allow yourself to express everything you have, even if it is bad or obscure or politically incorrect – because it does not affect the real life.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?  
What are the possible actions to protect artistic freedom?*

In my country, in Spain, the cultural field is very dependent of the political situation. The freedom of artists is definitely put at risk. You are always subjected to some kind of censorship, or you might be used as a weapon of political propaganda or political critics. If an artist presents a piece that is somehow controversial, and the government in that particular city is leftist, the right-wing will use this artistic exhibition, piece or other kind

of artwork as a weapon against their opponent. This is very dangerous, because it forces artists into having to be very careful about what they do. As an artist, you might spend far too much time and energy worrying about the expectations and about what is safe in the moment that you publish your piece. This worry cuts away artistic possibilities. This goes for theatre, literature, poetry, music, dance, painting, whatever artform. It happens a lot.

The artistic Spain can be open minded in the underground field – even though, if it can be used as a political weapon, it will. This makes me think about the fact that a fictional expression can be so powerful: fiction is very powerful nowadays. There is a crossover between fiction and reality, also within technology and the digital reality. Art, in this sense, is suffering from it when fiction is confused with reality. An artist may be asked the same question that you would ask a president of a government, a doctor, an architect, and none of these are working in the same field at all.

Actually, I think the piece we will present during the festival, *LA PLAZA*, talks very much about this topic. What is fiction, and what is reality? What is happening in your mind? Nowadays, reality is very subjective. Each and everyone has his or her own reality, and there is no such thing as a shared reality. This is something that really isolates us and generates a lot of loneliness. And despite this, we behave very much the same! This tension is very interesting. *LA PLAZA* is also touching the idea of image as a language. Humans are animals, and

our main sense is the sight, so what we see does really affect us a lot. An image does not necessarily say much, but at the same time, it says everything. The language of image, which we are using very much nowadays, is a very tricky language that I do not think we yet have the tools to read with a good critical reflection.

Tanya Beyeler and Pablo Gisbert are the driving forces of the Swiss-Spanish duo El Conde de Torrefiel. They once stated that “The verb is in the dancer’s body, not in an actor’s mouth.” Their characters transcend the limits of spoken language, and a lot of their work is focusing exclusively on the 21st century and on the existing relationship between the personal and the political. At Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, they presented the piece *LA PLAZA*.

## Verk Produksjoner

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

Freedom is big  
Freedom is different from liberated  
Freedom is utopic and something we strive for  
Freedom is something we must fight for  
Freedom fluctuates  
Freedom spits  
People go to war for Freedom  
Freedom is ideology  
Ideology sucks  
Freedom is more  
Freedom wants more  
Freedom is a feeling  
Freedom is rights  
Freedom has right  
Freedom prevails  
Freedom fails  
Freedom to become

Freedom is hubris  
Freedom twists, squirts and kicks  
Freedom of ants are different from freedom of plants  
Freedom is under attack  
Freedom attacks  
Freedom is scary  
Freedom frightens people  
Freedom can create envy, which is a very basic feeling  
Freedom is unofficial  
Freedom is boundless and needs boundaries  
I can be liberated yet unfree, or free yet enslaved

Verk Produksjoner is known for their epic and vaudeville-esque form of acting with satirical and political undertones changing swiftly between storytelling, acting and improvisation. Ahead of Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival, we asked them a question about artistic freedom.

## Duduzile Mathonsi

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

I am a black heterosexual woman, born and raised in South Africa and currently living in Norway. And I have struggled in my attempt to answer: I cannot really tackle this question, as I am not sure whether it aligns with how someone who looks like me navigates in the world.

What does artistic freedom mean to you?

Well, it depends on whose answer I am giving. The chameleon's answer, or Duduzile Libazisa Sfiso Mathonsi's answer? So, I have decided to give both.

The chameleon's answer is:

That artistic freedom should be anyone's right, and art can help change societies for the better. Artistic freedom is crucial in injecting different ways of critical thinking. It is supposed to work outside of systematic infringements of being, and therefore allowing free

creation. Artistic freedom allows stories to be told without censorship of truths. It allows freedom of imagination and can allow important conversations to exist. If we cannot express, then we can not exist; it is parallel with human rights.

