

MODES OF DISPLAY

A conversation between Ruby Paloma and Ina Hagen.

Upon leaving her position as director of the gallery Peder Lund in 2017, Ruby Paloma was eager to explore ways to represent artists distinct from the gallery model. The starting point for this work was collaboration: with artists, artist-run galleries, and initiatives in other art sectors. Her aim was to exchange expertise and experience by pooling resources. Her first collaboration was to handle artwork sales for the artist Jon Benjamin Tallenås, and she has since begun working with several Oslo-based artists. Her exhibition programme Tokonoma—which will inhabit varied spaces, including the artist-run photography gallery MELK—launches in June 2018 with Martin White. A partnership with the founder and director of Theatre F, Pernille Lindstad, has resulted in the initiative Loftet, an interdisciplinary stage in Oslo where artists working across disciplines are invited to present their work.

Ina Hagen co-founded Louise Dany with Daisuke Kosugi in 2016. It is a non-profit initiative, run from their home and studio in Oslo, through which they experiment with ways to encounter art and collectively develop artistic practices. They have established collaborations with the Institute for New Connotative Action (INCA) and the artist-run platform FRANK and have hosted a “HOHOL Sleepover” residency with The Office for Culture and Design, Manila. Another project was Nine Herbs Charm, a ten-week residency with artists Hannah Mjøltnes and Miriam Hansen. The endeavor was developed so the artists could slowly gather experiences pertaining to their materials: the nine plants mentioned in an ancient poem. Louise Dany rented out a room through Airbnb so visitors could take part in the explorations, shifting the focus away from exhibition viewing and toward longer encounters between the work, the artists, and the audience that could unfold over time.

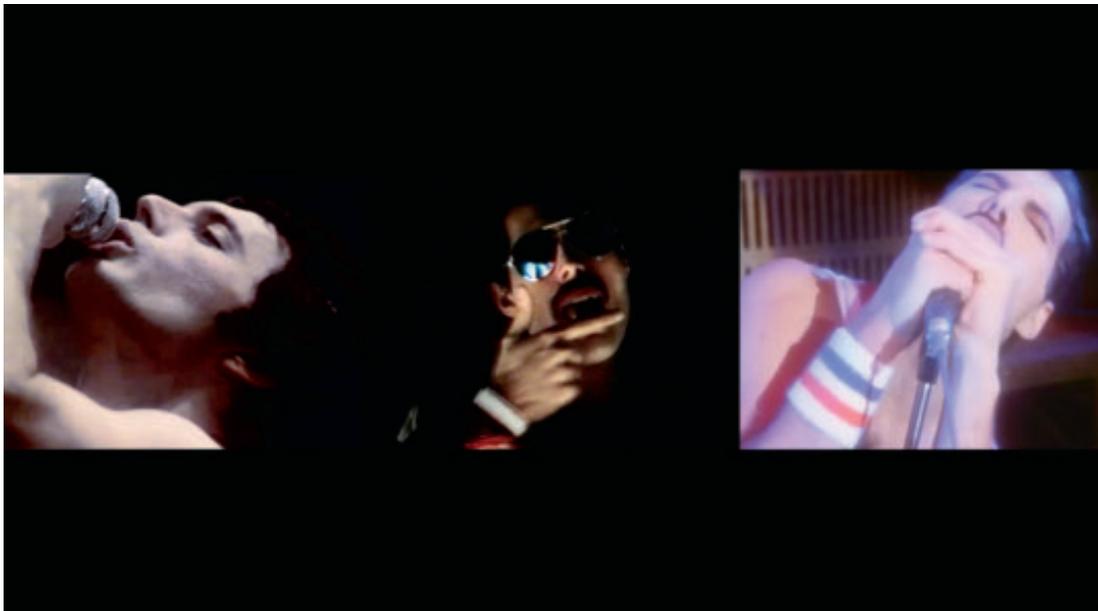
Ruby Paloma: In 2016, you and Daisuke started Louise Dany (LD) in your Oslo home. Did you want to create an alternative to the exhibition spaces existing at the time? How did the idea of being a site for alternative exhibition practices shape the direction of LD?

Ina Hagen: LD came out of an urge to nourish and

share the kind of artistic practices I was interested in but that didn't seem to fit with the steady turn-over of exhibitions in the art spaces in Oslo. In a city that is fairly small, one can get the feeling that a homogeneous set of interests and measures of success predominate. To be an “alternative” could be a helpful way of speaking about the urge to insert some raw material into the overall ecology of a scene. Yet it raises the question of what and why one is an alternative to, and to what extent one is ready to commit to the stance. For me, this applies to content production, but also on a structural level: the way one sets an institutional structure in motion is just as important to me as why one does so. Exhibition practices are inevitably intertwined with art-making, and new practices will always necessitate new sites for exhibiting. I truly believe that artists drive this development.

