

# Essentially Contested Performative Transgression in and around *The Wastefulness Commission 2021* by Traavik.info

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine performative transgression in, and interwoven with, *The Wastefulness Commission 2021* by Traavik.info. Launched by Morten Traavik in December 2019, the so-called hypertheatre project evolved into a big national theatre scandal during the process from the announcement to the realization of two stage performances in 2021 (*Part 1 Vestland*: 14 May at Ole Bull Scene in Bergen/Norway; *Part 2 Viken*: 22 June at Drammens Teater in Drammen/Norway), and beyond. The project caused heated conflict within the performing arts field in Norway that spread into the cultural public sphere where it is still virulent at the time of writing. In the article, I first present a theoretical framing concerning performativity and transgression bound to the question of efficacy of performances and the relation between theatre and the public sphere before I move to the case. In the reading of the case, I apply a multiscale-approach, combining micro- and macro-perspectives. I examine how Traavik activates and performatively reconfigures pre-existing cultural and political controversies concerning the experimental performing arts in Norway. Further, I discuss the scandalizing dynamics through the perspective of performative transgression and account for how the question of framing and contextualization is part of the contentious cultural processes. Finally, I focus on one of the stage performances and the performative practice of re-enactment.

## KEYWORDS

transgression, performativity, *The Wastefulness Commission 2021*, Morten Traavik, Traavik.info, hypertheatre, public sphere, theatre scandal, independent performing arts, Norway

ISSN 2002–3898

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PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE Open access: <https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/index>

Published with support from Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS)

DOI: 10.7146/nts.v35i1.145373

# Essentially Contested

## Performative Transgression in and around *The Wastefulness Commission 2021* by Traavik.info

This issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* invites us to discuss performativity and transgression in performing arts and the public sphere. In this article I examine performative transgression in a recent Norwegian case where theatre is highly imbricated with the wider public sphere: *The Wastefulness Commission 2021* by Traavik.info, a so-called hypertheatre project,<sup>1</sup> that has haunted the Norwegian performing arts field from the very moment when it was publicly announced in December 2019. The project has caused enormous conflict within the Norwegian cultural public sphere.

Morten Traavik, with his theatre company and artistic “label” *Traavik.info*, has been among the internationally profiled Norwegian independent theatre artists since his *Miss Landmine* projects (2006–2010) in Angola and Cambodia. As director and multi-artist, Traavik works interventionistically by interweaving the theatrical micro-public sphere with diverse mass and social media public spheres and culturally contested issues. Hence, Traavik’s works as a rule entail public controversies – probably best known internationally concerning his cooperation-projects in North Korea (2010–2017). Thus, *The Wastefulness Commission 2021* is no exception, but this time the controversies pertain to a national context.

The project was made publicly known in December 2019 as a cooperation with one of the most prominent, yet at that time anonymous “enemies” of the independent performing arts field in Norway, the so-called Sløseriombudsmannen, who had scandalized the use of tax funds on experimental performing arts. The artistic project quickly evolved into a “big theatre scandal”,<sup>2</sup> involving more and more actors and institutions, including independent artists from other companies, the co-producing theatre BIT Teatergarasjen, the national arena for cultural policy Kulturytring, the Arts Council Norway, and nationally profiled politicians from both left- and right-wing parties. The announcement of the project led to a tidal wave of media publications,<sup>3</sup> debate articles, and programs, as well as boycott calls and attempts to stop the announced stage performances. Yet, unlike most theatre controversies, the attempts to stop the performances came from within the art field itself. Despite the heated conflicts and scandalizing dynamics, the project resulted in two stage performances in 2021<sup>4</sup> which were planned and performed as one-time-only events, in addition to be live streamed free of charge.

The hypertheatre project and the scandal did not end with these stage performances. Among

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1 Traavik.info s.a./a. “Hypertheatre” here means, among other things, that the public discussions and conflicts about the artistic project are defined as an integral part of it. I will come back to the term and Traavik.info’s artistic manifesto.

