

Room of One's Own

Ashik Zaman & Edith Ekström

If Malmö has often appeared as an opposite of Stockholm, this is something that is evidently reflected too in the city's local art scene. A few things have rung very clear over time. One is how artists, in the absence of a commercial gallery realm, have significantly taken to self-organising by way of artist-run spaces and studio collectives with their own exhibition practices.

The other, consequently is, how collective and inclusive the mindset there is.

Among the many artist-run spaces in Malmö, ALTA is a favourite, because the group of artists running it, themselves are all brilliant and the exhibition programme they present is unfailingly fun and provides timely and fresh emerging art. They even produce their own zine and the space is quite distinctive. Located in what from the front side appears to be a nondescript industrial area (overlooks a nondescript residential area from the back), the exhibiting space is a generous passage space outside the actual entrance door to the artists' studios. If Malmö is a 'melting pot', the space is a direct mirror reflection of it, as the bustling building houses large community spaces that are rented for epic weddings parties and the likes. That reality naturally entails surprise visitors at their exhibitions from temporary neighbours on the premises. That also means, as Matti Sumari and Julia Selin tell me, that huge boiling pots will literally actually pass through the exhibitions (a passage space after all) and that surprise interventions along those lines need to be taken into account both by them and invited artists. "One of the great things about being here is the food. So much food is made for the parties thrown here that we often get to have the leftovers. At this point you know what your favourite Afghani dish is", says Julia Selin. She mentions how their exhibitions based on the time frame of one weekend have been linked to the experience of going to concerts. You're either there or not. Blink and you might miss it.

"Our running conditions are such that we set them ourselves according to what works with our own schedules and energy as artists. Since we are self-funded there are no external demands on the availability or the density of a programme", Matti Sumari says, elaborating on the freedom inherent in ALTA. They both agree that there is indeed a gap in Malmö between high-brow art institutions and the artist-run circuit that ALTA

is a part of. "I think the reason why this artist-run scene has had incentives to expand and has become so dynamic is partially to fill a void from commercial galleries that could have been of great benefit to artists here", suggests Julia Selin. "If you don't do it yourself, who can you rely on to invite you?", continues Matti Sumari. Malmö might lack certain bricks of an art puzzle but from the point of view of an artist-run gallery this also means the distance locally to people like curators, directors and institutional leaders is smaller. "I don't think you can expect in Stockholm for a museum director just to show up at a pop-up one-night-only exhibition venue, but that can happen here", considers Julia Selin. "Ultimately, the spotlight here on initiatives like ours that make things happen without proper means becomes a lot greater", believes Matti Sumari. I mention that an emphasis on the individual is less predominant in my social conversation here in Malmö and come to think of how when Signal was awarded the prestigious annual Dynamo Award by Konstnärsnämnden, the institution actually solidarically shared and distributed the award money with other venues in city, including ALTA.

"There's certainly a lot of desire here to work from a position of solidarity, a lot of speeches and apologies but then sometimes: nothing. I don't need apologies. I'll be one to ask: 'But what will you really do?'" notes C. Grace Chang, who is the curator of Skånes konstförening, as we meet over coffee inside Folkets park. Previously based on an artist-run structure, Skånes konstförening essentially bears the standing in Malmö of a great art institution. Skånes konstförening notably since 2017, annually awards an emerging artist based in Skåne with the Sven and Ellida Hjorts Exhibition Grant, which includes a grand solo exhibition. Most recently the recipient was Cia Kanthi and past recipients before

her have included Hanni Kamaly and Ikram Abdulkadir. "Solidarity is a verb. It's a noun, yes, but it is a verb", continues the curator, who says discussions at Skånes konstförening have largely been about how to connect policy and action so that they align. As a result, with her at the helm, the direction of Skånes konstförening has increasingly steered towards creating safe spaces for marginalised communities to meet, converse and create together. "I don't want to say for people who fall between the cracks because that expression implies that it is an objective process and an objective reality which is not the case. But instead I'll say for people but who normally don't get a fair share." She also suggests that safeguarding the future by way of including others to take more active charge of the programme has been a focus. "In retrospect the programme has much been about asking others what they think the future should look like and then asking them to come in and do something with us accordingly."

