

Grinding the Stage: Permeable Choreography, Counterculture, and Collective Politics in Mette Ingvartsen's *Skatepark*

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Abstract

“Grinding the Stage: Permeable Choreography, Counterculture, and Collective Politics in Mette Ingvartsen’s *Skatepark*” examines how Mette Ingvartsen reimagines contemporary choreography by integrating skateboarding as both a movement practice and social system. Premiered in 2023 and staged across the globe, *Skatepark* reached the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Canada, in November 2025. The work transforms the theatre into a functioning skatepark, exemplifying Ingvartsen’s concept of “permeable choreography,” an open framework that absorbs existing movement cultures and social relations. The piece shifts the focus from virtuosity to everyday acts of coexistence, while its scenography—developed with Pierre Jambe and Antidote Skateparks—creates a dynamic, heterotopic space. Engaging skateboarding’s tension between counterculture and institutionalization, *Skatepark* ultimately frames choreography as the collective negotiation of shared space.

Biography

Sam Monastero (they/she/elle) is an Art and Architectural History graduate student at Carleton University, located on the unceded territories of the Algonquin Nation. They hold a Bachelor of Arts in Art History with a minor in Arts Management from Carleton University, where she developed a foundation in critical theory, curatorial practice, and arts administration, alongside a

passion for the cultural and political significance of contemporary public art. Her current research engages with urban, street, and public art, with particular attention to sticker art, graffiti, and murals as vital expressions of urban life.

Rebekah Walker (she/they/elle) is an art historian currently completing a Master of Arts in Art and Architectural History at Carleton University, located on the unceded territories of the Algonquin Nation. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art History from Concordia University. Her work centers on craft theory and discourse, examining them as contemporary modes of political action and radical care. Pursuing a career in Canadian decorative arts and textile curation, she hopes to dissect some of the many intricacies of craft as a gendered, socialist, material art form and the ties it holds between community and private life. They have been published in YIARA Magazine, HASA UofT's Journal "Devouring Time," and written for CUJAH's CUADRO as well as The LINK.

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Mette Ingvarstsen's *Skatepark* (premiered in 2023) marks a significant evolution in her choreography, extending her long-standing inquiry into the political dimensions of bodies, collectivity, and movement by turning towards a practice not traditionally associated with theatrical dance. At the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Babs Asper Theatre is transformed into a functioning skatepark. The work mobilizes skateboarding, roller skating, music, and everyday gestures into a choreographic language that is as much social as it is kinetic. In doing so, *Skatepark* exemplifies what Ingvarstsen has termed “permeable choreography”: a practice that absorbs existing movement cultures, social relations, and material environments, reimagining dance as an open and collaborative system.¹

Situating *Skatepark* within Ingvarstsen's oeuvre reveals both continuity and rupture. Earlier works of hers, such as *The Artificial Nature Series* (2009–2012), interrogated non-human agency and ecological systems, while *The Red Pieces* (2014–2017) foregrounded the body as a site of sexual, historical, and political struggle.² In contrast, *Skatepark* abandons overt thematic framing in favour of what we would describe as ethnographic attentiveness. The work does not represent skateboarding so much as it re-stages its conditions of emergence, that being repetition, failure, perseverance, peer observation, care, rivalry, and shared occupation of space. The body remains political, but in a way that unfolds through modes of togetherness rather than explicit transgressions or provocation.

The decision to populate the stage primarily with skaters, many of whom are not trained performers, constitutes a radical rethinking of virtuosity. Technical mastery is visible in the gravity-defying tricks and fluid parabolic trajectories performed, yet virtuosity never becomes the sole organizing principle. Instead, the choreographic focus shifts to the micro-movements surrounding skating, that of waiting, watching, filming, singing, and simply coexisting. These gestures, often overlooked in both dance and sport, are reframed as choreographic material through displacement into the theatrical world. Ingvarstsen's choice to stage these peripheral actions prevents the spectacle of skill from eclipsing the performers' subjectivity, allowing the audience to perceive the skaters as individuals embedded in a collective ecology.

The scenography, developed by Pierre Jambe and Antidote Skateparks, plays a decisive and dramaturgical role. The ramps, curves, and platforms both host and generate movement. With this, the architecture becomes an active choreographic agent, shaping speed, rhythm, and

¹ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, “Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarstsen,” Mette Ingvarstsen, *maculture.fr*, accessed January 30, 2026, https://www.metteingvarstsen.net/texts_interviews/skatepark-interview-mette-ingvarstsen/, para. 5.

² NAC Dance, “SKATEPARK: Mette Ingvarstsen,” National Arts Centre, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://nac-cna.ca/en/event/38363#mette-ingvarstsen>.

spatial negotiation. The stage functions as a social common ground, “to feel like a public square that could be inhabited by the performers.”³ It emerges as a heterotopic site in a Foucaultian sense; a space where contradictory logics can coexist, balancing freedom and regulation, play and discipline, individuality and collectivity.

Skatepark embarks on an ambitious project to connect times, places, and people in one space. The performers’ occupation of the theatrical skatepark harkens back to the early history of skateboarding, which emerged out of Californian counterculture when surfers “moved from sea to asphalt one day when the waves were low.”⁴ The choreography throughout the performance tells a multi-temporal story; it joins history with the present and the future. This is demonstrated through the multilingual nature of the powerful punk lyrics, which are performed in English, French, and Spanish.⁵ Combined with the immersion of the skatepark inside the theatre, as well as the diverse ages and backgrounds of the performers, the show crosses generations, spatial realities, and language barriers. This sets up *Skatepark* within the framework of pluriversal experience. Ingvarsen talks about the skatepark as a space that is anti-capitalist, anarchist, and otherwise “outside” of the norms.⁶ Art historians Birgit Hopfener and Karin Zitzewitz define the pluriverse as a world which is “carefully self-conscious about the origins and shifting meanings of concepts and categories in a world conceived as relational and implicated in systems of power.”⁷ *Skatepark* is certainly aware of the field it is playing in; its meaning *is* the way that skateboarding culture operates politically.

