Anastasia Blokhina and Stacy Brafield in conversation

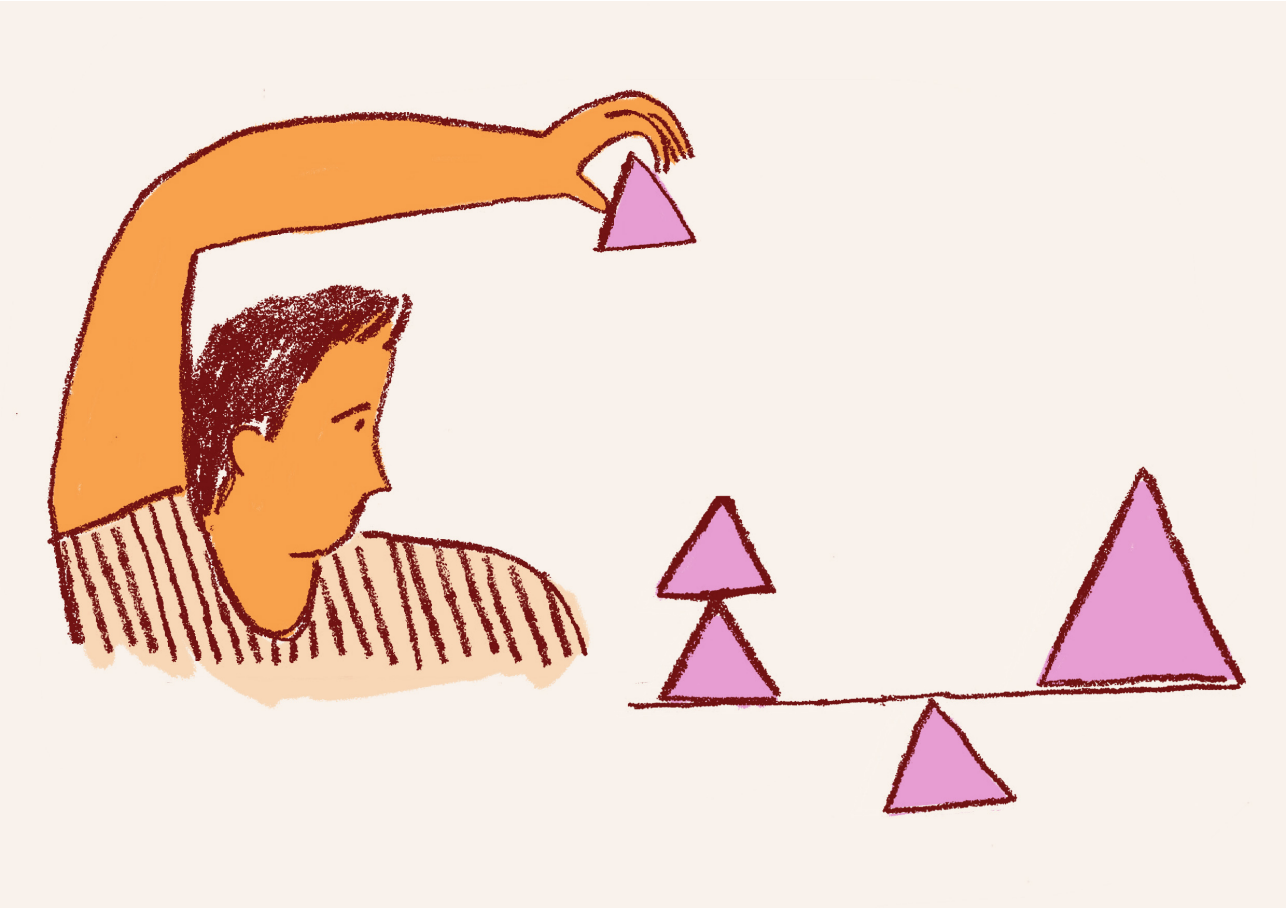

Figure 1. Rebalance, 2021, Joey Yu.

Anastasia Blokhina, Executive Director, Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art

Stacy Brafield, Education and Mediation, Bergen Assembly (2019)

RIBOCA2: and suddenly it all blossoms, curated by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, took place from May to October 2020, the Biennial adapted in to a feature film of recorded footage of exhibitions and a series of online discussions. Bergen Assembly takes place every three years and the next edition is due to open in September 2022.