2 Cf. Schoenmakers 2020, 34.

3 For a list of media publications from the period April 2020 to May 2021 see Traavik.info s.a./b.

4 Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the first announced and planned performances were cancelled in spring 2020. The realized performances in 2021 were: *The Wastefulness Commission 2021: Part 1 Vestland* on 14 May at Ole Bull Scene in Bergen and *The Wastefulness Commission 2021: Part 2 Viken* on 22 June at Drammens Teater in Drammen.

other things, the scandalizing dynamics spilled out, spread, and diffused into public conflicts within the Norwegian Freedom of Expression Commission in 2021, into the commission's official report in 2022,<sup>5</sup> and into the ongoing implementation of the commission's report in the field of cultural politics and (performing) arts.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, this article deals with a contemporary case that is still virulent in the national context that I am working within.<sup>7</sup> My approach to this case is descriptive and, necessarily, non-exhaustive. I cannot follow the case into all its ramifications, and I do not intend to evaluate or judge the scandal. Instead, I want to contribute to its (preliminary) understanding through the thematic lens of performativity and transgression. And, turned around, I presume that the case may be fruitful for a discussion of performativity and transgression in performing arts and the public sphere in the Nordic countries today.

In the following, I present a theoretical framing before I move to the case. Throughout my reading of the case, I apply a multiscale-approach, combining micro- and macro-level-analysis as a response to the case's complexity. In addition, this methodological approach may be understood as my suggestion to deal with questions of transgression and performativity in performing arts more generally.

### **Performativity and the Issue of Efficacy**

*Performativity* and *the performative* are umbrella terms that theatre and performance studies share with many other disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences. The terms are widespread and encompass different, sometimes even incompatible uses and understandings. I choose to depart from the (inevitably simplifying) understanding that performative approaches generally are concerned with how utterances, in a broad sense, function as actions that contribute to the production and constitution of social reality. Thus, *performativity* makes us focus on the *efficacy* of utterances understood as *action*.

That does not mean, that the effects of utterances necessarily are intended or in line with involved intentions. Indeed, in theatre studies we find an understanding of performativity that highlights elusiveness and deals with the performative as something that happens to the involved rather than something that is intentionally produced or controlled. Performative aesthetics, as described and analysed by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her influential study *The Transformative Power of Performance*,<sup>8</sup> attributes the efficacy of artistic performances to the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, more precisely, to the feedback loop evolving under the conditions of co-presence. According to Fischer-Lichte, this feedback loop is "autopoietic", that means it generates itself.

Christopher B. Balme has called our attention to the fact that Fischer-Lichte's, and the like, theoretical approaches within theatre studies elucidate the "closed circuit of performative aesthetic experience" but leave the question of performances' efficacy beyond their here-and-now, underexposed.<sup>9</sup> In his seminal study *The Theatrical Public Sphere*,<sup>10</sup> Balme connects the issue of performing arts' efficacy to the question of how performances and theatre, in an institutional perspective, affect or interact with the wider public sphere.

His somewhat pessimistic thesis, that I lean on in this article, is that performances in Western theatre today, to a high degree, are disconnected from the public sphere. In this respect artistic performances are often ineffective, despite the popularity of performative aesthetics with the ascribed claims of efficacy. Balme writes, provocatively: "We have to accept that what goes on in the privacy of a Western theatre is an almost entirely private matter: it is an artistic act conducted between two consenting partners – the performers and the spectators – and is therefore seldom of interest to the wider public sphere."<sup>11</sup>

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5 NOU 2022: 9.

6 In addition, Traavik.info launched a follow-up part 3 already in June 2021, which was realized under the title *The Wastefulness Commission 2022: Kristiansand* in November 2022.

7 See, for instance, Halvorsrød 2023.

8 Fischer-Lichte 2008. Original: Fischer-Lichte 2004.

9 Balme 2014, 12.

10 Balme 2014.

11 Balme 2014, 17.

This situation has consequences for the issue of transgression. Potentially transgressive acts become ineffectual within the “closed circuit” of performances as the involved partners have “consented” in advance. That leads our attention to the question of attending audiences. As I read Balme, the detachment from the public sphere in Western theatre today is not only a matter of the institutional framing of performances, but also concerns the issue of attending (and not-attending, i.e., non-) audiences. In his study, Balme highlights “the perceived tension between theatre defined as ‘art’ and its ability to communicate with other constituencies than its own subscriber or festival audiences.”<sup>12</sup> A tension that may be particularly strong in the field of independent, experimental performing arts.