C. Grace Chang is the first to say that her own background in art is not your most typical path of a BFA/MFA programme and entirely credits her predecessor curator Tawanda Appiah for being where she is as a curator at Skåne konstförening today. "It all came down to Tawanda [and his co-curator Simona Dumitriu] who curated my own past exhibition at Skåne konstförening and gave me the time of the day when literally no one else would. None of this would have been possible without him", she says. I note that it is generous of her to acknowledge this and bring up as a joke sometimes doing interviews without the interviewee once mentioning a single other name throughout the whole process. Our conversation is very enlightening and comes with several epiphanies. As we speak I'm struck by how the only way to really go for an institution is to be able to recognise your own limitations and bridge them by reaching out to others who know or can, when you don't or can't. "Honesty and play are two such crucial parts of working", says C. Grace Chang. Indeed, it really must be fun as well, I tell her in agreement. "Getting to play is such a privilege at the end of the day", she concludes.



C. Grace Chang



Wherever the Sunbeam Falls, Skånes konstförening, photo: Lena Bergendahl



Sleepy Servant, exhibition view at ALTA Art Space, photo: Olof Nimar

Conversations with Arkana

Something that is found in Malmö's art scene is the presence of separatist art venues, offering safe spaces for minority communities that are not always given opportunities for their artistic explorations. We've spoken to Arkana and Galleri Slätten, both spaces for women, non-binary and transgender artists, about the need for these kinds of platforms and what it's like for them to operate in Malmö.

Edith: Firstly, tell us about Arkana. What were your goals first starting it?

Arkana: Arkana started as, and is, a non-profit cultural organisation for women, non-binary and transgender artists. Our goal is to create a venue for us and at the same time use the space as a gallery. We choose to work with group exhibitions instead of solo exhibitions, focusing on visual arts, textile arts and crafts. You may recognise our space by the special orange colour we've painted our walls with, a shade that has a calming and healing yet curious and creative vibe to it.

E: What's it been like to run an initiative like Arkana in Malmö? What have been the ups and downs?

A: It's all ups! Malmö is the best place to start something like this and we've been very well-received. Our venue used to be the gallery Makeriet that was well known so it's been easy for people to find us. One down was COVID-19 that made it harder for us to create live events and for people to meet and hang out at our space, where we also want to do other events than the exhibitions. We are now eagerly looking forward to everyone getting vaccinated!

E: What room would you like Arkana to fill in Malmö's art scene?

A: We want to be a space for women, non-binary and transgender artists to meet, collaborate and grow together. It's important for us that the space is a safe space to be in, but at the same time open for the general public to visit. We want Arkana to be a space where we support each other, the artists and our visitors. You don't have to be an established artist to exhibit at our space; many of the participating artists are first time exhibitors.

E: Since Arkana is a separatist gallery; could you elaborate on the need of exhibiting venues such as yours?

A: We started Arkana because we really felt that a space like ours was needed. We are a foundation for

artists who aren't yet established and artists that are too shy or don't feel comfortable with having a solo exhibition. At the same time, we exhibit artists who are more established as well. Working like this we create bridges between them and make a new form of collaborating possible. Spaces like ours are very much needed because of the patriarchy we are live in, obviously. We want to support the ones that aren't represented enough in our society today.

We have been influenced by spaces like [Galleri Slätten](#) and [Whose Museum](#), and we are happy to see that other queer and/or separatist spaces are opening, for example the bookstore [Page 28](#). All of these places are important, and we all work in different ways but with the same ideology. Malmö is a town with many queer artists, and it is blooming!

E: You mentioned having had a great reception by the public. It sounds like things are working out well for you!

A: We have been very well met! We are very thankful that our first two years have been going well. Many artists are applying, and we have had a lot of visitors despite the COVID-19 situation. The artists applying are from 18-60 right now and that is about the ages of our visitors as well. We are happy that we have such diverse crowd.

E: How do you experience the collaborate spirit between different spaces and participants in Malmö's art scene?

A: It is amazing! In Malmö people are willing to collaborate more than in other cities. We have started dialogues with several spaces.

E: What are your plans, post COVID-19?

A: We want to collaborate more! We are now creating a map of queer spaces in Malmö. Through this map we have made many new contacts and are planning to collaborate soon. We will also have more readings, smaller concerts and DJs in our space. We want people to meet again!