AB: Do you do panic, or stay calm and keep going in a pandemic?

SB: To stay calm and keep on going is the most sensible thing to do, if one has the capacity to do so. Panicking in any situation has the potential to cause harm. How to keep on going is a good question, though. It could be broken into four different variables: do you panic and keep going, do you panic and stop, do you stay calm and keep going, or stay calm and stop? Personally, I think now is the time to slow down, to reflect, evaluate and to read the moment. So, stay calm and move slowly and very carefully is my answer. We currently live in a time where we think much more in a short-term manner and everything is provisional.

I remember when we last spoke, you mentioned that you've changed the ways in which you plan, from long-term to shorter evaluative hurdles. I think the smaller hurdles are crucial right now, for taking care of ourselves, our organisations/institutions and the people we work with. We have to loosen our expectations and be much more adaptable than before, and we have to learn this new way of working whilst navigating slowly and carefully through a pandemic.

Over to you: what are your thoughts on panicking or staying calm and keeping moving?

AB: Well, obviously, panic is counterproductive and considering none of us can do anything about the current situation, basically you need to keep going as far as you can. But you're not just keeping going on your own. You keep going with an institution and there are other people who depend on your decisions. One of the most important dimensions for me was the extreme social responsibility, because your decisions have consequences. Whether you decide to go on in full, for example, with an event, or to do it online, is hard to decide. And there are environmental implications in terms of the data. I think it multiplied about ten times the average data and for all of this you need data centres, and you need to be careful. The internet isn't endless, and it doesn't exist in a bubble that's not connected to the real world. So we should be mindful about the amount of data we use as well.

But the so-called safety of the online space is obviously very seductive compared with events in real time, because even if you pursue all the safety measures, even if everyone is within a safe distance and wearing a mask, you're still responsible. What if someone still gets it? And this social responsibility of 2020 is, I think, something that I'll remember in twenty years from now. Every decision needs to be evaluated, not only from the perspective of your institution, but from the perspective of the economy, because we do keep the economy going with what we do. But there are also consequences that are bigger than you and bigger than an exchange. So we went fully online with the public programme, and that was a good decision, but we still went with the actual on-site show because the space was so vast that you could self-isolate. For those who didn't want to come, we had a video tour. The governmental rules can't be the only ones you follow, because you still need to think about other people, and to what extent you want to endanger them by pursuing a physical activity, a physical gathering, or if you want to be in a safe online space. This is a dimension that I find extremely important.

What's also important not to forget is the need for culture, for knowledge. This is something that has always been there during the toughest times in the world. This one will be no exception. We need to learn how to navigate all the new dimensions. For example, the remote work is obviously something that's going to stay with us long after the pandemic is gone, but there should be a healthy balance between what could have been an email, what could have been a Zoom call, and what should be a real meeting. So I guess at the end of the day, we're just going to have to prioritise. Because the intercultural exchange should and will continue. It's just that we're going to be more responsible in terms of how we conduct it. There's a long, ongoing discussion of sustainability in the art world as a travel-dependent industry. This is a time when we should evaluate it forcefully. And maybe that's the outer force that needed to be brought into this conversation. You can't go to Dubai, Hong Kong, São Paolo to see three shows. You should choose one destination and explore the region and think about not only your own health, but also the carbon footprint and environmental aspects of your travel. This isn't necessarily bad. I think it's the time for all of us to reflect and to restructure our lives.

SB: If we take this situation we're in right now as an example, before the pandemic it would have been second nature for us to meet in person, to host the exchange face to face, but here we are today, talking through a screen. I think the fact that society is forced to consider the importance of travel today is a very serious curve in human behaviour. Society now has to take into account the potential danger of being a carrier of a life-threatening virus amongst other factors when deciding on whether or not to travel.

I do miss the physicality of meeting people in person though, and I feel quite uncomfortable having digital conversations. In the summer, I participated in a month-long artists-at-home residency, where all of the communication and exchanges were online. The digital conversations created quite high levels of anxiety. Meeting people for the first time and building relationships in the digital sphere is something completely new for me, and for many others I imagine. It was a steep learning curve!

We're learning in the moment; we're learning through doing. But, where are we looking to find help along the way? Are there specific models? How much of the programme do we move online, and how much do we cancel? What are the questions we're answering when we're making these considerations?

You moved the public programme for Riga Biennial online, but invited the public to experience the exhibition physically. Can you tell me a bit more about this process?