We were lucky to find an apartment in the city that also has a street-level storefront space, providing us a venue that can be both public and private at the same time. Hosting was important to me at the outset; our name, Louise Dany, comes from the housemaid and life companion of architect Eileen Gray and is a nod to the emotional labour and other invisible work that goes into keeping a home. LD soon grew into a place for the development of artistic work in a broad sense, but also for experimenting with the moment and shape of exhibiting work. LD is a place for artists to take a chance on something that is not refined, is unsure or in process.

RP I'm interested in what you say about spotting a homogeneous scene, or a homogeneous measure of success. There is a relatively large gap in Oslo between the artist-run scene and the commercial scene. It interests me that many artists in Norway, across generations, were not represented by commercial galleries. It made me think: how might I represent artists who had no commercial exhibition opportunities but were regularly shown by artist-run initiatives? Is there a way of making both these exhibition practices less homogeneous? Can we somehow fuse the non-commercial and commercial spheres without antagonizing those operating in either arena? My idea was to find a collaborative model that functions within the commercial sphere but that is based on the intellectual resources and ideals of the non-commercial sphere, in particular to work within frameworks set by artists. I want to find a way of bringing audiences that potentially want to buy art from the *artists*, rather than from a space that has a particular reputation or “brand.”



Martin White, *Dust Biter*, 2015. Courtesy of Ruby Paloma.



Images from *Nine Herbs Charm* (Hannah Mjøltnes, Saewon Oh, Eric Kim and nine herbs). Courtesy of the artists and Louise Dany, Oslo.

IH What would that mean, though? How can one create a market for artists in which the immaterial values of, among others, mythology, reputation, and coherence inform value?

RP Every commercial actor in this city struggles to find new audiences, particularly an audience that is willing to buy art. Norway lacks a tradition of fostering art collectors, yet a huge part of the population is in a financial position to buy art, especially by young artists. I wanted to find a way to attract this audience, particularly a young one not already part of the art scene, and to introduce them to what artists do. This work is based on the broader content and practice of the artist rather than on detached objects in exhibitions.

IH I'm interested to hear that to build a market segment you perceive to be underdeveloped in Norway, you want to draw the audience's eyes toward the broader scope of an artist's production. This is something we have in common. I want LD to function as a site for touching base, both with other professionals in the field and with accidental or invited audiences. This led us to understand that we needed to remain semi-private. For instance: in group critiques, artists share unfinished work with invited guests that we have selected based on their potential contribution to the development of that artist's work. This is never public. Along with sharing our home and our table with artists and organizing workshops, reading groups, and lectures, this has been an important strand of our work.

RP My original intention was not to make exhibitions, in some small part due to feeling somewhat uncomfortable calling myself a curator. I wanted to work one-to-one with the artists I represent and one-to-one with audiences. But I realized that it is essential to also have a space for the artists to work in and create showcases—something more than a small showroom or their own studios.

IH I'm very interested in how artists use their work as opportunities for new collaborations and intersections with audiences. An interesting exercise is to think about an alternative to the term *curator*, like the term Marcel Duchamp used for himself: *generator arbitrator*. I like the transparency of that term. I'm interested in drawing attention away from exhibition openings or flippant critiques and toward focused conversation that everyone who is present can take part in. Using my home as the ground for explorations imposes a different social situation upon the people present. It proposes the sphere of life as the

frame for the work and levels our standing in relation to each other. "You're all invited to my houseparty," in a way, but also: "life is inseparable from (art)work."

RP Your choice to work from your home says a lot about the financial situation many find themselves in. I never wanted to have a space of my own, so I have begun collaborations involving a site or room that already exists: Theatre F's loft space, which functions as an interdisciplinary, non-commercial stage, or MELK's gallery. With MELK, I exchange sales skills as an independent sales agent with free gallery space to show Tokonoma exhibitions a few months of the year. I set up similar barter agreements with other galleries or initiatives that already have suitable exhibition space. Tokonoma is an exhibition program only and is attached to but distinct from my larger efforts as a dealer and agent. In this way, I can work with and exhibit artists, in Norway or elsewhere, whether or not I represent them. The initiative has a pop-up mentality, though it is rooted in pooling resources and mutually beneficial intellectual and practical exchanges. At the moment, these collaborations are with artist-run initiatives that maintain their spaces through funding. My contribution is to bring in a commercial practice, or the potential of added income, by setting up some commercial structures within their non-commercial frameworks. I wanted to find a way of being able to survive while supporting young artists when having a traditional space seemed impossible. In addition, I find it difficult to be convinced by places that operate with the goal of becoming an institution in the broad sense—a name brand. I'm not sure I see that as an ideal context in which art and life can co-exist in an honest way.

