

# *Artists*

# ANAWANA HALOBA



## ON AFRICAN OPERA: A CONVERSATION WITH ANAWANA HALOBA

**Elisa Adami:** One of your most recent works, *How to (re)pair my grandmother's basket* (2021), is an experimental opera that draws from African operatic traditions and philosophy. It thus challenges and contests the widespread perception that the opera is first and foremost a European art form. Can you tell us more about the artistic and cultural traditions you take inspiration from and the way in which they help us to rethink and dispute constructions of a single lineage of opera (i.e. originating in Italy in the late 1500s)?

**Anawana Haloba:** I began working on the project *How to (re)pair my grandmother's basket* by focussing on and listening to different southern African musical and oral traditions using voice as the primary tool for delivering emotions, tragedy, storytelling and its styles (i.e. voice understood as a technology). I had not been exposed to any information that considered the similarities and compared these traditions with opera. My thought or conviction was born from the fact that the practices I investigated were equally mediations of tragedy, drama and a celebration of life using voice as a central tool, just as the European opera did. There are many different musical and theatrical traditional practices across Africa that could pass as operatic forms; others have been presented through written texts. Books like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for instance, is one example of tragedy – the tragic death of a warrior. If we were to reinterpret it on stage using Western opera, or Italian classical opera, it would fit. Furthermore, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka's critical work explores myth and tragedy in Yoruba culture and he has also investigated the similarities and conflicts between Western and Yoruba frameworks of tragedy and drama.

It was during this period, through my reading, watching and listening to different forms of operatic traditions that are defined as 'folk opera', that I came across a documentary titled *The Creative Person: Duro Ladipo* (1967). Durodola Durosomo Duroorike Timothy Adisa Ladipo, also fondly known simply as Duro Ladipo, or Oba Ko so, was a Nigerian Yoruba theatre-maker active in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s until his death in 1978. I think that the creative works of Duro Ladipo, as well as Souleymane Koly's *Waramba* (1991), gave me the confidence to follow the trajectory of this comparison. I started comparing opera to other

musical traditions: like Fado from Portugal and, finally, Chiyabilo/Kuyabila and Budima in Zambia, where I come from. The practice of Chiyabilo/Kuyabila is a Tonga operatic form practised mainly by the Tonga Ila people of the Bwenga area and the Ila people of Namwala in the southern province of Zambia. Chiyabilo is the form and Kuyabila is the practice. My father, whose voice I use in *How to (re)pair my grandmother's basket*, hails from Bwenga.

Budima is a traditional warrior musical and dance performed by the Wee people on both the Zambian side and on the Zimbabwe side of the Zambezi River. In the 1950s, in preparation of the building of the Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River, lots of people were displaced from this area. In 1957–58, a year into the building of the dam, there were two floods; the water rose to unimaginable levels. The second flood in 1958 was particularly colossal; it roared over the construction at 16 million litres per second. It is estimated that such magnitude only occurs every 10,000 years. The locals believed the floods were a sign that the god (or spirit) *Nyami Nyami* – the protector of the river, falls and people living in the area – had separated from his wife. A lot of people lost their livelihood; some people died in the flood, and others had to move to the higher planes. Budima is a ceremony performed on sombre and spiritual occasions, at weddings, funeral processions and other traditional ceremonies. It's characterised by a particular way of singing and by the use of many instruments, particularly whistles, knobkerries, flutes, spears, drums, rattles and horns (trumpets). There could be a thousand of people with horns of different shapes and sizes, thus producing different sounds as they perform, creating some sort of symphony. It's a very dramatised form of mourning that is used both to celebrate life and to perform a tragedy.

Both Budima and Chiyabilo are about celebrating life and tragedy, and are also ways of telling stories of the past, of passing them down to a new generation for the future, making them archiving practices of knowledge and history. In the context of spiritual and funeral processions these practices act as bridges between the realms of the living, the dead (ancestors) and the gods. The way people learn to participate in these ceremonies is by observing, then trying out, and finally becoming themselves the main performers in this process. It's not written; it's an oral process, a form of teaching or transferring of knowledge that is intangible, and also partly bodily, because you learn by observing, by acting. Therefore, the body or bodies, by acting out to what is felt and heard through deep listening and singing, become part of the theatrical, performative situation unfolding.

