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HANNAH : The Newest Unidentified Art Piece Of Verdensteatret

by Mylene Palluel(<http://manifesto-21.com/en/author/mylene/>)



Verdensteatret was presenting its new piece *HANNAH*(<http://verdensteatret.com/hannah/>) at the Henie Onstad Art Centre(<http://hok.no/en/>) in Oslo as part of *Ultima 2017*(<http://manifesto-21.com/en/?s=ultima>) in September. This art piece, resulting from a long and slow work process, offered to its audience a very unique multi-sensory aesthetic experience, at the crossroads of “concert, performance and installation, where the whole space is played as one polyphonic audiovisual instrument”. Founded in 1986, *Verdensteatret*(<http://verdensteatret.com/>) is probably one of the oldest art collectives in Norway. For thirty years, it has been evolving throughout every production with different members, which all contribute to this experimental mixture of artistic mediums, using audiovisual technology as well as more traditional art forms. We discussed with two representing members of the group (Asle Nislen(<http://www.aslenilsen.no/about/>), member since 1998 and Piotr Pajchel, member since 2003) about the (elusive) identity of Verdensteatret and its latest oddity, *HANNAH*.



<http://manifesto-21.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HANNAH-©-Verdensteatret69.jpg>

HANNAH © Verdensteatret

Manifesto XXI – How did the idea of this collective come up?

It changed quite a lot over the years. It all started when Lisbeth ([Lisbeth J. Bodd](http://verdensteatret.com/home/2014/9/29/lisbeth-i-bodd-1958-2014)(<http://verdensteatret.com/home/2014/9/29/lisbeth-i-bodd-1958-2014>) died in 2014, editor's note) bought a big, old circus-tent and a bus and went into the forest in Sweden. The first three years they were travelling around in Scandinavia making more family, children things. It started to move into a bit more strange experimental works, often outside. After eight, nine years, we went into more theater spaces. People are coming in, coming out ; some are staying several years, some just for one production. And all of the members have their own artistic carrier.

How did you end up playing at a contemporary music festival like [Ultima](http://ultima.no/en/)(<http://ultima.no/en/>)?

We want to play in different contexts. It's interesting for us to see how that work is perceived by other professions. It's just natural for our type of expression, that we are shifting from visual art museums, theater spaces to music scenes. We have that mix inside the group. We have always been more or less hybrid.

“ We often see it as a strength, not to be able to define what we do ”



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How was the reception of your works in those different scenes?

It changed over the years, depending on the type of works we had. Fifteen years ago, the audience might be more theater people, because our expression was then more over to scenic types of work (like dance, text theater). Now it is a lot of visual artists, musicians, composers, poets and technological artists, because we are more over to sound, music and visual art. This is more a hybrid type of work.

What does the name “theater of the world” mean?

It does not really translate the term. “Verdensteatret” comes from the old cinemas in Norway, that were called “*verdensteater*”. So it is more about pictures of the world. We actually kind of struggle with that theater part because some people are expecting theater. People from the theater field have been quite critical, because we are viewed as a theater production that does not want to be theater. So we are

being called (*laughs*): “*the theater group in a identity crisis*(<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/theater/identity-crisis-theater-productions-that-refuse-to-be-theater.html>)”! It can be sometimes difficult to fall between the chairs, but we often see it as a strength, not to be able to define what we do.

What was the main idea of the piece *HANNAH*?

For the last ten years, we have always been starting our productions with a research journey. Since we are different people from production to production, we want to have some common experience in a geographical place. This time around we did not want to find a new exotic place, so we decided to go back to Vietnam. We did a piece placed in Vietnam in 2007. So we thought about the idea of repetition, to go back to somewhere. We recorded there sound, stereo films. We also had already some materials for the piece before we went to the Mekong Delta (the organic abstract thing that you can see evolving on the screen at the beginning, for example). We had this ideas about geological time and attention fatigue. During the trip, we also talked about the concept of repetition around the text *Repetition*([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repetition_\(Kierkegaard_book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repetition_(Kierkegaard_book))) by S. Kierkegaard, that one of us had brought coincidentally. But it is not that deep philosophical. *HANNAH* is a conglomerate of different ideas, mistakes and misunderstandings.