My answer is:

Human rights? That's a conversation that could go on for days! That being said, artistic freedom is relative, and we cannot ignore who it is offered to and how it is being offered. Now, as we all stand against the freedom of being artists, as we all join together as race and gender alike, let us not forget each other.

History has taught us that people of colour will go to war with whiteness, but when the victory is reeled in, there is a tendency to leave us behind. I have more than one protest; artistic freedom in general, systematic racism within the arts, and human rights before artistic freedom. Maybe, as we look into these days of FRI KUNST, let us also have a look at the systems that do not offer free art to all.

Artistic freedom is freedom of being

What I want to do in my artistry

And where my creative process wants me to be

Choosing art as a medium for my creative process  
Not what I should represent or who

Artist freedom is the freedom to be Black

To have a singular identity amongst many other artists whatever colour they are.

Not decolonising because that is not my job

that is the job of the colonizer

Not making every artist decision on whether or not I am the spectacle or spectator

I want to make a theatre about A ROCK!

Yes, I too want to make theatre about a rock.

Dudzile Mathonsi is a South African artist living and working in Norway. She is an actress, writer, singer and performance artist. Her background is in TV and radio and her experience includes journalism. Mathonsi is the first black woman graduating from the Norwegian Theatre Academy with a BA in Acting. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, she presented her performance *Bitch Where the Fuck is my Manifesto?!*

## Maritea Dæhlin

“I think of artistic freedom and how it comes with a huge responsibility. I think of spaces for collective thought and transformation, and of spaces for polarization and separation. I think of the importance of having institutions and governments that protect their artists when their artistic freedom is being threatened. To have artists that stand up for each other. I still don’t feel that I manage to do enough of that. Standing up for others, for myself. I think of when I recently was almost silenced by my own fear in response to anonymous bullying online. I think of a country which I am very fond of (and which I also call home) where bullying doesn’t just stay online, but where ten women are disappearing every day, and which is on the top list of countries where journalists are being killed. I think of what it is like to be scared to talk about certain subjects, of a family member whom I never got to meet since he was killed for speaking up for the side that some considered to be the wrong side. I think of the importance of always guarding the freedom of artistic expression, of any expression. I think of how the freedom of one can step on the freedom of another. I think of the importance of resistance.

I think of the three times I have, in less than two months, seen performances with racist jokes, and then I think about who is supposed to laugh, who are we making art for.”

Artist Maritea Dæhlin alternates between living and working in Norway and Mexico. She is interested in human behaviours, emotions, rituals and encounters. Her work spans between devised theater, video performance, performance art and poetry. Her art comes off as playful, minimal, non-linear and sometimes absurd. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, she presented her solo performance *I WANT TO BE TRADITIONAL*.

## Mia Habib

In October 2018, Mia Habib Productions was awarded basic funding from the Norwegian Arts Council, receiving NOK 2.8 million a year for four years. The funding was noticed by an anonymous Facebook account that shares examples of what he thinks is a waste of state money, and which has also previously made a point of several choreographers receiving support from the Arts Council. The comment box below the Facebook post about Habib’s support was full of dissatisfaction with performing arts receiving public money. This was then followed up by the right-wing online newspaper Resett, which in a text about Habib’s support, links to a video for readers to see what she is working on. In the comment section below the post, racist and Islamophobic comments were flourishing. This led Habib to report Resett to the police for dissemination of hate speech, as the newspaper is responsible for the comment section and modification of its content.

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?  
How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

Artist freedom to me is freedom to formulate your projects and create the art you want without political interference. I find it difficult to talk about artistic freedom without taking into account what has happened in Norway in recent years. We have had clear examples of artistic freedom being put at risk. Then I think of *Ways of Seeing*, but not least of the discussions that have flourished again in recent months, where we have a Fremskrittspartiet (The Progress Party) politician asking, during the Parliament's question time, a question based on something as unreliable as an anonymous Facebook source. The fact that this is even possible; that a politician at Stortinget is allowed to do so – and not least that journalists in mainstream media do not immediately lead the discussion around the fact that this question is based on the premises given by an internet troll. This is also an example of something that I believe is threatening artistic freedom. You need to be fully aware of the arm's length principle. Artistic freedom is central to a democracy.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

Artistic freedom is an important fundamental principle within the laws and regulations we have in a democracy, which should also relate to paragraphs dealing with racism, discrimination and hate speech. Regarding this, I think it is important that art is free, not least because

art should be able to reflect and criticize existing power structures and political situations. In today's political climate, both in Europe and globally, where we see the extreme polarity, I believe it is crucial that art can be the free, critical voice of the conversation. At the same time, I also believe that it is important that the arts should not rise above the legal clauses that stop us from discriminating others. Freedom of speech and hate crime can sometimes be in a bit of a negotiation with one another. I believe that art should deal with this as well. This in particular has not been a problem in Norway so far, but it could potentially be so.