### **Big Theatre Scandals and the Culturally Contested Question of Transgression**

As an exception to the general detachment of performances from the wider public sphere, public controversies about and around performances occur. Balme states: “Theatre scandals and controversies represent perhaps the most prominent point of articulation between performance and the public sphere. Scandals embody invariably the transgression of a norm, which produces in turn extremely emotional, even violent reactions from a public and often engenders legal sanctions of some kind.”<sup>13</sup>

What Balme describes here, has been defined as *big theatre scandals* by Henri Schoenmakers in the recent anthology *Theatre Scandals: Social Dynamics of Turbulent Theatrical Events*.<sup>14</sup> Schoenmakers understands big scandals as linked to negative emotions which are “communicated publicly in order to criticise [sic!], control, stop or prevent what is going on or could go on in the theatre and involve more people or institutions in society than the ones in a (possible or actual) performance. The negative emotions (...) lead to conflicts about what is acceptable within the theatre.”<sup>15</sup> That means, part of the dynamics of a big theatre scandal is the culturally contested question of transgression itself.

The transgression of norms and values in performances, the crossing of perceived boundaries between what is acceptable within theatre and what is not, is not a given and undoubtable fact, as distinct, for instance, from disruptive natural events like a tsunami or an earthquake. Even as strong negative emotions and affects are involved, scandals do not evolve without determined actions on the part of the individuals and groups that protest against what is perceived as transgressive. This also includes the possibility that the scandalizing actions (utterances) of an audience or non-audience may be read as a strategical fight for favored norms and values of all kinds, both concerning theatre and society at large.

With this point of departure, we may ask: Transgression of what, for whom, by whom, in which context, and to what means? To what degree and in what ways is transgression produced by the artists/the artistic project or is it first and foremost ascribed and produced by the scandalizing audiences or non-audiences. What are the specific contexts that are virulent in the scandal, and what kind of contextualization is needed to understand its dynamics?

### **Hypertheatre-poetics**

Theatre scandal theory usually discerns between scandals “starting during theatrical events” and those “starting outside and around theatrical events”.<sup>16</sup> In the case of *The Wastefulness Commission* the public conflicts arouse long before, and thereby outside the announced stage performances. But the poetic program of Traavik.info and the conceptual framing of the stage performances re-inscribe the outside of the performances to the inside of the artistic project and the theatrical event. The outside/inside-divide thereby becomes paradoxical.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Balme 2014, 194.

13 Balme 2014, 140.

14 Cremona et al. 2020.

15 Schoenmakers 2020, 34.

16 See, for instance, the headings of part 2 and part 3 in Cremona et al. 2020.

17 I have previously analyzed this paradoxical re-inscription by means of the system theoretical concept of *re-entry*, see Böhnisch 2022. The present article builds on my earlier analysis in Böhnisch 2022 that was written before the stage performances were realized. There, I examined the “dramaturgy of disagreement” in the conceptual framing and in parts of the contextual processes leading up to the stage performances of *The Wastefulness Commission 2021*.

Traavik.info's poetic manifesto "To be in it but not of it"<sup>18</sup> articulates the leading poetic values of this artistic practice, its explicit poetics.<sup>19</sup> It presents the idea of a hypertheatre that "reaches beyond the usual, conventional, expected, and perhaps even sustainable boundaries of not only theatre as such, but even the notion of art itself."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the manifesto clearly builds on an avant-garde tradition to transgress the boundaries of art by anti-art to reach out and connect to the world.