**Adeena Mey:** There is something quite compelling in what you said about opera as adopting both plural and common features. You trace the multiplicity of forms that opera can take, but at the same time, you seem interested in the essential human need for expression and transmission through these various instances of sonic moments – moments, which are also about sharing an experience or have an educational dimension and that take place through different modalities, in different places. With regards to this plurality and commonality, can you clarify what is meant by African opera? Is there a distinctive African Opera (like there is an African Philosophy) but which had to be reconstructed and recovered through a process of epistemological disentanglement?

**AH:** I think both African Philosophy and African operatic tradition draw from the same axis of knowledge and understand life and reinterpret it in a similar way. Their distinctiveness is grounded in an ontological premise and, therefore, they both require a process of epistemological disentanglement to reconstruct, recover and repair, too. As a creative person, I am drawn to African opera traditions because they manifest the moment in which the gods are ‘revealed’ in human form. It is not only a form of storytelling, of staging stories of love and death, which are similar to those we find in classical opera. There is something distinctive in their deeper meaning and in their structure.

Wole Soyinka has also referred to the traditional musical sessions he was exposed to growing up in the small town of Abeokuta in western Nigeria, as opera. He says that these operatic happenings were ‘complete with every structural component, from overture to stand-and-deliver arias to tragic climaxes’. The only difference is that the overture, in African musical performances, is called the Opening Glee, and, unlike Western operas, is followed at the end by a Closing Glee. As Soyinka says, ‘the idea of “closure” in European Romantic opera would be near profanity: ruin the climax, dissipate catharses and curb those interminable curtain call.’<sup>1</sup>

The other distinctive aspect is that African opera is rooted in oral traditions that pass through the body. I also see it as an active archive, that keeps on regenerating, as it goes from generation to generation. So, it’s neither stagnant, nor has it been reduced by colonial interruptions, and what they have done to that form of art. This form of art continues to be there because it’s an active regenerating archive that doesn’t necessarily have to be pure or concrete, fixed and unchanged.

In my opera, I borrow from the tradition of Budima as a way to talk about the politics of encounter and otherness through history, and how they affect us today and how we can talk about them. I’m referring to the archive to see how problems were resolved or how communities came to terms (unresolved) with them. If we could look at these problems that we want to avoid talking about as an archive that has been regenerated, probably we would be able to dialogue and confront the politics of encounter and otherness without feeling accused of anything, like being complicit in some atrocities, or being in denial, or having an inferiority complex.

**AM:** What you’re saying about the archive is very interesting, because on the one hand, we have African traditions and the potential of the archive as something that is regenerating itself; something that is essentially in movement, fluid and constantly open to change and reinterpretation. On the other hand, we have the Western tradition with more rigid protocols, and a written archive that is subjected to ideas of fixity and timelessness. However, every performance is also an interpretation; it’s not just a reinterpretation. So, I’m wondering how you engage with and navigate between these two ideas or two poles of the same idea.

**AH:** I think showing this regenerating or reoccurring movement, it’s also perhaps a way to expose the rigidity of Western opera. I find Western opera rigid in the sense that it emerged by trying to create a certain kind of high art, to make something very purely tamed with music. But if you think of music, it’s in its nature to be physical as in the fact that sound comes from things that vibrate. It contradicts itself and I expose it by creating this experimental opera.

I recently saw a lecture by Fred Moten titled ‘Symphony of Combs’, where he asks why there are so many operas set in Seville, Spain – a city with a lot of trauma and violence.<sup>2</sup> He talks about the deconstruction of the African drum in the opera music, which you hear through the bass part, the lower, heavy keys of the piano. This makes me feel that the next stage of my research is to delve further into Western opera, to find and reveal what is hidden: influences coming from outside, the drum that has been repressed, the violence that opera maybe is trying to cover, and where it comes from.

**EA:** As I understand, this rigidity in Western opera seems to come also from the historical codification of the form through a fixed repertoire, conventions,

etc. Do you think that this repression you are talking about is related to a kind of polishing or sublimating of the raw elements (the violence, the drum) in Western opera?