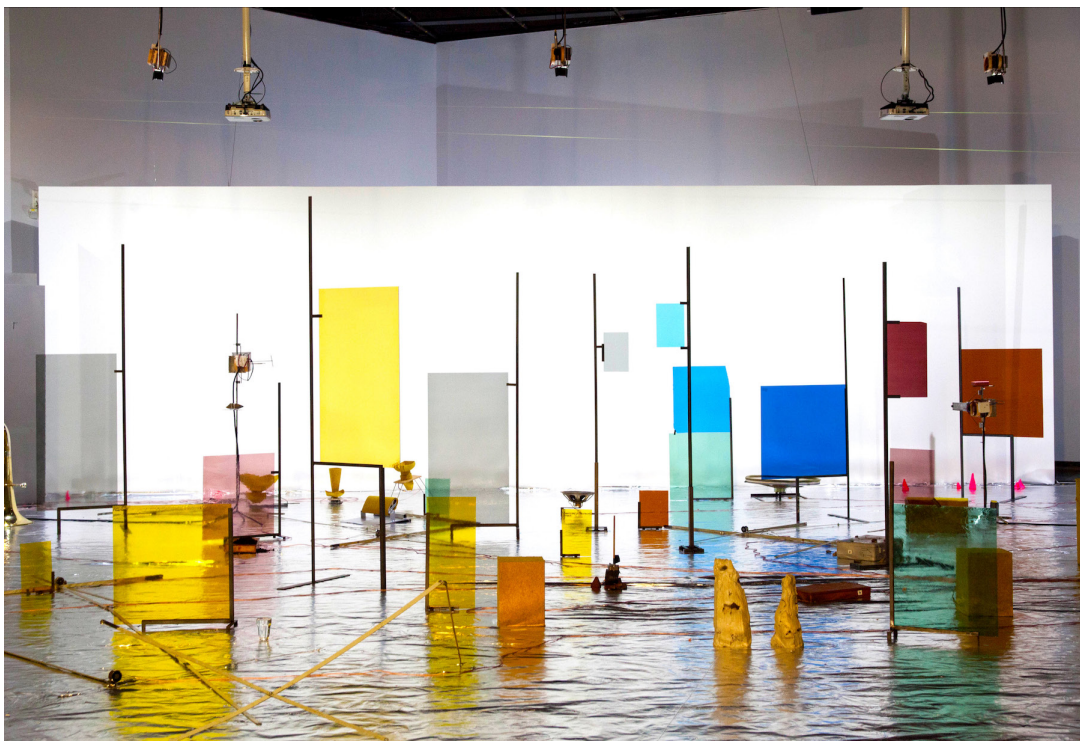


(<http://manifesto-21.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HANNAH-©-Verdensteatret618.jpg>)

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There is something very cosmogonic in the piece. It is like a little world, with its own story. Everything is organically linked together, some machines look like strange screaming creatures. At one point, the stormy and chaotic atmosphere evokes a form of apocalypse.

Well, during the long process of the making of the piece, it becomes its own universe in a way. Objects get personality and come alive. But that scene just developed organically for us. We wanted to make the boxes on the floor more visible, so we had to make the structures on the scene collapse. For us, this scene is just space that collapse. And it is a kind of musical composition that tries to be as unmusical as possible.



(<http://manifesto-21.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HANNAH-©-Verdensteatret612.jpg>)

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But actually the sounds of this scene have been recorded in North Bend(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Bend,_Washington). The whole thing was just an accident. We had one day off while playing at Seattle and we wanted to go on a ride. We were walking in the forest nearby North Bend and discovered this place, a stone island in the middle of a big river. There was this long log in the river, we had to balance to get over the freezing water stream. One on the island, we started to clash stones together and listen to the echo. The bats have echo location and it is quite interesting to find out that human can more or less do the same. You can actually make out a landscape. The mountains, the forest, everything is reflected by the echoes of these stones. We tried to transpose this experience in the scene that you are referring to. That is how the material came out. It is a chaotic

process. It is not so easy to have a definition of what the piece is, that is the same for us as it is for the audience. We do not have an explanation. We are as curious as you are.



<http://manifesto-21.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Verdensteatret-North-Bend-2.jpg>

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But maybe you could tell me why you chose the title *HANNAH*?

That is hard to say... When you have a birth, you find a name for this child, then the child grows up and becomes the person with this name over time. I think it is something similar here. So we do not know what *HANNAH* is right now, but with time *HANNAH* will be *HANNAH*. We also like capital letters, it is a graphical thing. "HANNAH" is a mirror, a reflection, that can be read both ways. The title is always a very tricky thing. What should it do? Should it explain something and point a key to understand the work? Or should it be a material, just as the other artistic material? It is really hard to find a title. Sometimes it comes out of nowhere and you just know that yes, this is the right title, without knowing exactly why.

“ We use a lot of energy not to take decisions, to be as open as possible for new things ”

We can see in the trailer the work in progress of *HANNAH* in the studio. How do you work together?

The video reflects our attitude towards the material, so deeply in the process. We have this big studio and every artist in the group is involved in the process of the production. There is no master plan. We discuss on the different materials and ideas, but in the end this is not the best argument that wins, it is what artistically works. Of course sometimes we have fights! It is a collective experience, that actually functions, because we have this understanding that is more or less pulling in the same way. We use a lot of time to get this common language. That is also one of the important aspect with this travel stuff we do. It is a way of making a common aesthetic. We worked together everyday on *HANNAH* for one and a half year, so we also got to know each other. We are very lucky to have the funding that let us work like that. It is a good system for culture in Norway (Verdensteatret is supported by [Arts Council Norway](http://www.kulturradet.no/english) (<http://www.kulturradet.no/english>) and other official art-foundations in Norway, editor's note).



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Why does the production of every piece take so much time?

We work in long processes in our studio and we see where the material takes us. It is a very organic process, that takes a lot of time. We have some material that looks promising, but the solution for how to express it artistically comes from the material. You cannot force it. You just have to watch, listen and try out things for weeks or months, before the material gives back what it has as a potential. And if it does not, well it dies in a way, it stops breathing. It is nothing we can control.

In art you have the luxury to be very uncertain and not have a specific goal. We see it as a strength not to know where we are going. We use a lot of energy not to take decisions, to be as open as possible for new things.

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