AB: When we had to make a decision about the postponing of the opening of the Riga Biennial from mid-May, we had three scenarios, and one of them was that we wouldn't be open to the public at all, and then we'd just film the movie. So we still build a show, and we film the movie, and that's it, if we're not allowed to let the public in. Or we were going to let two people in by appointment. But eventually, we were lucky to be able to let people in without too many restrictions, just with some cautiousness. But no-one could predict this in mid-March.

Pre-pandemic we designed a beautiful programme and invited speakers from different countries, a lot of them from US. The list of names included Sophie Lewis, Federico Campagna, Astrida Neimanis, CA Conrad and many more. When the lockdowns started, it became obvious that we couldn't bring in people from abroad. So we decided to move the programme fully online. It took us a few weeks to find the film crew, set up all the editing and transcribing and we started to release one video a week. The first one marked the original date of the opening of the biennial in mid-May. When we were finally able to open, we decided that the public program would be screened on the premises of the biennial and we had a few Q&As with local speakers in a mixed format – the international speaker was on Zoom and the local audience in the exhibition hall. That was an interesting experience. The main outcome of this situation is that we'll most likely continue to do lectures online, streaming them from the exhibition halls in 2022.

SB: I think it's important to reflect on how moving such programmes online broadens the accessibility and inclusivity for those who wouldn't have had the opportunity to experience them for mental, physical or geographical reasons. This space that has been created needs to be held and not forgotten as we navigate back into physical happenings and encounters. Accessibility and inclusivity should always be a main factor in decision making and never secondary. I felt that this year's Biennial in Riga created a balance of the online and the physical. Balance is essential.

AB: Yes. And in terms of inclusivity, we've had the subtitles burned into the film in three languages: English, Latin and Russian. This is something that's very important, not only for different nationalities, but also for non-hearing people. That's a level of inclusivity that we never achieved before.

I completely agree about the balance. It's a balance between inclusivity, social responsibility, and still having an experience, because we can't move all life online. You need to interact with the arts in a physical space. That's how it's always been and how it always will be. That's why people travel to see the original painting, because obviously they can look at it online, but that's a different experience. Humanity has so much adaptivity, and obviously we'll adapt to this situation as well, eventually. It's just that the adaptation is going to be a result of what we put into this process.

SB: I completely agree.

AB: There's no way we can plan long-term now, so the only thing we can do is to plan short-term.

SB: Yes, and be receptive or reactive or adaptive.

AB: For sure. Reactive and flexible, and we need to very thoroughly understand where our interests and principles lie, and how to find the balance between fulfilling our goals, not endangering others, while still delivering what we want to do and what we can achieve at this particular moment.

SB: Is the movie still on schedule for the same time frame? Let's say you weren't able to invite the public in physically – was the movie going to be produced more quickly or within the same timeframe?

AB: Within the same timeframe. We needed twenty filming days, so we opened for three weeks, and then we had two months for the post production. It's going to be released at the beginning of next year at one of the festivals. If no one had been able to see the exhibition, we might have released the movie earlier, online or somewhere else. But now we're going to release it next year and that's going to be a very good opportunity for everyone who couldn't join us in Riga to see the exhibition. So it's the most well-documented show in history!

SB: Now that you've had the opportunity to invite the public into the exhibition, does this have any effect on the film? Is the same effort still going into documenting the exhibition on film? And how has the experience been?

AB: Well, we normally document everything that's going on. Would we build it into a movie? Maybe not. But we do document it with photos and videos. So we pay a lot of attention to it, because in a digital world, this is something that gives you endless opportunities. But maybe not with the effort of a full-swing feature movie.

What about you? What kind of decisions did you make in all of your different jobs and activities?

SB: I've been slowly working on several projects and nurturing a new artist-run space called aerial. aerial was planned to open to the public in spring but we quickly switched our focus inwards rather than outwards, into making the space a sanctuary for ourselves during this precarious time: slowly renovating the space, applying for funding for the programme and accessibility of the space. The development has been very slow and reflective and I really appreciate that: making solid foundations for the future rather than running before we've started to crawl. I thrive on productivity and being active, so this slow process has been quite a testing yet renewing experience.