**AH:** I don't know if it's polishing. . . I mean that a lot of notions within Western culture are borrowed from various places and when these elements that have come from outside are reinvented within the Western culture, they are repressed in the process. But at the same time, the same knowledge is used as a stepping stone, as a kind of platform from which to build, almost like the rock where a church is built. It would be interesting for me to deconstruct that, to be able to dig out those platforms. What I've done so far is to show a different kind of tradition, which I can relate to opera, and talk about it from its own perspective, without having to resort to Western operatic conventions. There are many operatic stories coming from Africa, which have basically just been transposed into the language of Western opera. I think that doesn't really help. So, what I've been doing in my work is basically to focus on the 'operatic' elements already present in these African traditions and to show them the way they are. For example, the libretto in my opera draws from African culture; the objects and even the stage link not just to operatic notions, but to African cosmologies and philosophies of life as well as architecture. For me it's a question of seeing how the story is told in this theatrical, musical operatic form, which is African. But when we look at these musical traditions, we never think of them as opera. They are labelled as African 'primitive' ways of expression. So, for me, it's important to look at these so-called primitive forms of expression again, and fight for what they stand for.

**EA:** It's a sort of double claim or double movement. On the one hand, you are making a claim to opera, as a 'universal' form: you are saying that African traditions like Budima or Chiyabilo/Kuyabila can be considered as part of what we think of as opera. But at the same time, you're also rethinking what opera is, because you are claiming it from another perspective, from the perspective of African tradition.

**AH:** Yeah, in my research I'm obsessed with creating some kind of comparative relation; not to compare in evaluative terms, but to pair, to bring together, and, at the same time, to unveil the repression that is hidden.

**EA:** Since you brought up this idea of repair, it would be great to hear more about your take on this concept. Repair is an important word that

appears in the title of your experimental opera, and lately there has been a lot of discussion around ideas of repair – in the form of reparations or restitutions, for instance. Can you explain how you see repair in your work and how it intersects with current debates?

**AH:** I tried to separate the word repair into its constitutive parts. 'Re' symbolises the idea of care. In repair, care is the first step: you repair something because you care for/about it. This is a way to begin, the first act of responsibility. The second part of the word, 'pair', means to set two things together. The pairing is not just pairing of two things. Going back to what we said earlier, it's about multiplicity. It's the articulation of a comparative way of looking and a method by which knowledge might be encountered differently – in its relationality. It's a form of connectivity, and in that act, I'm hoping to draw connections – for instance, between Southern African operatic traditions, Duro Ladipo from West Africa, and so on.

This understanding of knowledge as a nonlinear way of thinking is also connected to a South African logic game called *Manyumbo* or *Icho, Chise*, in which situations or propositions are brought up among peers who together investigate the problem and come up with different solutions. It's a non-hierarchical way of looking at knowledge. For me, it's interesting not just to compare things, but to think what kind of shared history informs them. If we could think of knowledge and the histories we share as a point of connectivity, then maybe we have a better way of communicating and are able to create different ways of thinking that better understand ourselves as human beings in this world for the next generation. So that's where the care is: in the decision to work with a certain history or tradition that has been epistemologically disenfranchised and to put it at the forefront.

I know that repair today is attached to restitution, repatriation. We can talk about these words, but I feel that without care, in the sense that everyone takes responsibility, they're just buzzwords, trendy words and everyone can have a Zoom meeting about them.

**AM:** I feel we've been talking a lot about the epistemological aspect of the opera. You mentioned the stories and histories you address in the work. Could you tell us a bit more about the content and how the work came about?

**AH:** *How to (re)pair my grandmother's basket?* stems from my PhD research, in which I've been looking at two writers: Franz Fanon and Bjørnstjerne

Bjørnson. The latter was a contemporary of Ibsen and, like him, a Nobel Prize winner. He wrote a famous play *En Hanske (A Gauntlet, 1883)*, four years after Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House (1879)*, a story about a young lady who discovers that her fiancé has had an extra-conjugal relationship, and she gets further disappointed when she understands that even her father, before he got married to her mother, was involved with other women. It was written as a play first, but then he decided to present it as a lecture. He went around Europe and a lot of engagements were broken as a result. Bjørnson became an activist later in his life, fighting for the poor and for women. He used to lobby the parliament on women's rights. He also went to the United States where he had an influence on early feminist writers. In the 1830s, during the industrialisation of Norway, Bjørnson argued that women needed to understand the industrialisation of the country if they were going to be part and parcel of the society.