Mia Habib is a dancer and choreographer based in Oslo. Habib makes work that speak to the major concerns of our time. She understands theater as a social and political space. In recent years, she has been working across genres and with various forms of overall art projects. During the Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival, Mia Habib Productions was supposed to present the performance *How to Die – Inopiné* at Dansens Hus. It got cancelled due to the coronavirus and is rescheduled for March 2021.

## Bára Sigfúsdóttir

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

For me, artistic freedom is the right of artists to create, communicate and reflect freely through their work in public and private spaces without fearing censorship, attack or punishment. It is a fundamental human right.

Artistic freedom also makes me think of having both the inner and outer freedom to do, think and communicate differently than what might be expected from our surrounding environment. To allow oneself to make something what one might not even like or understand at first, to take creative risks like there was nothing to lose and to dare to follow the unknown in a creative process instead of going for safer choices that “work” in our current social context.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

It feels important for me to live in a world where there is freedom and equality, and where human rights are respected. In places where those rights are not

respected, that usually mirrors a society where not only artists lack freedom to express themselves, but other community members as well. That is also why we need to take care of and continuously protect artistic freedom. Through art, we hear different perspectives than the ones that tend to echo in the mainstream media. I think art empowers us as citizens to sense, feel, think and decide for ourselves by inviting different ways of seeing things than what we might experience in our personal environment and context. I also think that art can be supportive in reflecting upon contemporary society as well as it can challenge our social norms and trigger constructive criticism.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

I have observed artistic freedom put at risk when political and/or economic pressured groups want to avoid an open and transparent dialogue about certain topics due to their own agendas.

I think we protect artistic freedom when we question and oppose censorship of any kind, but this is of course easier said than done as there are billions of different contexts in which artists are working around the world. I am aware that many artists cannot speak in an open transparent manner about their work as they would put themselves at risk. I think it is important to protect our own artistic environment and, in combination, seek out dialogues with artists in other contexts. I feel it would be nice to be more aware of each other's working condi-

tions to be able to connect with and support each other. I don't know if there exists an international law that protects artistic freedom, but I definitely think there should be.

The Icelandic choreographer Bára Sigfúsdóttir represents a unique style of exploration and composition of movement that is both articulate and expressive, musical and distinctive. As she continues to increase her importance in contemporary dance internationally, she creates performances that are accessible to a wide-ranging audience. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival, she presented the performance *FLÖKT – a flickering flow* together with Tinna Ottesen.

# Alice Ripoll

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

This question is so broad, I will try to make a certain cut to answer. I have been thinking a lot about the internet, I feel that it can work like a big prison for me. Having to sign in daily, via email, WhatsApp and social networks, is something that restricts my freedom a lot, as it consumes my time.

Art demands a more delicate relationship with time. The internet, the possibility of being found by your phone at any time, will still generate a lot of damage that we will be facing. I believe it tends to impoverish art.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

For me, art and freedom are involved. Each artistic creation that I make has the objective and implies to increase my freedom and that of the interpreters. It is a mission of my work.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

*What are the possible actions to protect artistic freedom?*

In this framework that I chose to answer, artistic freedom would be protected by being less connected by the internet, trying to increase the time in the rehearsal room, in being an errant in life (walking, reading, talking). The internet simulates a wandering route, but through the algorithms, it imposes a route on your navigation, where you only see what you have been looking for (mainly for consumption purposes). Without free research, without error, without really wandering, there will be no more freedom in art, only reproduction of programmed routes.

Alice Ripoll was born in Rio de Janeiro. At the age of 21, she was studying to be a psychoanalyst, and took a deviant path to start studying dance. The political and social issues of her home country are often reflected in her work. *CRIA*, the performance she was meant to show during Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020 – if only it weren't for the coronavirus – is no exception.