IH I have tried to explore similar collaboration models—not necessarily between commercial and non-profit actors, but between different artistic agencies and artist-run initiatives. I believe we need to redefine our relationships to each other constantly. At this moment, we need to be collaborating. My question then, is how? Interrogating how and why we collaborate will help us build new institutional structures. We need them, because some of the art institutions we are living with have clearly been failing us on a human level.

RP Do you see the future of LD as an institution? What does that look like?

IH First, we have to look into what we mean when talking about "becoming an institution." James McAnally begins his text *Prefigurative Institutions*, which he wrote and performed for us in 2017, by

quoting Amiri Baraka's wonderful album *It's Nation Time*: "This recording is an institution." He does that to break with the assumptions about what an institution is and what defines it. Re-reading James's text for this conversation, I was reminded that all the shared structures we build are, in a way, institutions. Rather than believing that we are an alternative to them, our work is to keep in mind the future we want to see. Exhibition-making and other ways of making artists' work public lead toward that future. And consequently, the forms we adopt matter. The survey *Panic! Social Class, Taste, and Inequalities in the Creative Industries*, published by Create London and Arts Emergency, and the #metoo-campaign, show how extremely culturally impoverished and abusive the most powerful art-world institutions are.

Like McAnally, I like asking myself what other forms of instituting an institution are possible. I see LD staying as close as possible to art making, determining its shape from whatever project we are working on or collaboration we are involved in and observing how life changes around us. To use a metaphor: to be software, not hardware.

RP I don't think I've reached a point yet where I am able to think of my project as a potential institution. This is perhaps because I like the flexibility of being "software." And I don't necessarily have a wish for traditional forms of stability, not least to keep things interesting for myself—but also to stay in touch with the kind of flexibility that is required in contemporary society. Why is consistency a sign of professionalism and quality? Of course, for the artists that I represent, I'm required to retain some level of consistency. But I'm exploring what happens when you break with that kind of consistency. Is it really the best long-term solution to be consistent?

IH I think that consistency in service of maintaining a strategic position or reputation makes us vulnerable and blind to structural problems. I am thinking, for instance, of the rhythm with which exhibitions are produced or the need to continually grow (in size or audience numbers). When we are constantly pressured to produce more to stay relevant, aren't we just compromising everyone involved? How do we slow down this development? For me, adaptability is more valuable than consistency; it makes it possible for me to work in my own rhythm.

RP Are we asking too much of the audience by refusing to be consistent, though? We're both hesitant to be very visible online and yearn for physical encounters with our audiences. I don't want to call

either of our approaches a form of resistance, but I recognize that this might be how they are perceived. I'm wondering whether avoiding branding is even possible in a post-internet society.

IH It's interesting to think whether branding, in a traditional sense, has been replaced with self-marketing that is unavoidable. It can feel like that sometimes, because that gap between practicing and presenting (oneself) seems shorter all the time. I think that moment in between needs to be prolonged as much as possible. That is maybe why aiming for consistent recognition doesn't feel relevant for us, because that pause is not a fixed length. Maybe the kind of flux we are exploring can seem like a lot to ask, in that audiences can't easily establish a predictable pattern in their relationships to you. You have to do a whole lot more if you are not using social media to reach your audience, and they have to do a whole lot more to find you. But when it comes down to the moment of interaction with artwork, then it seems quite simple: I want to stick to physical connections that allow for a slow unfolding of thought, experience, feeling, and knowledge. I actually believe we could be asking more.

Ruby Paloma (1984) is an Oslo-based independent artist agent and dealer. Paloma is also launching the exhibition program Paloma + Stephensen in 2018 with London-based curator and publisher Trine Stephensen.

Ina Hagen (1989) is an Oslo-based artist and writer. She is a regular contributor to Kunstskritikk and a deputy chair of the board of Young Artists Society (UKS)—a national union for young artists and an exhibition venue for contemporary art.



Resident Evil Seminar by Sondra Perry. Curated by Alejandra Salinas and Aeron Bergman for Louise Dany, Oslo. Image courtesy of the artist and Louise Dany, Oslo.