I came to Bjørnson from Fanon. I was interested in Fanon's views in relation to feminism, although he's sometimes referred to as misogynist by other feminist groups, or naive that he didn't really understand the situation in Algeria. For me, at the time, it was interesting to put these two writers together, because I felt that the industrialisation of Norway was a modernist project, in the same way as decolonisation from settler colonialism was for Fanon. This is where the discussion starts: I wanted to make a comparative analysis of these writers, while trying to inhabit them.

I started from feminism and later I took on a humanistic philosophical understanding of Bjørnson and Fanon, as they are both humanist philosophers. According to a radical understanding of feminism, to be a feminist is also to be human. That's the position I write from: as a feminist but also as a human.

In the libretto, I work with ideas of decoloniality. The content of the opera focusses on the ability of people to talk about difficult problems, the histories that we somehow all link to, and how we talk about it from a position that inspires an idea of polarity. If you read the text, it's both a conversation happening inside (an inner monologue), but it's also a conversation that is out there. It shows the separateness of these positions and how we are all connected through these histories. How am I you? What part of your history do I share? And what version of it? It gives some hint of what we could be together if we consider those things that join us. But, of course, it is also about otherness. When we were talking about opera earlier, we were talking

of African traditions seen in the light of Western opera. So, it becomes the Other opera, which, for some, is not opera at all. Likewise, the politics of identity always construct an Other in relation to an 'ideal' human being. So, the libretto reproduces the conversation that is going on, but not necessarily in an aggressive way, perhaps in a cynical way. It inhabits this dilemma of how one can claim an identity while at the same time be aware of how this positioning might discriminate against the other person. I bring in this game to talk about difference, which is there, but which can be seen from another perspective. The cynical part in the dialogue says: 'There's a red mass under my skin, which carries histories and inclinations of a place, something which is foreign to them, but maybe something which they should know.' And then it goes on like, 'you know me, I have white, blue, red, yellow friends, all the colours of the rainbow.'

**EA:** It's interesting to see how you moved from Bjørnson and Fanon, two figures with recognisable names and life stories, to arrive to a sort of abstract dialogue between unnamed characters, voices, that can't be pinned down to a particular biography or assigned to any particular figure. You refer to these characters as not gendered, and what they say are, for instance, stereotypical stock phrases that we hear all the time as responses to accusation of racism, and that you exaggerate. I'm interested to hear more on how this piece is experienced in terms of the voices, but I am also wondering how, by taking common phrases out of context and putting them together in this dialogue, you create another way of perceiving them?

**AH** I think these are not entirely just stereotypical stock phrases as one may think, but phrases deliberately chosen with care. They represent some conversations I have had with people I have encountered and cared for. I also think the characters in the text are not just defensive to racial accusations but create confrontational dialogue that strives to find meeting points. I also see them as reflection of an inner dialogue – 'the noises of the mind' – as racism is an internalised notion that manifests externally. Therefore, for me, these ungendered characters are real and have names; the text is beyond just a discussion about racism but also considers the ideas of multiplicity and opacity. I think the text exposes ideas of being that are symptoms of racism, white privilege, chauvinism and entitlement. For instance, this exchange between characters 3 and 4:

I know who I am, don't look at me the accusations you hide behind your smile do not make me guilty. I am a man, my presence

exudes honour, I am a hero.

No, you are not. You are not a man or a hero. You are me. I am in your skin, the breath you breathe. It's my mouth you speak from. You are me. I am a woman.

Throughout the text of the libretto, there is a reoccurring voice that pleads 'see me' and that climaxes at the end of the opera with several characters repeating the same phrase, in reference to the idea of opacity in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* and Ubuntu philosophy. This, I think, also refers to Bjørnson and Fanon's humanistic philosophies.

Most of the dialogue takes place on the street; it's like bringing these thinkers to a conversation on the streets. In the Nordic countries, where I live, in 2019 the Holberg Prize was awarded to Paul Gilroy. Shortly after, Achille Mbembe was also invited. In the university, there's been a lot of talk about 'Decolonising the North' and so on. The question is how does then this conversation within the university translate to the community? Because I don't think decoloniality should just be in the university. Maybe it's not necessary to write so many books and create so many seminars about it, but it is supposed to be present in society. And in society, how do we talk about it? I think the text is also inspired by Harry Garuba's effective interpretation of what decoloniality is, namely to put the needs of the epistemologically oppressed in the forefront of knowledge making.

