

# Hidden Publics

**Ephemeral and relational art set the aesthetic agenda of the Oslo Biennial, which risks disappearing without a trace.**

By Heidi Bale Amundsen 12.06.19 Review Artikkel på norsk



Jan Freuchen, Sigurd Tenningen and Jonas Høgli Major, *Oslo samlede verk OSV.*, 2019.  
Photo: Niklas Lello.

Traditionally, a biennial is an event anchored in an institutional setup; one that, over the course of a few hectic months, attracts a paying audience for a spectacular art experience. The first edition of the Oslo Biennial, osloBIENNALEN, is a more low-key, five-year project presented in public spaces throughout Oslo. The ambition is to reach a wide audience through a changing selection of relational and predominantly process-oriented projects.

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***The Oslo Biennial, first edition***  
**2019–2024**

**Oslobiennalen, Oslo**  
**25 May 2019**

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The biennial is financed by the City of Oslo's art programme, which ensures that 0.5 per cent of the municipality's investment funds are spent on art that can be accessed by the general public. Given this point of departure, the curators Eva González-Sancho Boderó and Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk's decision to conduct this biennial as an open investigation of what art in public spaces is

(and can be) comes across as sympathetic. So too is the curators' general sensitivity to the invited artists' needs, thoughts, and ideas.

All of the works presented at the Oslo Biennial are located in public spaces. But the curators have given the invited artists free rein to define what they wish to exhibit and how, which is unusual in a biennial context. The participating artists have also been given particularly generous conditions for producing their works in terms of budget, time, and facilities. The strategy has resulted in a varied programme of works of generally high quality. One example is Jan Freuchen, Sigurd Tenningen, and Jonas Høgli Major's *Oslo samlede verk OSV* (Oslo Collected Work), which consists of a sculpture pavilion showing a growing selection of works from the City of Oslo's art collection, accompanied by a series of pamphlets about the overall concept of a 'collection'.

Placed between the roundabouts in the district Økern, the pavilion is designed as a rust-coloured cube without walls. Inside, a network of narrow, intersecting paths weaves between a variety of animal sculptures and neatly tended weed lawns; the arrangement evokes the sculpture park at Ekeberg. Given to the City of Oslo by the real estate investor and art collector Christian Ringnes in 2013, Ekeberg Sculpture Park presents a collection of women figures in almost the same way as Freuchen, Tenningen, and Høgli Major present a wild boar, a snail, two deer, and two bird sculptures. This paves the way for interesting reflections on the idea of a collection, its relationship to the realms of the public and private, taste and capital, as well as on the administrative policies of the City of Oslo.

Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine – a library of living books* is another highlight of the biennial. Having evolved since 2010, the project now involves over eighty people each assigned the task of memorising a book of their choosing. The idea was taken from Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, in which censorship has prompted a group of people to learn books by heart in order to preserve a collective history. For the Oslo Biennial, Edvardsen has set up a provisional library in her studio, allowing visitors to listen to the 'living books' and converse with them. I myself was fortunate enough to visit the library while one of the living books retold the violent-erotic opening of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) to a listener, his eyes boring into hers. Once that listener left again, I also had the opportunity to participate in a thought-provoking – and less intimate – conversation with the 'book' about the gradual erasure of the distinction between the author's narrative and his own during the memorisation process, about the musical element of the oral retelling, and the relationship between memory and

oblivion.

The book is often perceived as a contrast to the more collective experiences offered by visual art. In the living library, however, the book format does indeed feel like a collective art form, a starting point for a communal experience. By contrast, my encounter with Carole Douillard's *The Viewers* prompted an intense sense of exclusion – although this feeling of alienation is also linked to a strong sense of presence. French-Algerian artist Douillard's performance consists of a group of people standing completely still in the urban space, all looking in the same direction and at those who pass by. This simple approach has an undeniably strong effect. The group's scrutiny creates a genuine bodily experience: as a passer-by, I get a palpable feeling for the relationship between public and private, activity and inaction.



Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine – a library of living books*, 2019. Photo: Niklas Hart, Hartwork / osloBIENNALEN.

Visually, *The Viewers* is more spectacular than most of the biennial's other projects, yet is never reduced to mere entertainment. Mônica Nador and Bruno Oliveira's low-key *Another grammar for Oslo* is more typical of the biennial's aesthetic. Nador and Oliveira's project consists of a one-year series of workshops that give audiences the opportunity to tell their own stories about Oslo through prints on paper and textile. The two Brazilian artists will later transform these prints into books and patchwork quilts and use them for an installation outside the biennial headquarters at Myntgata 2.

Nador and Oliveira's work, appropriately set in a selection of the city's public libraries, conceptualises Oslo as a network – or rather, a patchwork – of narratives. As such, it is undoubtedly a thought-provoking project, particularly in the way in which it invites us to contemplate the question of relational art's mobility.

*Another grammar for Oslo* springs from the artists' work with the organisation Jamac, which channels public funds for art production to poor residents of São Paulo through collective projects in urban space. But what happens when the project is relocated to a Norwegian context, and thus to a welfare society?

Unfortunately, that question was left hanging in the air because the workshop did not turn out to be the meeting place it could have been; only one other person, besides me, participated while I was there. I personally believe the reason for this was quite simply that it was difficult for the visitors who eventually filled the Deichman library at Bjerke to tell that a workshop was going on at the back of the room. Here, I felt a need for a stronger curatorial grip on the audience's situation, a need that also applies to the biennial as a whole. This lack of a clear strategy for connecting with audiences was striking, particularly during the opening symposium. Even in the final panel discussion, where the chairs were arranged in concentric circles in a room in the former Museum of Contemporary Art, only the *inner circle* – quite literally – was permitted to pose questions and make contributions. That is to say, the curators, the speakers, and a group of invited respondents who, curiously, did not include a single representative for Public Art Norway – KORØ.

Given that osloBIENNALEN is funded by the public – meaning that it belongs to all of the city's residents – I find it problematic that it does not open itself more to the general public. Having said that, the biennial's open-ended format has scope for change, and hopefully in the future the curators will be just as sensitive to the public's needs as they are to those of the artists. With a clearer strategy for communicating and connecting with audiences, I believe that the generally strong projects featured in the Oslo Biennial can leave lasting imprints on Oslo's collective imagination – in spite of, or perhaps even *because of* the volatile relational formats of the individual projects. Because in those cases where these formats really work, the City of Oslo's ambitious commitment to art in public spaces encourages new ways of experiencing both the city and the community.



Carole Douillard, *The Viewers*, 2019, Oslo central station. Photo: Inger Marie Grini / Oslobiennalen.

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**Med Mikaela Assolent, Benjamin Bardinnet, Julien Bismuth, Carle Douillard, Ed D'Souza, Mette Edvardsen, Michelangelo Miccolis, Monica Nador, Bruno Oliveira, Rose Hammer, Gaylen Gerber, Hlynur Hallsson, Jan Freuchen, Jonas Høgli Major, Sigurd Tenningen, Lisa Tan, Marianne Heier, Michael Ross og Øystein Wyller Odden.**

**Kuratert av Eva González-Sancho Boderó og Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk.**

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