But here, the transgressive gesture gets a specific and paradoxical twist as it is supposed to be realized by the help of the art-form and medium itself: "and yet, still firmly on the basis of and fuelled [sic!] by the most basic and eternal principles, methods and creative processes of The Theatre."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Traavik.info's hypertheatre does not discard the art systems' own arenas, but operates both within and outside these arenas, in our case: both in a variety of media and the pertaining public spheres as well as on the theatre stage. In *The Wastefulness Commission*, the public announcement of the project was the point of departure for the public controversies. At the same time the publicly known conceptual premise of the project has been, that the controversies around it are part of the artistic project.

In the following, I will examine how the concept, as it is communicated and performed in Traavik's first public announcements of *The Wastefulness Commission* initializes the controversies. What strategies of transgression are in play? By whom and for whom? Which boundaries, norms and values are (perceived as) transgressed, and what are the cultural, social, or political contexts that are invoked by the (alleged) transgressions? And, in what respect are the transgressive practices performative?

### Activating Pre-Configured Public Controversies

Traavik's public announcements of the project kicked off the hypertheatre project on two different media channels, social media (Facebook) and a big national newspaper (Aftenposten), with their pertaining audiences and public spheres. In our context, the most striking conceptual choice here is that Traavik activates pre-existing cultural and political controversies. This activation is thoroughly staged and performed.

Firstly, the project explicitly connects to an established pressure group that has scandalized experimental, independent performing arts since 2017, the so-called Sløseriombudsmannen (SLO) and "his"<sup>22</sup> (at that time) 60,000 Facebook-followers. SLO is an anonymous Facebook profile that has acted as a self-appointed "ombudsman" accusing state authorities of wasting tax funds on diverse policy areas, among others, the public funding of experimental performing arts by the Arts Council Norway. SLO's daily Facebook posts trigger the algorithms, as well as the populist condemnation of perceived elites of all kinds, among them, independent performing artists.

For his very first public announcement of *The Wastefulness Commission*, in December 2019, Traavik chooses to make an appearance on the SLO Facebook profile in form of a video-message, directly addressing the anonymous "ombudsman" and his followers, inviting them to join his artistic project, that means to participate in two stage performances on a "prestigious Norwegian stage".<sup>23</sup> The video-post verbally invites cooperation but also performatively marks the obviously already started cooperation with at least one of the individuals behind the anonymous Facebook profile, as the video-message is posted and commented on by SLO.<sup>24</sup> Here, we need to zoom out and back in time, for further contextualization.

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18 Traavik.info s.a./a.

19 Poetics understood as the arts' own reflection theory, cf. Szatkowski 2020.

20 Traavik.info s.a./a, [point] 1.

21 Traavik.info s.a./a, [point] 1.

22 The name of the anonymous Facebook profile has the grammatical form of definite singular, but the profile is probably operated by several individuals. Traavik has cooperated with one of these individuals, who in public is usually referred to as *the* Sløseriombudsmannen (SLO) and who in February 2021 was disclosed as Are Sjøberg, a then-38-year-old financier who had been involved with the Norwegian ultra liberalistic political party Liberalistene.

23 Traavik in Sløseriombudsmannen 2019, my translation.

24 For a more detailed analysis of this video-appearance see Böhnisch 2022, 377–83.



### **Sløseriombudsmannen's Strategies of Transgression and Traavik's Intervention**

The policy field of art funding came into SLO's focus when the Facebook profile, in 2017, launched a digital "Christmas Calendar" with 24 consecutive posts, each making a fool of a named independent performing artist and one of her or his artistic works. The posts combined short (alleged) facts about the received state-funding with a video-clip from a performance (mostly experimental dance and choreography). The video-clips are obviously strategically chosen by SLO. They show staged actions, that almost inevitably must appear as weird, senseless, and sometimes even disgusting for a receiver that is not familiar with this type of art, in other words, to the vast non-audience of experimental performing arts. When these posts in addition meet an audience on SLO's Facebook profile that is used to be entertained by being enraged about perceived elites, the result is predictable: the Christmas Calendar posts triggered numerous contemptuous comments and digital reactions from followers, ridiculing the artists and their work and accusing the "obviously" senseless and irresponsible use of tax funds.