I feel what the text for the opera does is to rethink these ideas in relation to everyday life, as simple conversations where, for instance, two people get pissed off at each other. There is anger in the libretto, but there is also satire; there is dialogue and coming to terms with things; the audience get to love some of the characters, are irritated by others or feel an affinity and create kinship with some others.

As for the question of gender, I'm looking at it from the perspective of my own culture's understanding of gender, where it is very fluid. My mother, for instance, is addressed as male, 'Tate', in different settings. Thus, I try to transcend the male/female binary.

**AM:** Let's talk a bit about how the work manifests in space. The opera presents itself as an installation of objects and props, mainly musical instruments, that evoke visually and aurally the physical dimension of sound, the elusiveness of the voice

and of the breath. Can you tell us a bit more about the form your opera takes?

**AH:** I built the stage and instruments. The traditional African form of opera takes place in the village's market square. I call it square because that's the word architecture uses to describe it. But it's never a square; it's usually a circle. The village in most African cultures is likewise circular, with the village square right in the middle next to a tree and the kitchen. This is where life happens: if there's a party or an opera, it will happen there. I've just uprooted this space and recreated it as a stage.

As for the instruments: the horn is a reference to the operatic form of Budima, which uses small horns, and to Norway, where very similar horns, called *bukkehorn*, are made from goat's horns. The horns in my work are quite big because they contain speakers.

There has been an evolution in the way I've worked with speakers over the years. In my first sound installation, I worked with eleven speakers and each of them relays two pairs of voices, whispering to each other, in a shower-like installation, while in the background, a subwoofer transmits the sound of my heartbeat. I made that work in a moment during my twenties where I was thinking a lot and I heard all these thoughts in my mind all the time. With that work, I tried to bring the mind into the space, using the speakers not only to make the viewer hear the sound, but also to imagine the sound was coming from themselves. That's what the heartbeat does: it makes your own heartbeat become very present.

In later works, such as *When the Private Became Public* (2008) presented at the 16th Biennale of Sydney, the speaker turns into a speaker box. If you look through it, it is a well, but at the same time, the whole thing is a speaker box, which endows the sound with the ambience of a cave. In *I shall cure you my tongue* (2018) also part of my PhD project, the speakers are inserted in ceramic plates or bowls, and this gives you the impression of somebody talking into your ear; you sit under this pot, which seems to have somebody in it, either a radio or a person talking to you. It's about deep listening.

In *How to repair my grandmother's basket?*, I focussed on the objects. The horns are made of a thermal plastic material, and inside, they're layered with the same material that nails are made from. The bigger the horn is, the thinner the nail material is. The difference in size makes the sound behave in different ways. Each speaker produces

a specific rattling, based on the volume of its material, creating a character. So, the speakers become like bodies. When I decide which sound goes where, I listen to the character of the voice and check the rattling of each speaker: this helps me to choose which horn should carry a certain voice. If I had just designed the structure of the sound in the studio and then played it out in the space, it wouldn't have been the same.

The artists I recorded are artists I've worked with before, and they had the text for a long time to the point that they embodied the character in it. Each one chose their part, so they really entered into the character – it feels like a real conversation.

**AM:** This made me think of the work of Senegalese philosopher Mamoussé Diagne.<sup>3</sup> He talks about specific modalities that enable transmission in oral contexts. For him, orality is by no means restricted to the spoken word, the verbal or the linguistic. He identifies several modalities, and one of them is 'dramatisation'. Your work plays with oral traditions in a mediated form – through recorded voices and speakers – yet it seems to me that through dramatisation you are recovering orality as the epistemological condition of African cultures. So even writing or recorded performance are enacted in the paradigm of orality. Does this idea resonate with you?

**AH:** That's very much speaking to my work. Earlier, I was talking about this regenerating archive, which, of course, is an oral tradition. I guess the action of 'dramatisation' is a part of all these oral traditions. In my mother's tradition, there is a man who is like a human archive. I recorded a video of him reciting historical events that are very symbolic of his culture: what that culture confronted, how it changed, the first people they encountered, the different monarchies and so on. Then this knowledge is passed on to the next generation, who start learning the archive when they are very small, and they carry it ready to take over when the moment comes. It's like having a person that grows with you – a child whose main education is to learn the tribe's history. When the first holder of that history, which is oral and immaterial, 'disintegrates', the other takes over.

