Traces of the Theatre

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Photo: Hampus Berndtson

Any settlement of social relations into a spatial form is likely to be temporary. – Doreen Massey

If you look up the word “symbiosis”, you’ll learn that it’s a noun that stems from Greek *symbiosis*, literally meaning “co-living”, which is a compound of *sym-*, “together”, and a derivative of *bios*, “life”. Within biology, symbiosis is understood as the “coexistence between different organisms”, and figuratively it is understood as a “close connection between people”. Biology further defines symbiosis as “two species that live together in a morphological connection. This includes mutualism, where *the co-existence gives advantages to both species*”. Thus, symbiosis is fundamentally relational – it is an interaction and a shared existence where both species affect each other and develop together over time.



Photo: Hampus Berndtson

In spring 2022, the artist, architect, and scenographer Jakob Oredsson mounted his temporary piece *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)* on the façade of the Black Box Teater in Oslo. The work was a site-specific scenographic installation where a simple steel framework was erected around and above the entrance to the theatre. On the wall above the door, between the two characteristic light boxes where programme posters have often hung over the years, the steel framework held in place an LED display. The display featured pictures that rolled by, both in and out of focus, of for example a hole in a wall, a detail from a tiled floor, a graffiti tag, or a close-up of a strap holding black Molton curtains together – in other words, pictures of the theatre's various surfaces.

The word "surface" itself derives ultimately from Latin *superficies*. A surface can be understood as the upper layer as differentiated from an underlying layer, or it can be used to refer to a layer that delimits a certain body – it is that body's outward limitation. Figuratively, it means the external, outwards, conspicuous part of something. Oredsson's surface imagery, however, has not been culled from the most conspicuous elements of Black Box Teater. He has taken pictures of details that visitors typically overlook when they move about a theatre: small traces of actual theatre life.

The place

Black Box Teater is a theatre in Oslo that both stages and produces experimental and genre-transcending works of theatrical art. The theatre does not have its own company of actors, but sets up productions by both national and international companies and independent stage artists. As a producer the theatre has also become a leading venue for Norwegian stage artists to premiere their works. Since 2003, Black Box Teater has been located at Rodeløkka in Oslo. Previously, the theatre had been located at Aker Brygge after its founding there in 1985.

As of today, the theatre's future location is uncertain. All the theatre knows is that they must move during autumn 2023, but a new location has yet to be found. Many of the readers of this text are probably familiar with Black Box Teater as a venue, but it is worth mentioning this background because it represents the basis of Oredsson's scenographic installation. The uncertainty surrounding *where* the theatre will be relocating in a few years is a vital basis of the work and a motivation to document the venue as it currently appears.



Photo: Hampus Berndtson

As someone who primarily uses the theatre to see a couple of productions per semester, and who doesn't work within the theatrical arts myself, I find myself standing outside of the theatre one day in March 2022 observing the inside of the theatre through the façade's LED display. Traces of activity and close-up details of the interior are shown in an unhurried and beautiful stream of images. These are pictures of details that, I assume, will jog the memories of those who are familiar with Black Box Teater's various rooms, nooks, and crannies. For me, viewing it from the outside, the unfolding display works mostly as a meditative flow. I'm not familiar with the manifold layers of history that are stored in the theatre's walls, nor do I know what it will actually entail for the art and stagecraft communities that they must relocate from this venue. But the pictures give me the opportunity to catch a few glimpses from the inside – glimpses of material structures that say something about the venue's identity as a theatre and as a production site. As I stand there looking at the stream of pictures, I gradually gain a sense of the venue and of its atmosphere and logics. With his scenographic work on the theatre's façade, Jakob Oredsson turns the venue inside out and prompts me to link the small traces he presents to my own associations and memories from Black Box Teater. This creates a new experience of, and relation to, the place itself.

The shifting images of surface details fades into and out of focus, alternating between almost merging with the building and standing conspicuously out from it. Functioning as a leitmotif, a picture of the actual brick wall behind the LED display repeatedly turns up between the various images. Both in its scale and its chromatic reproduction, this picture of the brick wall is so verisimilar that for brief moments the illusion is created that the display has disappeared and that we are looking directly at the façade, at the theatre's surface. The various images come gradually to the fore "through" the wall, becoming clear and in focus until they gradually fade out again. As the physical perquisite for the theatre's activities, the brick wall becomes the visual cornerstone of Oredsson's scenographic piece. By putting the picture of the wall on the display, and the display on the wall, Oredsson plays around with the concepts of foreground and background: What do we usually notice, and what escapes our attention?

The details highlight the intimacy of the interiors and the architecture, visual markers that in tandem help create a place. In this piece, they have been separated from the overall context and presented individually. At the same time, one of the entirely fundamental elements of the theatre experience is strikingly absent from the pictures, namely people. The theatre and the field of performance are of course grounded in a social context: without people, there are no encounters, and no theatrical art is created.

Relationships

The title *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)* refers precisely to the people of the theatre, its "beings". But the LED display only presents the vestiges of these people – surface traces of a wealth of activity, traces of all the time spent there. The piece can be understood as a kind of subdued homage to all the people who over the years have left their traces at a theatre that now is on the verge of relocating. The building serves as the performers' workplace: it frames their activities and is important for the practices that are developed here. It is also a venue that the audience knows and where they can feel at home. The people who meet each other here liven up both the building and the neighbourhood. The theatre's brick walls become a shell that cloaks thousands of memories and experiences, a wealth of encounters and events.