Seen through the theoretical lens that Balme provides us with in *The Theatrical Public Sphere*,<sup>25</sup> the scandalizing dynamics initiated by SLO are a striking and, seen from the perspective of the mocked artists, obviously highly problematic example of how artistic performances gain efficacy outside the performances' here-and-now. The followers of SLO react to a perceived performative transgression in the documented stage actions that never were intended to be distributed in this channel and for this (non-)audience. The non-audience, in turn, performs opposition<sup>26</sup> to the artistic practice and its public funding, thereby, performatively changing position from non-audience to involved anti-audience. And, finally, the anti-audience acts in a way that almost inevitably is perceived as transgressive by many of the exposed artists.

If the performed opposition had stayed in an enclosed part of the fragmented public sphere, the consequences could have been minor. But although the public sphere is fragmented, it is at the same time hyperconnected. Since the SLO's first Christmas Calendar in 2017, and through the following "seasons", the posts and commentaries were shared, spread, and multiplied within social media. Several of the exposed artists report on personal harassment as consequence of SLO's posts.<sup>27</sup> In addition, SLO's "cases" were picked up by national, and even international media, as well as in political and parliamentary debate.

When Traavik, in *The Wastefulness Commission*, chooses to cooperate with a person behind the anonymous Facebook profile, and to invite the profile's followers to partake, he not only activates a pre-existing controversy with its pertaining connotations, concerns, and emotional investments, he also performatively intervenes, and thereby potentially reconfigures, the configuration of this pre-existing controversy. As Traavik himself is part of the scandalized field, the sheer fact of collaboration may disturb the clear-cut conflict-lines and trigger reactions from his own field.

The most disturbing power, however, lies in the institutional framing of this collaboration. SLO and his followers are invited to partake in a performance that shall be realized on a "prestigious Norwegian stage".<sup>28</sup> If the announced stage performances are realized, an unruly and harassing anti-audience, and the SLO "himself" will enter this stage. They will enjoy the legitimizing power of this institution and will be included in the (imagined) community that they have ridiculed and counteracted. In what follows, the imagination of these events in the minds of the extended hypertheatre audience is an important motor of the public controversies that co-constitute the hypertheatre project.

Traavik could have settled for this conceptual point of departure. But he chooses to activate yet another pre-existing cultural and political controversy that had been virulent throughout 2019.

### **Ways of Seeing and a Culture War**

For the second public announcement of *The Wastefulness Commission* Traavik uses the

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25 Balme 2014.

26 Cf. Blackadder 2003.

27 See, for instance, Edvardsen 2021.

28 Traavik in Sløseriombudsmannen 2019, my translation.

format of a debate-article in the national newspaper Aftenposten in January 2020.<sup>29</sup> Here, Traavik (ironically) alludes to a clear-cut theatre scandal that had evolved in Norway in 2018–19 around the performance *Ways of Seeing*,<sup>30</sup> and that had been communicated internationally. In 2019, this scandal provoked a counter-scandal from within the cultural public sphere, including protest marches for artistic freedom of expression in several Norwegian towns, expressing solidarity with the scandalized, and at that point of time even charged and investigated *Ways of Seeing*-artists.

By his ironic allusion to the *Ways of Seeing*-scandal, Traavik positions himself and the announced artistic project implicitly, though clearly, outside and in opposition to the pressure group within the cultural public sphere that engaged in the *Ways of Seeing*-counter scandal. This positioning is apt to enrage as the counter-scandal had expressed acute concerns and produced strong emotions.

Finally, Traavik activates a more extensive antagonistic political contextualization. He formulates his debate article<sup>31</sup> as a reply to an earlier article in the same newspaper where the theatre critic, Per Christian Selmer-Anderssen, had summed up “The awful theatre year”<sup>32</sup> 2019. There, Selmer-Anderssen had interpreted the *Ways of Seeing*-scandal and the Facebook-phenomenon SLO as pertaining to an escalating “culture war” by national and international populist, political right-wing forces against the legitimacy of state-financed experimental art and the alleged high-culture elite. While the theatre critic admitted the problems of the societal closure of the art field that he himself belonged to, as well as that of small audience numbers at experimental performances, he called forth, with considerable pathos, a “we” (implying the reader) defending humanistic values, that must avert the attacks on the “power-critical” art that “exists on the edges of the public sphere and needs support to survive.”<sup>33</sup>

In sum, Traavik not only activated the pre-existing controversies and antagonistic political understanding, but he also used them to maneuver himself and the artistic project on the outside of the taken for granted, solidarity-demanding “we” and thereby apparently on the “wrong” side of the antagonistic divide, seen from within this “we”. In other words, he performs the transgressive role of the traitor. Why that?