1 Wole Soyinka, *Blackout, Blowout and Beyond. Wole Soyinka's satirical revue sketches* (ed. Martin Banham with Chuck Mike and Judith Greenwood), Oxford: James Currey, 2005.

2 Fred Moten, 'Symphony of Combs', lecture, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 17 November 2019, available at <https://www.hkw.de/en/app/mediathek/video/76046> (last accessed on 27 January 2022).

3 See his essay in this issue.

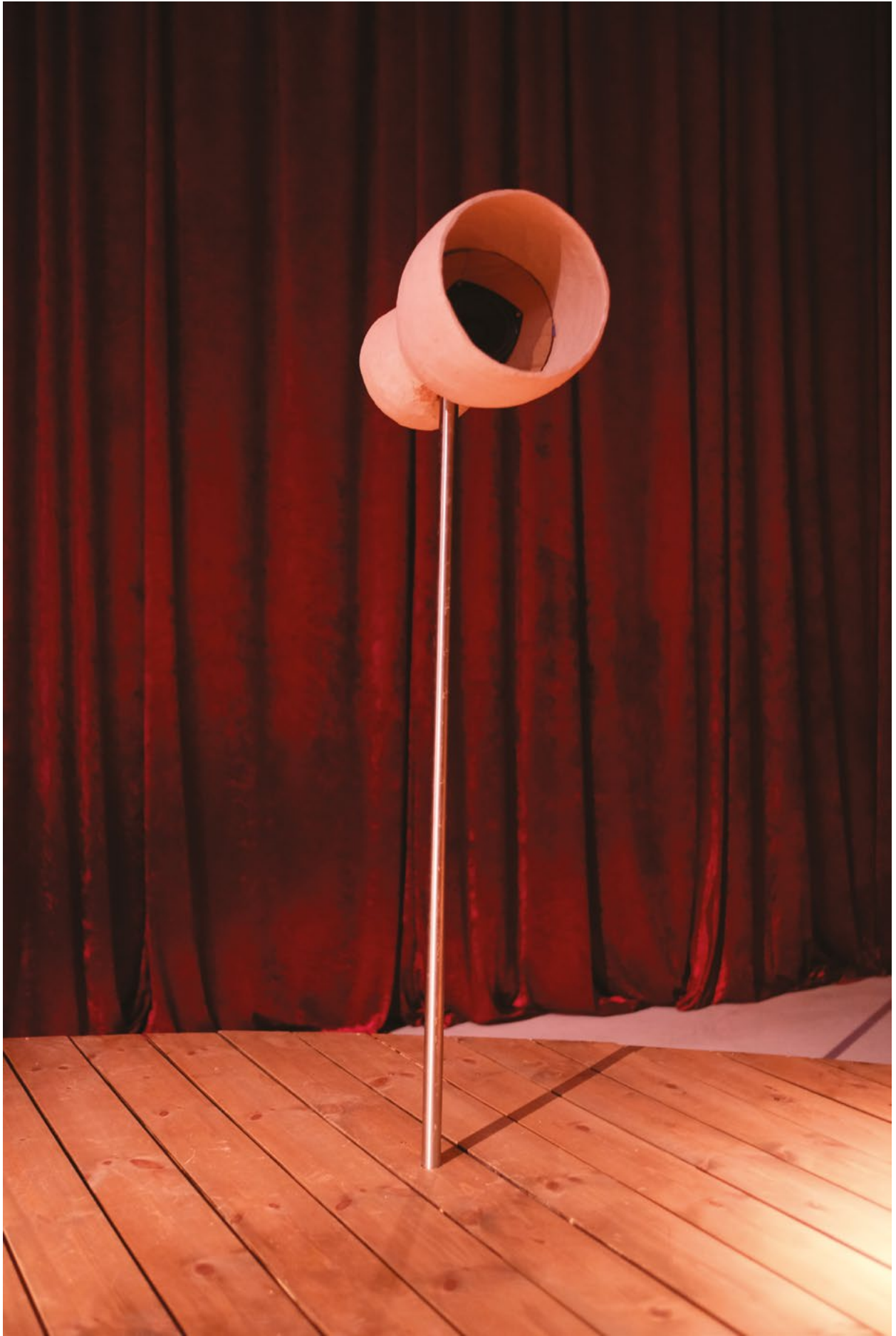






Anawana Haloba, *How to (re)pair my Grandmother's Basket*, installation view, KODE, Bergen 2021. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Adriana Calderon