The most thought-provoking element of pluriversalism brought forth in *Skatepark*, in our view, is the contortions and transgressions between physical and temporal space. In their review, Bojana Cvejić highlights that, “the difference between skating the city and skating within a park designed and designated for skateboards, reflects at least two different kinds of social production of the space.”⁸ This clashes with Ingvarsten’s assertions of skateboarding as having “an anarchistic approach to private property that displayed an anti-capitalist attitude.”⁹ How can the skatepark navigate these attitudes while being performed in a government-funded institution like

³ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, “Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarsten,” para. 7.

⁴ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, “Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarsten,” para. 4.

⁵ Ruth, “Skatepark,” Spotify playlist, May 11, 2023.
<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5tikFLGvLxhJd9jw6rLbLB?si=6af44431f2af445a&nd=1&dlsi=c543a86bbc2040ff>.

⁶ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, “Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarsten,” para. 2.

⁷ Birgit Hopfener and Karin Zitzewitz, “Towards a Multi-Temporal Pluriverse of Art: Decolonizing Universalized Historiographic and Temporal Frameworks,” *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 5, no. 1 (2024): 2. <https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2024.1.102972>.

⁸ Bojana Cvejić, “Skateboarding Structures the Worldview of Those Who Practice It,” Mette Ingvarsten, Ruhrtriennale, 2023, https://www.metteingvarsten.net/texts_interviews/skateboarding-structures-the-worldview-of-those-who-practice-it/, para. 5.

⁹ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, “Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarsten,” para. 4.

Canada's National Arts Centre? Is *Skatepark*'s occupation of space an anarchist proclamation, or is it diffused by mere association?

Politically, *Skatepark* engages with skateboarding's ambivalent status as both a countercultural practice and a commodified sport. Ingvarsen neither romanticizes rebellion nor dismisses institutionalization, instead holding these tensions in suspension. In doing so, skateboarding appears simultaneously as an anarchic occupation of space and as a practice shaped by rules, hierarchies, and economies. This ambivalence is mirrored in the physical space of the theatre, which becomes temporarily occupied by a culture that has been historically marginal to institutional art spaces. The choice to include local skaters in each city extends this gesture beyond representation, transforming the performance into a permeable encounter between art and lived practice.

What grounds these ideas are the piece's commitment to making real connections behind the scenes. Ingvarsen's production aims to interact with local skate scenes, making each individual showing a unique product of the landscape or environment of the host city. To invite local skateboarders to a free skate session on the set in the week preceding the performance, the production collaborated with Vickie Lemire, a member of Canada Skateboard's Board of Directors, a board member of the Ottawa Skateboarding Association, and the lead of the Girls+Skate 613 initiative. The participants are given the opportunity to be included in the official pre-show. As the audience files into the theatre, settling into their seats, they are accompanied by the squeaks, slides, and clacks of the skateboarders doing tricks on stage. Bridging the divide between the professional and amateur, young and old, local and foreign; everyone is equal in the skatepark.

Sound and lighting further articulate the work's politics of plurality. The sound design, arranged by Anne van de Star and Peter Lenaerts, creates a layered soundscape of punk music, electronic textures, and live singing that rejects sonic homogeneity in favour of simultaneity. Multiple speakers were intentionally scattered across the stage, echoing the informal auditory experience of a skatepark, where personal sound systems may coexist next to conversation and without centralized coordination. Similarly, Minna Tiikkainen's lighting design evokes a dusk-lit urban scene rather than an overly theatrical clarity, situating the action in an in-between temporality that resists spectacle while enhancing the work's cinematic atmosphere. Together, these elements construct what Ingvarsen describes as a heterogeneous community, a space where difference does not require resolution.¹⁰

Crucially, *Skatepark* also intervenes in the gendered histories of movement cultures. Skateboarding has a masculine legacy that is subtly but decisively challenged through the presence of female and non-male performers, whose voices and bodies occupy the space. Rather than foregrounding equality as a thematic statement, the work enacts it structurally,

¹⁰ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, "Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarsen," para. 8.

redistributing visibility and audibility within the collective. Notably, only non-male voices are heard throughout the performance, as the singing is performed by two female skaters, Poppy and Julia.¹¹ Additionally, the choreographer herself is female, which has directly influenced her experience and been translated into the performance. Ingvarsten aligns with broader feminist methodology, which privileges reconfiguration over declaration. *Skatepark* is thus dedicated to creating equal opportunities and a more inclusive understanding of the urban landscape.¹²

Overall, *Skatepark* proposes choreography not as the organization of bodies into legible forms, but as the careful orchestration of coexistence. This piece resists narrative closure or moral resolution. What remains instead is sustained attention to how bodies share space, negotiate difference, and generate fleeting communities. By inviting a countercultural practice into the theatre—a national theatre, nonetheless—without domesticating it, the scope of contemporary choreography is expanded and its capacity to function as a critical lens on social life is reaffirmed. *Skatepark* surpasses expectations as an ode to youth or nostalgia rather than a quietly radical proposition; it suggests that freedom is not a given but a collective practice that is patiently rehearsed.

¹¹ Wilson Le Personnic, Wilson, “Skatepark Interview with Mette Ingvarsten,” para. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*

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