*FRI KUNST Interview no. 11 — 29 April 2020*

## Katarina Skår Lisa

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

To me, artistic freedom is related to freedom of 'speech' within both the body, mind and heart, and it refers to the possibility to express from an honest centre towards oneself and all sentient beings. This may mean the freedom to express whom we are and from the culture and land which we are related to, or it may refer to those concepts and ideas we connect with.

To me, artistic freedom is based on accept and compassion for the individual expressions and those who are expressing urges from a core of either social, political, spiritual, cultural or personal needs or beliefs. These artistic expressions may be triggering, confusing, boring, important, necessary, demanding, opening, moving, beautiful, and so much more to those who witness the growth or presentation of the artwork. They may trigger many emotions and feelings within us. Can we

handle these expressions without projecting our fears or worries towards the expressions or the artists that are presenting certain issues?

I think artistic freedom should concern the respect for all sentient beings as often as possible. Within this saying, I mean that artists should have the space to ask questions and to be generous about challenging perspectives, views and activities within our society – space to dare putting sensitive and sensible themes on the agenda.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

To me, the importance of artistic freedom tells something about how the artists or the artistic expressions are reflecting multiplicities and differences in societies. We need artistic freedom to go beyond the surfaces of issues of all kinds. There are no ‘one way’ of things. I see that artists, through their expressions, can be important figures of telling new stories – and these stories create new imaginations and possible futures.

Artistic freedom is important for abling the artists to approach sensitive topics and to take their space, but it should also give the possibility to ‘retreat’, if needed.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

I think artistic freedom is put at risk when freedom in general is limited. What is freedom, eventually, for each

person, each culture, each land and country? These possible differences of perspectives make it complicated to give one overall answer to this question. Personally, I am worried that artistic freedom can be limited as seen in other countries. In Norway, there have been several worrying cases of this during recent time; cases where artistic productions have been threatened in medias for its unsuitable political contents, and where cultural heritage buildings are decided to be demolished without the people’s consent. There are also cases of big corporations paying disrespect to the nature and the culture of Sámi people; where land- and culture based practises are threatened by big building corporations in vulnerable nature areas, which are also important grazing lands for reindeer and other wild animals. Sámi artists become important storytellers in some of these cases, bringing up important issues through their artistic expressions.

I do have a belief that a collective ‘dugnad’ spirit will protect artistic freedom, through sharing art as both a need and a tool to navigate through our lives.

— *What are the possible actions to protect artistic freedom?*

We should continue working for the freedom of speech to be available for each and everyone of us, and to ensure that the voices of the people are heard – including the marginal voices, as well as the voices of the unseen and the unheard.

I do believe that it may be a good quality to work inwards with our own capacity of care, compassion and ways of listening. We should build spaces for inclusive attitudes towards expressions of all kinds of life. I also wish to raise the possible importance of collaborations or co-creative sharings about strengthening the artistic freedom.

(((I dream of a more generous attitude towards expressions and differences. Also, I dream of a more caring approach towards and with our micro and macro surroundings.)))

Katarina Skår Lisa is a dancer, choreographer and teacher – Norwegian, and with Sámi roots. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, she presented her work *Gift of Stone* – an expanded choreographic examination of physical boundaries, of histories, experiences and spirituality of this massive part of Sapmi; the region of the Sámi people.

## Iggy Lond Malmborg

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

I'm not sure. Maybe it is a chimera where the sadistic super-egos we all carry would happen to fall asleep, be too drunk or too uninterested in interfering the ongoing actions, on that very stage in that very moment. Perhaps best framed by the moment when someone asked the Dutch-American artist Bas Jan Ader “why?!” after Bas himself had rolled off a rooftop in front of a camera, without any living audience present, and he answered “I wanted to know what it feels like.” Just like the child that once again has licked on a frozen pole, to see if the same immobility will strike her – or if it was (just like most of the time) the adults playing her a trick. Maybe that childish impulse of thinking ‘let’s see’ or ‘let’s try’ would be the leading force in rehearsals and performances in such a state, where the artist is free – free of the responsibility to produce something valuable, finding an answer to the why before the action, word, sound, movement (or whatever) has been done. Thus the curious attempt, the playing itself would be the main fuel. Or the restlessness caused by the utterly boring

world we are condemned to live in, the status quo – a restlessness that finds enjoyment in the most destructive gestures; producing noise where it is silent, stirring what is still or stopping where there is too much movement already – without keeping in mind what these gestures might do, what its achievements will be. And most of all, what they will mean. Kicking on buckets without being interested in the clean-up, to put it bluntly. That also means; freed from the responsibility of the possible hurt the actions or words might cause others. – Oh, I hope such a freedom never occurs!