### Additional Line of Conflict

Traavik here introduces an extra line of conflict that is relevant in our context as it concerns the question of transgression. The concept of *The Wastefulness Commission* as communicated in Traavik’s debate article contains, implicitly, an art-specific justification of the project, concerning the function of art in society, that is its poetics. Traavik attacks the (as he states) widespread rhetorical legitimation “that art is supposed to ‘challenge’, ‘stretch the boundaries’, ‘question’ and the like”. And he continues: “That is, as all the involved know, only a glorified version of ‘kicking in open doors.’ In a uniquely egalitarian and liberal society like the Norwegian, both sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll and general critique of power in the (performing) arts are, at the top, as-if-controversial.”<sup>34</sup> We understand that the question of power-critique is the crucial point here.

In the above cited manifesto, Traavik.info’s hypertheatre positions itself against “the virtually unchallenged paradigm of soft-left humanist *faux-subversiveness* of so-called ‘political’ art”.<sup>35</sup> As I read the manifesto, the question of subversiveness is not taken further. The point is not to aim at *real* subversiveness. On the contrary: “Hypertheatre actively encourages getting your hands dirty and encourages the Faustian dilemma of working within, and in collaboration with, established power structures as a far more potent strategy of real and lasting change than moral high-horsing and condemnation from afar.”<sup>36</sup>

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29 Traavik 2020.

30 By Pia Maria Roll (director), Hanan Benammar, Sara Baban and Marius von der Fehr, premiere: 21 November 2018 at Black Box teater in Oslo/Norway.

31 Traavik 2020.

32 Selmer-Anderssen 2019, my translation of the article’s heading.

33 Selmer-Anderssen 2019, my translation.

34 Traavik 2020, my translation.

35 Traavik.info s.a./a, [point] 7, my italics.

36 Traavik.info s.a./a, [point] 8.

The conflict line concerning poetic values that Traavik adds in the announcement, not only deals with the question of the function of art in society, but also with the understanding of the societal status quo – two sides of the same coin. Instead of the culture war perspective, he emphasizes the “uniquely egalitarian and liberal [Norwegian - SB] society”, and turns the spotlight towards the art field itself.

After placing the poetic agenda into the article, Traavik undertakes the decisive, provoking, but at the same time obviously playful action: he merges the SLO’s “investigation” of allegedly wasted tax funds on the experimental arts with his own poetic agenda. A “we”, that we must read: Traavik in cooperation with SLO, is inviting “both ‘common people’ and ‘the elite’ to participate in the stage performances *The Wastefulness Commission*, where we together scrutinize this societal phenomenon [‘networks that are interested in making Norway a more wasteful society’]<sup>37</sup> and, finally, ourselves.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Scandalizing Counterattack, Transgressive Hypermediality and the Struggle of Framing**

Traavik’s transgressive strategies, launched and performed in the public announcements of *The Wastefulness Commission*, swiftly called forth public reactions from within the performing arts field. The reactions span from critical questioning and rational arguing against the project to polemical counterattack and scandalizing condemnation, clearly communicating strong negative emotions, and verbally performing opposition. The polemical counterattack was soon caught up and conveyed by the established media to a wider public sphere, thus initializing, and firing up the media dynamics of broad public attention through scandal. Not surprisingly, Traavik and his artistic project were associated with SLO and accused of legitimizing or even spreading populist, right-wing political activism, and the bullying of independent artists himself, without anybody knowing what would happen on stage.