& Galleri Slätten

E: What's the story behind Galleri Slätten?

Who is found at the helm?

Slätten: Slätten was started in 2015 by **Elin Aldén** and **Ylva-Li Ahlström**. A few years earlier, they had met at a photography school and both liked to work departing from separatism. From that grew a dream of someday starting a separatist gallery for women, transgender and non-binary artists in Malmö. When Ylva-Li's grandmother told them about a vacant basement space on Möllevången, in the same house that Ylva-Li had grown up in, everything fell into place. Together, they began a major renovation of the space, which had been used by a battery company for 40 years. Slätten became a room for artists to exhibit in, but also a studio collective where many artistic expressions have seen room over the years. Today there are ten active artists in the studio collective and since 2018 the work with the gallery has been a collective process in different constellations. Over the years, Elin Aldén, Maria Flodmark, Stina Lundkvist, Andrea Santivanez, Josefina Vega Ezpeleta, Evelina Zachrison Persson, Christina Tsiobanelis, Hanna Reidmar, Lisa Ewald and Ylva-Li Ahlström have all been part of Galleri Slätten.

E: How would you describe the art scene in Malmö?

S: Malmö has a very rich art life! Above all, the independent art and culture scene is very strong and alive here. It may sound cliché or romanticised, but Malmö has a rather special and unpretentious atmosphere, perhaps unique in Sweden. There are new initiatives and projects constantly happening, and we feel that people are eager to cooperate! Today there are many galleries and studio collectives that work norm-critically, like Arkana and Whose Museum. It feels like this way of working is more common today which is super fun.

E: What's it been like to run Galleri Slätten for the past six years?

S: We have received incredibly nice and positive response from both participating artists and visitors over the years, which confirms the need we felt for a separatist space. This also gives energy and a drive to continue. But sometimes it is tiring to work non-profit, and it is not always easy to navigate through different people's schedules to keep it afloat. A lot happens in six years and based on who is involved in the gallery we decide what we want to do and how to do it. It's an ongoing open dialogue.

E: You've explained using separatism as a tool for inclusion in the art scene, could you elaborate?

S: We experience that the art scene in general is still quite unreachable. By adopting an expressed separatism, we hope that people who might not otherwise feel as confident and at home in art contexts could be able to feel that there is a slightly safer room for them to explore their own or others' artistic expressions.

Maybe, and hopefully, the step to continue working after that will not be as big. This has become even more apparent during our four spring salons (our annual group exhibitions) where we have received between 100-200 applications per year with a large range of both established and unestablished artists. For some artists it has been the first time their work has been exhibited.

E: You talk as well about wanting to create a space where the focus is to cooperate instead of competing.

S: Art scenes can be individualistic. There is still some sort of idealized shimmer over the lone artist, a kind of idea that the individual and the "own" expression is still the finest, most desirable. But also, there is a focus on the artist as a person. It stresses the artistry as some kind of personal brand, which also creates competition and can become quite uninteresting. We work collectively in Slätten and are not interested in working on the basis of such elitist norms. Kindness is more important than coolness for us and we want it to be welcoming and comfortable for artists and visitors to be here. Having a dialogue about the art with both artists and visitors is a way to be inclusive. It is about flattening hierarchies and shifting focus from the individual to their work and to create conditions, be it economic or social, for people to have the opportunity to work based on desire instead of profit.

E: Lastly, what are your future plans for Slätten?

S: Right now we have an ongoing discussion about what the future of Slätten can look like. We are in a process of change but haven't put into words what, when or how yet. These six years have been wonderful! But also, a bit exhausting. So, it's also about finding ways to work as a non-profit gallery without the workload becoming too heavy. We talk a lot about how Slätten should be accessible to more people and we want to try new ways of using the space. This autumn the studio collective will have a small collaboration with Skånes konstförening (who do very exciting things!) during **Bästa Biennalen**. And hopefully we will also be able to do some of the events that we had planned but had to postpone due to the pandemic.

Roxy Farhat, Skånes
konstförening, photo: Lena
Bergendahl



Emilia Bergmark, Galleri
Slätten, photo: Elin Aldén

Sleepy Servant, Exhi-
bition view at ALTA Art
Space, photo: Olof Nimar



Arkana, courtesy: Arkana