In the beginning of 2020, I started working on a project with Festspillkollektivet, Bergen Kunsthall and Ytre Arna refugee centre, where together with the residents we were going to design and make a green social space where people would spend time growing produce and cooking together. Unfortunately, the project was postponed. In the summer, we found out that the refugee centre will close in December 2020, which came as sad news. I'm now at a stage of not knowing exactly what to do regarding the fee, as I've spent a lot of time researching and developing the project, but we haven't actualised anything.

AB: It's the responsibility of the institutions. When we were asking our artists to make the social-media contributions for us, we had a small fee, because it's the time you put in, it's your work and this is your source of income. I think every institution will have to find a balance between realising the project and remembering why your institution exists. It exists because of the artists.

SB: Exactly, thank you for reminding me of that. That's important.

AB: I'm encouraging you big time to ask for your fee. These are very uncertain times when we all just have to be human. And we need to think about people who depend on us, people whom we can help. There's no way we're getting through this without thinking of each other. There have been a lot of good examples lately during the pandemic, but also lots of bad examples. So this is something that needs to be a normal practice without the pandemic. If you want artists to do something, there will be a fee involved. You don't ask for people to give you food for free, or to give you a haircut for free. So you pay your sub-contractors and you pay for the services. And it should be a rule for every institution. Obviously, many labours of love happen in the arts, where people just want to produce something together and they don't have a budget, and they agree that they're going to work pro bono. But that should be an exception. If you're an institution with a budget, there's always something you could do, whatever the budget is. It doesn't have to be enormous. It just depends on how you look at it and how you perceive the workforce and how you perceive the artists. Every institution needs to base their activities on respect. So if you have a budget for six projects and none of them has an artist fee, make five projects and the budget of the sixth goes to the artist, because you should have calculated it this way from the very beginning.

SB: These are important morals to have as a grounding.

AB: Yes, it's just the way you do things in 2020.

SB: For today's conversation we decided that we'd each share advice with one another. In preparation, I asked Form Class, a group of artists, thinkers, curators, designers and cultural managers, what advice or experience are you holding on to right now, when working within the pandemic?The discussion with Form Classwas focused around the importance of reflecting and how we should slow down whilst reflecting and learn from the changes, the adaptations we've made. We should be making

thorough reflections on the recent past for the present. When we're moving slowly forward, we need to do so with care and sensitivity.

AB: Yes, that's for sure. And you're reflecting on something that's in one way an achievement, and it's a breakthrough, because you've managed to make something happen, despite all the circumstances. But all of your usual ways of measuring success are no longer there, starting from, for example the number of visitors. We had 55,000 in 2018 within five months, and we had 21,000 within three weeks. But do these numbers reflect the fact that we're now better known, or that our education programme was so good in the inter-biennial period that it made people come? Probably not entirely, because everyone was in the city, and everyone was bored. There wasn't much happening, so people came. It's not because it's a bad show or a good show. And the current circumstances give a completely different dimension to your reflections. You can't reflect the way you used to reflect. We're all talking about the 'new normal' because we don't know what's going to happen in 2022. That means that you're also reflecting on the future, wondering whether you'll be able to do what you started doing before the pandemic. Will the international show be something that people will travel to? Will you be able to do research and invite artists and everything else? It's a very different kind of reflection this year.

We're now in the middle of finishing the analysis and the survey of the visitors, of the artists etc. I think these results are going to be really interesting because on one side, you just feel like you're fighting the circumstances. On the other side, you wonder, will I still be able to do that in 2022? Not to mention that this year, everything was changing three times a day.

In terms of advice, and if we think about the lessons that we got from the pandemic, my biggest lesson is that people still need culture. My second lesson is that you can't really plan anything in the circumstances without exhausting the team and going completely crazy yourself. In a way, the biggest lesson was just to go with the flow. I've learned to feel comfortable about missing deadlines because there's nothing I can do.

SB: I think that's a really interesting point, to be comfortable with missing a deadline, or failing to meet an expectation. This feeling of being comfortable within a state of failure is a very new one. The focus has switched from meeting deadlines and expectations to practices of care. I think that's a huge learning curve for most people.

I'm curious about what the normal model of reflection is for the Riga Biennial and how this changed due to the pandemic.

AB: The evaluation model hasn't changed too much. We had plans to get a professional agency to evaluate the show, which couldn't happen because we didn't know whether there would be an audience to ask about the biennial, or whether there would be funding for it. But the process of self-criticism and learning from our mistakes didn't change. It just became even more important to do that, because you're now writing your future history. If you don't reflect on what happened this year and you don't document it, you might make the same mistakes again.