At that point, the artistic project produces a transgressive effect on a meta-level. As the public debate about the project, sparked off by the announced concept, is dealt with as part of the hypertheatre project by the artist, the opponents, even those that polemically and harshly scandalize the project, find themselves *inside* the project, thus contributing to what they want to stop or counteract. The hypertheatre conceptually deprives its opponents of the discursive position that would be necessary to perform the critique. In addition, Traavik, time and again, verbally repeats the (alleged) open invitation to actively participate in the announced stage performances. “Everybody is welcome, on the stage *in real life* or behind the keyboard *in real time*. Dialogue is the new confrontation!”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the opponents, who are obviously not interested in participating on stage, are framed as those who refuse to contribute. In addition, the position that Traavik himself contributes from in the public debate is undecidable, gliding between the obviously staged, using the ludic power of the theatrical, and the seriousness of political argument.

On the other hand, the artist obviously does not have control over the scandalizing processes and their understandings and consequences in the wider public sphere. This may echo Fischer-Lichte’s thesis about the “elusiveness” of the autopoietic feedback loop in artistic performances.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the hypertheatre project, a feedback loop evolves in the public sphere that none of the involved individuals and organizations can control, but that many of them try to influence, with varying degrees of (temporary) success.

In the long-lasting process between the public launching of the project and the realizing of the stage performances, the discursive struggles over the framing of the issue(s), the attempt to influence public understanding of what is at stake, what this is all about, which norms and values have been violated or are in the danger of being violated, and what significance this violation has for the involved individuals, institutions (of independent theatre, the arts) and society at large – these struggles intensify and diffuse at the same time. Obviously, there are no clear boundaries between the hypertheatre project and the public controversies that Traavik purposely activated in the announcement of his artistic project. Finally, during spring

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37 The formulation ironically alludes to the agenda of *Ways of Seeing*.

38 Traavik 2020, my translation.

39 Traavik 2020, original italics, my translation.

40 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 50 (in the German original “Unverfügbarkeit”, Fischer-Lichte 2004, 81).



2021, the case and its ramifications flooded the Norwegian public sphere, with sky high conflict levels, yet, without any involved part winning the struggle over the framing and the public understanding(s) of what is at stake. At the same time, within the performing arts field, the scandalizing opposition to *The Wastefulness Commission* was mainly concerned with the issue of harassment and bullying of independent artists, only to a small degree (if at all) differentiating between SLO and Traavik.info's artistic project.

### Appearing on the Theatre Stage

Seen from the perspective of the artistic project, the quite concrete problem arises how the announced stage performances may be realized despite the scandalizing dynamics. Numerous individuals and several organizations are involved, some of them with co-responsibility, and many of them with their own integrity or reputation to lose. The TV-documentary film that was released one year later,<sup>41</sup> shows some of the doubts and negotiations behind the scenes, as well as attempts to defend a discursive and performative position that is possible to inhabit for the involved.

When the performances finally happen on stage, in the physical here-and-now of the theatre, as well as live streamed online in the digital there-and-now,<sup>42</sup> Traavik continues with the inverting of the outside/inside-divide.<sup>43</sup> The transgression that has caused most critique and enragement concerning the stage performances is that he chooses to re-use some of the video-clips from performing art works that SLO earlier had exploited in the "Christmas Calendars". Right before the stage performances, some of the artists explicitly and publicly had requested Traavik not to use the clips on stage. Traavik ignored the request. In addition, he cited one of these concrete requests on stage. Again, he forces the opponents to be on the inside. Accompanying this transgression, he includes a live judicial assessment by Traavik.info's own "in house-lawyer", Morten Grønvigh, in the first of the two performances. Grønvigh explains the judicial regulations and boundaries, with the right to quoting public utterances on the one hand, and privacy protection on the other hand.

A more specific theatrical and performative way of quoting, that is used several times in the stage performances, is bodily re-enactment on stage. I finally zoom in to a part of the second stage performance, where the re-enactment of passages of the performing art works that had been exposed to SLO's anti-curating in the Christmas Calendars, becomes crucial.