Photo: Hampus Berndtson

Oredsson has taken a step back, turned the lens away from the people, and instead accentuated that which normally remains in the background. The overall effect is that the theatre's history becomes more present to me. A range of sto-

ries about the theatre can come to the fore without being disrupted by the personal charisma of the actors or the documentation of concrete events. The regular stream of pictures reflects the regular stream of work that has been carried out here over the years. The stories that emerge concern the physical framework that is a prerequisite for social interactions to happen, turning the theatre into a meeting place. They are stories about the symbiotic relationship between the theatre's people and the theatre building, about a co existence that, as per the definition, is to the advantage of both "species".

The theatre is a complex space, and its identity as a place is formed by the sum of many relationships, such as the relationships between people and productions, between performers and the audience and the place, in a network of social and ethical questions. All the factors interact with one another and are in a continual flux. A place's identity is connected to its material and social structures alike, as well as to how these structures interact. The influential social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey has extensively studied how places are constituted and how we understand places and spaces. According to Massey, what we understand as spatiality is in fact social relations "stretched out". There are no social relations that do not have a spatial form.

Oredsson revitalizes these relationships by playing around with what is positioned in the foreground and the background. As a result, *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)* also becomes a reflection of scenography's role in the theatre, a role that is often perceived as withdrawn, as being the backdrop, but that is rife with signifiers that are absolutely crucial to the artistic expression and to the theatrical production's creation of meaning. As with the scenography, the theatre building is also full of details that are frequently overlooked but that help build the place's atmosphere and identity. Seen from that perspective, Oredsson's work is also a subdued homage to the material structures that enable people to meet, interact, and create theatre.

Time

The seemingly endless stream of images in *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)* underlines the temporality that is always implicit in a theatre. In the twentieth century, it was commonplace to conceive of time and space as two independent dimensions, with space for example being understood as a static entity – as a cut through time without any dynamic component. Conversely, Doreen Massey has for a long while contended that space is indeed dynamic and that

time and space must be conceptualized as integrated dimensions. When presenting her arguments, she has rejected the influential philosopher Henri Bergson's understanding of time and space. In 1910, Bergson wrote that "we cannot make movement out of immobilities, nor time out of space", but Massey argues that the temporality of space is in fact a precondition for time to even exist:

> In nature, as Whitehead observed, there are no stills. If the instantaneous moment were not itself imbued with temporality there could be no temporal trajectory. Correspondingly, for time/ temporality/ becoming to exist, space has to be imbued with the temporal. As a slice through time, space is a dynamic simultaneity and that is quite different from a stasis. We must, then, re-write Bergson's dictum. Rather than "we cannot make time out of space", it is that for there to be time, *space must itself be imbued with temporality*.



Photo: Hampus Berndtson

Thus, Massey adds, space can be envisaged not as a surface but as a "a cut through ongoing histories" and a "simultaneity of stories-so-far". Massey's primary argument here is that space is not a static entity but is constantly

changing. Contrary to what Bergson claimed, time is therefore an inherent part of space and cannot be separated from it. Such an understanding requires a change in perception and a reconceptualization of the relationship between time and space. Time does not go by, it comes. Time is not a duration, but a genesis.

And it is just such a time-space relationship that Jakob Oredsson explores in *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)*. In his arrangement of surface details, he presents a cut through the ongoing histories that are to be found at the theatre so far. He imagines the social and the spatial as a whole from the very beginning – a symbiosis between place and people, relationships that have been extended in time and made spatial. According to Massey, it is precisely these networks of social relationships and interactions that constitute the places we find ourselves in. Thus, a place is in its essence socially and relationally grounded.

With *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)*, Oredsson says something about how Black Box Teater has come into being and how it appears on the surface as of today, in 2022. Furthermore, he explores the role that time has played in constituting Black Box Teater's identity as a place. Oredsson's work is in a way emblematic of the theatre's durability. A place is always in flux, and this is what Jakob Oredsson's scenographic work pinpoints and highlights, in both content and shape. The theatre's future is uncertain, but in *Symbiotic Surfaces (Black Box Teater Beings)* we are afforded a glimpse of what Black Box Teater is, right now, right here.

Footnotes

1 John Allen, Doreen Massey, and Allan Cochrane, with Julie Charlesworth, Gill Court, Nick Henry, and Phil Sarre, “Space, Place and Time”, in Rethinking the Region: Spaces of Neo-Liberalism (Routledge: London, 1998), 138.

2 “Symbiosis”, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbiosis, accessed 11 May 2022.

3 “Symbiose”, https://www.mn.uio.no/ibv/tjenester/kunnskap/plantefys/leksikon/s/symbiose.html#:~:text=Symbiose%20(gr.,uten%20verdi%20for%20den%20andre (in Norwegian), accessed 11 May 2022, my emphasis.

4 “Surface”, https://www.etymonline.com/word/surface, accessed 11 May 2022.

5 The information in this section has been taken from the theatre’s web pages “Om Black Box teater”, https://blackbox.no/nb/om-black-box-teater/, and “Historie”, https://blackbox.no/nb/historie/, both accessed 13 May 2022.

6 “Hva skjer med Black Box teater i fremtiden?”, https://blackbox.no/nb/hva-skjer-med-black-box-teater-i-fremtiden/, accessed 1 June 2022.

7 Doreen Massey, Space, Place, and Gender (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/massey_space_place_gender.pdf.

8 Ibid.

9 Massey refers to Bergsson’s essay “Time and Free Will” from 1910 (p. 115) in her essay “Landscape/ Space/ Politics: An Essay”, https://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/landscapespacepolitics-an-essay/, accessed 3 June 2022.

10 Ibid., my emphasis.

11 Ibid.

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