Yet, now I am only speaking of the internal criticism and limitations put on the artist by herself. There is of course a level of obstacles put upon us from the outside: By politics (guidelines for art), by trends, by our own community of makers and spectators; pointing, shouting and calling up others' works as not *producing enough value* or creating the *wrong meaning*. An act of silencing that just has to stop, as censorship is an art we are virtuosos at ourselves.

Every time a maker has done something and come to the almost unthinkable decision of showing it to others – that very thing has been passing through a series of tests that would have any state interventionist face the tribunal in the Hague. And usually it was a mistake, usually the piece that made it through the internal battle of self-censorship is nothing but a hungry cry for affirmation. But sometimes, in rare cases, it is something beautiful, horrifying and confusing. Or even, in the best

of situations, it somehow made it to stay unsure. That means; its own antagonisms and contradictions have remained unsolved.

And the pocket of time and space we call art, is the only battlefield where such a thing might appear.

– *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

Without mentioning the most obvious financial, social and political limitations (instrumentally put on us by a positivistic zeitgeist), I would say it is put at risk through representation; this diabolic spell over theatre, where something very small and temporary is functioning as a stand in for a larger thing or crowd.

A spell thrown by one of the strongest (yet saddest) powers we have: the memory. And the human ability to draw links between events, to make and read symbols.

I, myself, sometimes suffer from obsessive hallucinations in which events on stage are nothing else than they are in the moment of performance; when an artist is pouring massive amounts of honey over its body (that very action has been done so many times, so there is no need to mark a reference here), it is not a signifier of something absent – it is only a process of moving from dry to wet, from smooth to sticky. But I wake up quickly, reminding myself of what such a theatre would demand (which is how I would imagine an ideal theatre); an Alzheimer-ensemble performing for a lobotomized audience.

Please do not misread this delirium as a quest for truth! I am a simple nihilist, like most of us. I just find the very situation of theater so complicated that I silently dream of staying within it and try to understand it, before we take care of (and subvert) the world as a whole.

The world becomes a little quirker once seen through the lens of actor and performance maker Iggy Lond Malmborg. His texts are witty and sometimes dark, but always well performed, original and cleverly written. Malmborg is based in Malmö and Tallinn, and during Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, he presented his performance *Things in my mouth*.

## Kristina Norman

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you? Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

My constitutional right to participate in the democratic process. Me or any other person losing this liberty would signal the end of democracy.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

At this point, I wouldn't separate artistic freedom from other liberties which should be secured in any country that wants to think of itself as democratic. It's quite evident that if there's no freedom of the press or no freedom of speech, artistic freedom will be at risk, too. Of course, artists are brave and create a space of freedom by themselves even when they are not granted it by the system. Still, then the consequences might turn out to be grave for them and their rights as citizens, as humans might be under threat.

One can identify plenty of workings of trump-effect in my native Estonia, and particularly in the time of the corona crisis. Despite being a minority in the government, we currently have an extreme nationalist party setting the tone in politics. What is truly alarming is that in the state of emergency, when everyone is turning their hopeful gaze towards the government, these politicians get to speak about “soft issues” such as public health. Still, along with that, they also entrench the rhetoric of social exclusion, racism, and sexism, normalizing hate speech in the public sphere.

In the conditions of economic recession and the decrease in advertisement sales, quite some media outlets found themselves in a vulnerable position. To secure for itself some financial support from the government, one of the most prominent newspapers in Estonia called other media outlets to refrain from criticizing the government for the duration of the state of emergency and to avoid posing uncomfortable questions. While the media is voluntarily backing down from their position as the “fourth estate,” the government is attempting to push through a few laws that would expand the state power in several spheres of public life.

— *What are the possible actions to protect artistic freedom?*

The society needs to be reminded that artistic freedom is at risk all the time, just as is any democratic freedom.