I think we all agree that the world has changed and when we all finally go back to normal, it's going to be a different normal. It's crucially important now to reflect on everything as much as you can and to document it because it's going to be the basis of really interesting research for the future. For example, most likely, we're going to do the public program online all the time, with the physical presence in Riga as well, but also broadcasting the videos online. Because this way you create a really good repository of knowledge, and you can reach a wider audience. That's lesson number one, and there will be lots of other lessons. For example, if one artist is coming from Latin America to Europe, rather than flying from Argentina to Riga for a week, it should be planned that they visit other European destinations over several weeks. So cooperation and co-production between different institutions is also becoming very important.

What I also find interesting in terms of giving advice, or maybe seeking advice, is the discussion of how people coped with this situation mentally. Not only COVID itself impacts on mental health, but the

mental health implications after the lockdowns is worth discussing. Mental health now needs to be really well taken care of. If I were in the government, I'd include mental care in the insurance policies, because the majority of our problems now come from here, not even just this year, but over the last twenty, thirty, forty years. Of course, this year was a drastic change to a lot of people, and they need help. They might not even understand that they need help, but they do need it.

This second wave, the autumn/winter one, is for me much more exhausting and uncomfortable. Obviously, that might have to do with the region – as you know, in our region, it's dark at 3:00. But how do we find something to hold on to? You don't see people, you don't go to work, you don't see exhibitions. You don't do anything that you used to do, and where do we find the resources to cope in these circumstances? Do you have any ideas on that?

SB: I think the difference between the first and the following lockdown is the element of hope. In the first lockdown, we went into the complete unknown, thinking it was temporary. Now, after multiple lockdowns with varying strengths of restrictions, we're living in a new time, a time that's precarious.

Days are short here in Bergen too and it's important to stay active in our minds and bodies. On the south side of the peninsula that protrudes out from Bergen city centre, there's an outdoor swimming pool, with a sauna and steps down into the sea. The swimming pool, the cold water swims, have played a large part in my own personal wellbeing during these precarious times.

AB: Flexibility and adjusting your expectations is important. I was planning to spend these weeks somewhere in Southeast Asia, because this is what I normally do after we've finished the biennial. I go for a long vacation, somewhere really far away. Now I can't do that. You just try to find some small things around you that give you hope. To me, it's a lot of reading, because I finally have time to read – and cooking. Everyone cooks now. It's the new black. It's so funny, all of the conversations are revolving around cooking and recipes. People who couldn't fry an egg a year ago are now baking cakes. What I'm wondering is, how long will that be enough? How long can you hold on to cooking? Instead of cooking, you maybe need to start creating something new. Like you mentioned, people are adaptable, can regroup and rethink, and start doing something new. I'm just wondering when this moment will happen, because obviously as a humanity, we've been on a sprint, not a marathon for the last ten years. I'm interested, in an anthropological sense, in whether we're going to go back to the old life. For example, as someone who visited two countries within three weeks, I have to tell you that travelling isn't worth the amount of stress that you put yourself through. Spending a flight in a mask is challenging, but you're not going to die from it, but the amount of stress you put on yourself when you sneeze and you're like, 'Okay, I'm infected and I'm visiting my family, so I might have brought the virus to them.' The whole build-up of conditions, of factors, of things to consider is becoming a bit overwhelming.

I'm starting to doubt that there's going to be a point when everyone's vaccinated and everything's back to normal. First of all, it's not going to be back to normal because of the number of people who died through the pandemic. It's horrible. Half a million people were lost to COVID. But also, how easy will it be to run a business, like a small bar, or a gallery, or to be an artist? A lot of them are getting jobs now because they don't have shows. What's the world we're living in going to be like when we come out of the final lockdown?

SB: Are you planning for future vacations now? Or would you rather go with the flow and book last minute?