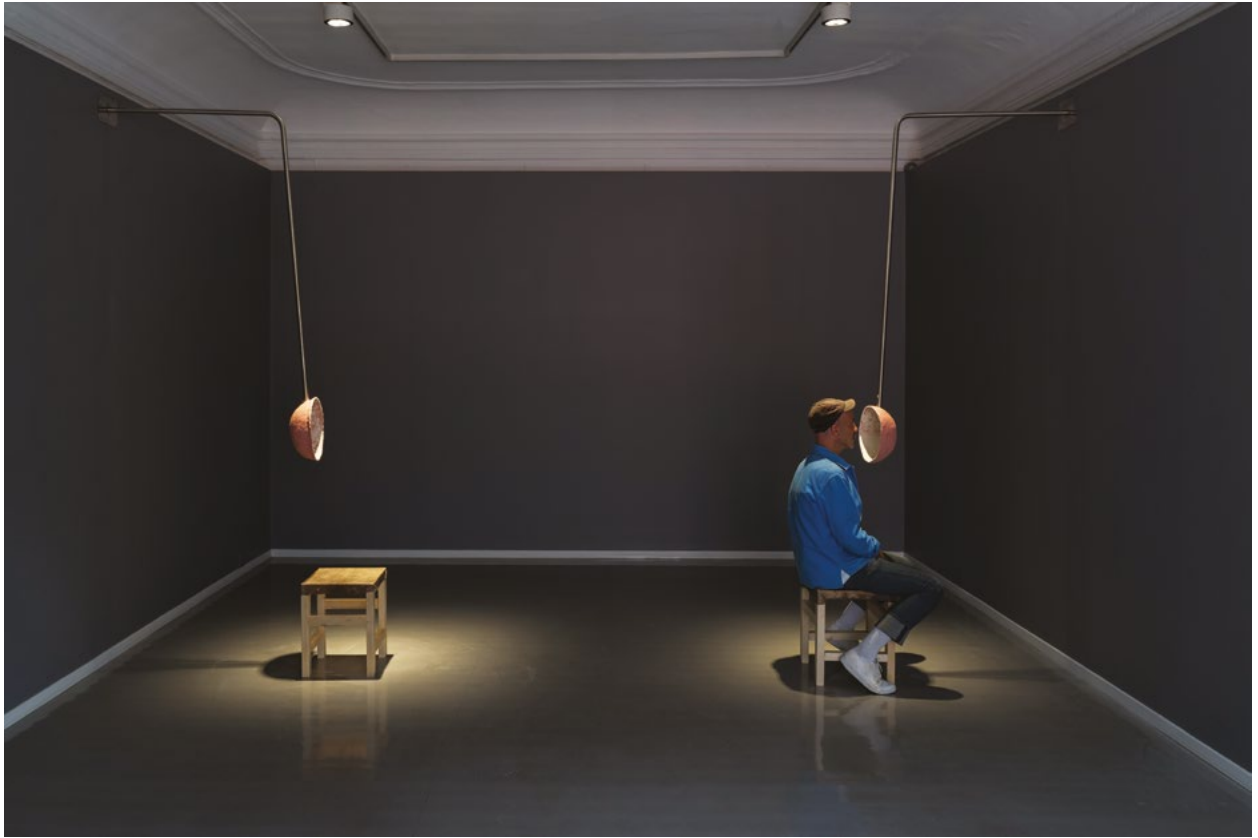




Anawana Haloba, *How to (re)pair my Grandmother's Basket*, installation view, Archive Sites Milan, 2021. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Iman Salem



**Anawana Haloba, *Conversation With Sticked Up Lips*, installation view, Oslo Kunstforening, 2018. Courtesy the artist.  
Photo: Christina Hansen**



Anawana Haloba, *I Shall Cure You My Tongue*, installation view, Oslo Kunstforening, 2018. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Christina Hansen