Democracy is a process, and any freedom that we have cannot be taken for granted. We need every democratic institution, such as the media and the arts, to be always alert, because those in power are tempted to expand their political influence and, unlike artists, they have immense financial and administrative resources at hand in pursuing their goals.

While mainstream political power strives to suppress the uncomfortable opinions and silence down the disagreeable voices to create an illusion of public consensus, political dissensus is an essential instrument in an artist’s toolbox. To keep the current of the public debate running and the democratic processes developing, artists imagine and propose different political positions, create symbols and images which attempt and sometimes succeed to counter the powerful and highly professionally and expensively made political propaganda. No artist has similar resources as political parties do, but needs to find a way to pose critical questions about power relations, about visibility or invisibility of different social groups, about the audibility of the silenced voices.

When someone in the position of power initiates a witch-hunting campaign against an artist or an independent cultural institution that offers a platform for artists to deliver their message in front of the audience, it should not be ignored by anyone who values democracy. The power tests its limits. Every particular case creates a precedent. Today it’s a group of artists who is

under attack, tomorrow it's an independent newspaper, and the day after it's you. Who can tell where the line between inaction and participation in the crime against democracy is?

Trained as an artist, Kristina Norman is active both in the field of contemporary art and documentary filmmaking. While many of her art projects are presented in the form of video installations, the site-specific and the performative are also of great importance. Some of Norman's more recent works are dedicated to the issues of migration, focusing on the aspects of memory and public representation. One of her works is *Lighter Than Woman* – a performance meant to be shown during Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020 – which unfortunately was cancelled due to the pandemic.

## Trond Reinholdtsen

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

Artistic freedom is of course a fantasy. I have tried (from 2009, when I founded my own institution The Norwegian Opra in my living room, which was later relocated to a villa in the Swedish forest) to suspend as many of the “outer” perceived obstacles to artistic freedom as possible: the festival structures, musicians, collaborators and, ultimately, the audience. But as we know from psychoanalysis: you can't run away from your superego, and to reach a kind of primordial pre-Oedipal stage of happy free flow of breast milk and feces without any sense of borders between an omnipotent narcissistic subject and some sense of paternal Law becomes, at some point, psychotic. That is my experience anyway, ...

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

... so art must in some sense interact with the unfree corrupted world. This is very important. But in my view, this romantic activist resistance must evolve out from an isolated cold cellar in the Swedish forest – as the

imagined source of utopian artistic freedom, as a true Hegelian negation of the status quo of THE SYSTEM. Or else it quickly becomes a mess because...

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

... the SITUATION is becoming increasingly bureaucratized, marketized, instrumentalized, popularized. THE OUTSIDE (of the cold cellar in the Swedish forest) is a mayhem of anxiety and paranoia and dopamine triggers. New forms (at least in Norway) of not-so-subtle political policing and censoring, in parallel with social media shit storms, seems to be the new concept of “the Public”.

Since his debut, contemporary composer and vocalist Trond Reinholdtsen’s music has developed in a performative direction; conventional music passages are fused with performance-based forms of expression including essayistic interpretations, live-camera filming and elements including statistical facts, and face-making. In 2009, he founded the Norwegian Opra, which six years later relocated to the woods of Sweden, abandoned the idea of the audience and downscaled the opera apparatus in order to regain artistic freedom in isolation and concentration.

*FRI KUNST Interview no. 15 — 12 June 2020*

## Saul Garcia-Lopez

Saul Garcia-Lopez replied to the questions in the shape of a manifest, presented on the following pages.

**0.- What does artistic freedom mean to you?**

2911 Garcia-Lopez aka [unclear]

To become a living hyper-text. To turn the "original" version of myself (1981) into to a written breathing body (2020) and become a living metaphor by 2085.

To be misunderstood due my

ser parte de un ensueño macabro of the alt-right and be able to wake up & speak against centuries of injustice

an ever morphing sociological experiment

don't have to ask for permission to exist!

Yo

(me)

0

**manifest**

To be one artistic version of many to come, and invite people to create their own for their own specific causes.

Turning into an imperfect prototype of your hidden cultural fetishes and misunderstandings.