AB: Vaccination is on the way. I think I'm going to do that, because it looks like that's going to be your passport to the life you had before, not to mention dealing with the fear. I know some people who went for vacations to Mexico and Indonesia this year, which I couldn't because of the movie. The deadline to finish it is the end of January. That means I'm working. Technically my office is closed until 11 January, and all of my employees are technically on vacation, but everyone's working here and there because, first of all, there's not much else to do. This whole idea of remote working has completely changed the perception of

time off. It's taken away freedom because work life, home life, free time, work time is all blurred. After we go back to normal, it's going to be a big adaptive period of putting our work life back where it belongs, and I foresee this as a big challenge – one of the biggest actually: to identify which parts of your life can be done online, and which parts need to go back to physical space. You're going to have a different perception of your life, of your schedule, of your home, and of your office. A lot of people actually feel comfortable with working from home, especially those who have families, or have a long commute to work. It's going to be interesting to observe the working culture after that.

SB: Yes, one of the potential countering factors will be that people who've benefited from remote working will have the opportunity to question the physical meeting and the necessity of it.

AB: And of live events. A lecture, for example, can be given through Zoom, but a panel, where you need to have an exchange obviously needs to happen offline. I'm looking forward to traveling again, because one of the very important parts of my job is seeing things. This is where I draw my inspiration and I take tips from here and there. If that's taken away, it's going to be really difficult to continue, not to mention the networking, because phone conversations and Zooms are great, but you can't really develop a relationship through Zoom. Not yet. Maybe in ten or fifteen years, all life will happen on Zoom, which is a horrendous idea.

If that moment comes when the world is free again, everyone's going to be pretty obsessed with physical meetings, and then we'll find a balance between online exchanges and physical presence. I don't think we're going to go back to this crazy travel, where you go to New York for twenty-four hours to give a lecture. It's going to be more thoughtful and considerate.

SB: I totally agree. We have to hold on to key ethics!

AB: If we sum up the conversation we've had, you can see some positive effects of the pandemic. You can now sit and reflect on the situation that was absolutely out of your control. You learn to live a new life, which is hopefully not a forever new life, and the main point of reflecting now is to learn lessons and make the best practices, avoiding the bad things and carrying forward the good things of lockdown.

SB: It is going to take some time, but in a few years we'll be able to look back on the effects, once we have a little distance. For now, its important to start to prepare ourselves and understand our expectations of the future. It won't be the same as it was before, so let's find the important elements from the present to take with us into the future.

AB: I think that's a beautiful closing statement.

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Anastasia Blokhina and Stacy Brafield

Anastasia Blokhina studied Journalism and Communication at St Petersburg State University and graduated with honours. She is an experienced cultural producer known for her work delivering large-scale visual arts projects across the world, within the museum, commercial and not-for-profit sectors. From 2011 to 2014 she was Director of External Communications at Erarta Museum and Galleries of Contemporary Art, the biggest contemporary art museum in Russia, with an outreach of galleries in St Petersburg, New York, London, Zurich and Hong Kong. At Erarta, she was involved in the development of the whole organisation from both the cultural and business side. From 2014 to 2016, she was Director of YAY Gallery in Baku, Azerbaijan, part of the Yarat foundation. While in this role she worked on various local and international projects and organised exhibitions in New Delhi, Rome, Moscow, Perm, Dubai, Sharjah and Paris. She worked with venues such as the Old Sorting Office and organisations including the Louise Blouin Foundation in London, UK, and the Leila Heller gallery in New York. Blokhina was also involved in Yarat's project The Union of Fire and Water at Palazzo Barbaro at the 56th Venice Biennale.

Blokhina brings her international experience in project management, external relations and working with artists to the Riga Biennial, for which she is responsible for managing and directing all operations. She lives and works in Riga.

Stacy Brafield (she/her) is an artist born in Suffolk, raised in the Lake District, and based in Bergen. She graduated with an MA in Fine Arts from Bergen Academy of Art in 2014. Within her practice, Brafield explores human relations and forms of everyday interaction in society. She is influenced by the rhythms and values of everyday life and her motivation is to reflect these back to society in a poetic way. Exploring the realities that often go unnoticed in public space, her work provides a space for the overlooked. Works respond to the environment and are formed in community projects, drawing, installation, performance, sound and text. Encouraging the audience to reflect upon society through participation, she is interested in the interactions and processes through which the individual and the whole are shaped.

Brafield co-founded the aritst-run space aerial in 2020. Alongside her artistic practice she works with communication at Bergen Kunsthall and is currently coordinating a seminar programme for UKS´ 100th birthday. She worked with the 2019 edition of Bergen Assembly, co-initiating the education and mediation programme. Since 2018, she has been working with the nomination committee for UKS and with the board for Hordaland Kunstsenter since 2019.