One hour into the performance some of the "followers" of SLO enter the baroque styled proscenium stage of Drammens Teater that Traavik.info has extended with a "catwalk" reaching out over the front part of the auditorium. Until this point of the performance, the discursive position of criticizing the public funding of experimental performing arts has been performed and embodied on stage by Are Sjøberg, the SLO "himself", and some other public persons, all of them acting with a persona pre-existing in the public sphere. In contrast, the "followers" are the faceless populist mass in the public drama, hiding behind their keyboards on social media and the like.<sup>44</sup> When they appear on the theatre stage, they "make an appearance".<sup>45</sup> Hereby, they become individuals stepping and standing out of the mass. As Jens Roselt writes: "Appearances execute as social events. They presuppose a group, that they appear from and that are structured and changed by the appearance. At the same time appearances are acts of individuation".<sup>46</sup> The followers "get" faces and names on the theatre stage (see figure 1, 2, and 3).

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41 *Prosjekt Sløseri* 2022.

42 Without any interaction with the online-audience.

43 It is out of the scope of the article to describe and analyze the stage performances' overall Cabaret dramaturgy with a vast array of participants on stage, including Traavik himself.

44 The last out of four followers that appear on stage, has a different position: Magnus Vanebo, an art-student from the Norwegian Art Academy had been involved in public controversies before. I here concentrate on the first three followers.

45 Cf. Matzke et al. 2015.

46 Roselt 2015, 141, my translation.



Figure 1: Follower number one, Wenche Martinsen (screen shot, 1:28:37)<sup>47</sup>



Figure 2: Follower number two, Borgar Lorvik (screen shot, 1:34:24)



Figure 3: Follower number three, Anders Filip Eng (screen shot, 1:38:06)

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<sup>47</sup> All screen shots from the video-documentation of *The Wastefulness Commission 2021: Part 2 Viken 2021*, with kind permission from Traavik.info.

In addition, they get the opportunity to present themselves as “ordinary” people, with ordinary jobs, families, and friends. At the same time, they obviously are on foreign terrain, entering the “cultural world”. Their appearance performatively inverts the marked-unmarked-divide within the theatre space. Sitting in the audience and being directly addressed by these followers, I suddenly enact the in-group of the “cultural word”, that “owes” the space and the institution that they, embodying the “anti-audience”, are appearing within.

Together with the presentation we get to know that the followers, in advance, had the task of choosing one of the experimental dance works that they had witnessed through the video-clips in the SLO’s Christmas Calendar, and to prepare an “interpretation” of the chosen work on stage. Alluding to TV-entertainment-formats, that invite “ordinary” people to compete on performing known (music) pieces, the followers are sent out onto the stage, one after the other, to perform for the co-present theatre audience.

All of them seem well-prepared and perform with surprising dedication to the “original” work. We can witness how they invest themselves in the re-enactment, supported by the chosen works that, apparently, match their “personalities”, spanning from the introvert to the extremely extrovert “Rampensau”.<sup>48</sup>

What happens here, appears to me as a double process of possession. The re-enacting followers appropriate the works, but the artistic works also appropriate the performers in the bodily process of re-enactment. A striking paradox of this performative micro-event is that these works, in the middle of the ambivalence-driven and ambivalence-producing staging of *The Wastefulness Commission*, effect these “representants” of the vast non-audience of experimental performing arts, and that they have reached out to them through the anti-curating of the SLO.

### Essentially Contested Issues of Performative Transgression

Here, my reading of the case comes to an (open) end. I started out by linking performativity to questions of efficacy and adopting Balme’s perspective on the “closed circuit” of performances in Western theatre today. This led me to the interest in big theatre scandals and the current Norwegian case that, by the time of writing, is still virulent and, obviously, non-concludable: at least as long as we do not give in to being sucked into the discursive struggles that are being activated in the case. Instead, I have tried to show and to exemplify how essentially contested issues of performative transgression may be descriptively reconstructed by a multiscale and multi-perspective analysis that deals with aspects of inside/outside, agency, the play with changing contexts, and the struggles on framing.

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48 Cf. Roselt 2015.

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