**live**

version**2020**

**No manifestarme**

versions of my identity, and be able to talk back

to you in multiple imaginary languages

to attend public rallies without the fear to be killed

to let you transform me into multiple

theoretical, hypothetical & performative

# 00. Why do you think artistic freedom is important?

**BECAUSE I believe in the body of the performer** in the capacity to transform and translate new forms to co-exist with nature, and the illusions of the capitalist. To envision invisible cities that exists on our skin and eyes. To let the blood of my ancestors to run and dismantle unnecessary borders.

To exorcise the colonial power that has stolen our more beautiful dreams.

**000.- How is artistic freedom put at**

**risk, either from your perspective, based on the situation in your country of residence, or in general? What are the possible actions to**

## protect artistic freedom?

**I believe in the risk to be present and to exist.** I want you to understand collective embodiment, to practice conceptual trans-corporeal orgies to discharge the toxic gas of our static consciousness. To constantly put ourselves on the line, and be human shields for our brothers and sisters who are victims of oppression. It is OK to be holy and unholy at the same time.

**and** and revenge my imperfect understanding of the "other". Body, knife, knife, body, punzante, corto punzante. The **is** the traveling site of resistance.

**To resurrect forgotten memories of our bodies;**  
**cuerpo-soul, body-alma;**  
alma-cuerpo, body-espiritú,  
cuerpo-spirit; cuerpo-de-mi-almá:

I invite you to listen a collective indigenous voice and find your answer. The following page is full of words categories to be said aloud and randomly. The following page was borrowed from the Pocha Nostra Anti-manifesto for the Americas 2015.

DEMONIZING WORDS		EMPOWERING WORDS
Prato		Myth
Pela Vermelha	Denomination	Motherland
Pela	Corpo impróprio	Revolution
Pérua	Neocolonialism	Aboriginal
voyous	Neoliberalism	All my relations
Noble Savage	Colonial Strategies	Knowledge
Ignoble Savages	Windigo Policies	Cosmology
Coca colonization	Imperialism	Ideology
Windigo	The Crown	Renewal
Denial	Increasing Consciousness	Ceremonies
Rape of motherland	Reconciliation	Responsibility
Natural Laws	Revisionist	Diversity
Savage Feminism	Representation	Unity
Fugitive Feminism	Recognition	Burdach
Treaty	Reclaiming	Mapuche
Trick	Revolution	Mapunk
Ayumamat	Resiliency	Indige punk
Contaminated	Reciprocity	Humility

Saul Garcia-Lopez, also known as La Saula, is a performance artist, a radical performance director, a scholar and pedagogue, as well as the co-artistic director of La Pocha Nostra. Through his work, he explores the pedagogical intersections of acting and performance theory and practice, indigenous strategies of performance, ethnicity, gender, postcoloniality and indigeneity. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, he lead the workshop *Traveling Identities*, structured around radical performance pedagogy.

## Deise Nunes

— *What does artistic freedom mean to you?*

To me artistic freedom can be so much and perpass many factors. From freedom of speech, through opportunities to become an artist and live a good life as such, to the availability of platforms and means of transmission and diffusion. But it also relates to personal, communal and political processes of creating, curating and funding.

— *Why do you think artistic freedom is important?*

Because it's a fundamental right, likewise freedom of speech. But artistic freedom, again, like freedom of speech, cannot be a token for acts of totalitarianism and dehumanisation of minoritarian, vulnerable groups. Therefore it has to be constantly discussed.

— *How is artistic freedom put at risk?*

In my country of origin, Brazil, artistic freedom is directly threatened. Censorship is a reality to many

artists and groups, and there is a cultural crusade against certain artistic expressions. The funding policy there, or rather its absence, is also a means of controlling and limiting artistic freedom. I believe in specific situations where totalitarian forces are in power, it's important to have strong communities and political actions to fight for, fund and protect artists and their work. Art institutions in that sense are oftentimes bound to public funding and politically instrumentalized, so they are not going to be agents of change. It is a challenging situation for all those who value the arts.

Theater scholar Deise Nunes has a special interest in interdisciplinary collaboration. With a particular interest in intersections between ethnicity and gender in the art field, Nunes established the company Golden Mirrors Arts Norway in 2017, focusing on the production and dissemination of works by black women. During Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, she was supposed to hold the performance-lecture *Decolonizing the performing arts II: The gaze, colonialism and aesthetics*, asking the question: how is our gaze shaped in performing arts? The performance-lecture is postponed to the next festival in March 2021.