

Conversation with
HANNE MUGAAS,
Kunsthall Stavanger

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania

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Hanne Mugaas is the
Director and Curator of
Kunsthall Stavanger, Norway.

With Alex Klein, Laurel
McLaughlin, and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN:

What is your role at Kunsthall
Stavanger and how long have
you been at the institution?

HANNE MUGAAS:

I'm the Director and the Chief Curator. This is my sixth year in this position.

AK:

Where were you before the
Kunsthall?

HM:

I was born and raised in Stavanger, and went on to study in Oslo, Stockholm and London, before moving to New York in 2006. I interned with the curator Barbara London at MoMA for a year, and worked as her assistant for another year, in what was then called the Media Department. I then worked on a project at the Guggenheim Museum, before working as a curator at Salon 94. I also started a project space called Art Since the Summer of 69 together with Fabienne Stephan and Paul-Aymar Mourgue d'Algue, which we ran from 2008 to 2012. I've also curated exhibitions as an independent curator since 2004.

AK:

Speaking as someone who is also
working in the city where I grew
up, what drove you to relocate
back to Stavanger?

HM:

I was definitely very interested in the rare opportunity of getting to be in charge of developing and opening a new kunsthall. It didn't matter where it was, and that Stavanger is a small town compared to New York. I was rather intrigued by the different context. The Kunsthall's building from 1925 is really beautiful and had a lot of potential. I also asked to live in-between Stavanger and New York, which the board allowed. This worked really well until I had my daughter in 2016; now we're mainly based in Stavanger.

AK:

When was the Kunsthall Stavanger founded?

HM:

Kunsthall Stavanger was founded in 2013, but is run by Stavanger Kunstforening, which was founded in 1865. The Kunstforening built and opened our building in 1925. It was the first art institution in Stavanger, and it housed Stavanger's first public art collection. The Kunstforening had an extensive and strong program until the 1980s, when it went through a period of ten different directors in ten years. In 2012, the board and the General Assembly made decided to "re-brand" the Kunstforening, changing the name to Kunsthall Stavanger, hiring me as the new director, and professionalizing the programming and the operations.

AK:

Interesting. So, it was almost like a new institution when you arrived, because it was kind of re-branding and re-orienting itself.

HM:

I did the re-branding and re-orientation after I arrived, and I had the task of establishing the Kunsthall on the local, national and international art scenes. The building is the same, but everything else is new. There is one staff member who has been here for 22 years and everyone else are new hires. The Kunstforening had been showing touring exhibitions and exhibitions by local and Norwegian artists, but there was no international presence.

AK:

What is the institutional landscape that you found yourself in? What is the local arts ecology and how does the

Kunsthall Stavanger fit into or differ from it?

HM:

Stavanger, with a population of only 134,000, has an art museum, an art center, several artist-run spaces and a few commercial galleries. So, there is a very rich scene for such a small town. Young artists are starting to move here, which is a very good thing.

AK:

What is the distance between Stavanger and Oslo?

HM:

40 minutes by plane, 8 hours by train.

AK:

Is there a lot of back-and-forth with people coming from Oslo for openings and things?

HM:

I think we might actually have more visitors from abroad, but yes, we do get visitors from Oslo and Bergen.

LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN:

Do you have more exchange with Bergen than Oslo?

HM:

I have more contact with Bergen, for instance with Bergen Kunsthall, which we feel a strong kinship with.

AK:

Sometimes working in a smaller city in a smaller city provides other kinds of opportunities. Working in Philadelphia, we often feel like we can do shows that we couldn't do in New York.

HM:

Yes, definitely, and that is also one of the reasons I took the job. It's a different context, and you can—in fact, you have to—do things differently.

You have to think about your programming in a whole new way, and also how to balance the local and the international contexts, because you need to be part of both. This creates new, interesting situations and a different focus. I have truly enjoyed the experience. Not only was there an opportunity to build a new institution, there was also the possibility to contribute to a smaller and local art scene. In this context, our educational program has been really important, and it has been one of our main focus areas—to offer high quality art programming for kids and youths. Our Kids' Art Club and the project Mobilizing Citizenship, where youths collaborate with artists and are introduced to artistic strategies and methods, have been really successful.

AK:

To backtrack to when you returned to Stavanger, did you craft a new mission statement? How did you dive in and re-orient the institution? What were some of your first steps?

HM:

There were several processes: One process was the rebranding and the new strategy for the institution, the second was implementing the new artistic program, and the third was the renovation of the building, which was falling apart. We're only just now starting to do the heavy loads with the building. It has definitely been the right approach to work on the content first, and the building second.

At first, I focused on communicating and distributing the new kunsthall, to our local, national and international audiences and followers. First and foremost, with a new website. We opened the Kunsthall with the launch of the website, which included several online projects, in June 2013. The Kunsthall opened in November 2013. I wanted to bridge the local with the international, so my first exhibition was with Lina Viste Grønli, who is from Stavanger, has an international career and lives in Cambridge, MA. It has become a continuous focus, to bring back artists from Stavanger who are exhibiting internationally, such as Torbjørn Rødland and Yngve Holen.

Starting a new institution is very much about nuts and bolts, and being extremely detail-oriented. Since the institution has a new name, you have to get a new sign, and you need to change your letterhead. We needed to install heating in the building, as there was none. The former directors had never thrown anything out—we had 20 containers of garbage to throw out. The galleries had not been upgraded in decades, and had to be renovated. There were no offices. From 2013 to 2015, it was only one staff member and myself working at the Kunsthall. We were lucky to get an amazing group of

volunteers and service sponsors onboard to work on the heavy loads.

AK:

It's an interesting point that you raise because I think that it's different to found a new institution from scratch than to grow a new institution out of an older institution. I'm actually curious to hear a little bit more about that and maybe some of the growing pains. Perhaps we can talk a little about the Barbara Hepworth sculpture, just to touch on how that transition happened and enabled you to reorient the institution into its next phase?

HM:

Yes, it is definitely different from starting a new institution and I would say that it is more challenging. In Stavanger, people had strong preconceptions about the institution from when it was a kunstforening. Since we have an old building where there was very little activity over two decades, it has been challenging to turn that around, to bring people back and convince them that this is something new. This includes the City of Stavanger, which has not increased their support since the 1990's. We received and continue to get most of our support from Arts Council Norway. They have been our most important supporter – we would not have succeeded without them, and I'm so appreciative that they've invested in us from the early beginning.

The Kunstforening is a members' organization, and the members own the organization. With the ambitions for a kunsthall, the board knew that additional funds were needed, so in 2014, in order to continue operations, the board and the General Assembly decided to sell their only asset in addition to the building—a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth, which had been in the garden since the 1960s. Without the sale, the Kunsthall would have had to close its doors.

The sale created a lot of controversy in Stavanger, which was very much reinforced by the local newspaper. And of course, I understand. We did not want to sell the sculpture either. But the options were to keep the sculpture and close the kunsthall – or selling the sculpture to give room for new art and artists.

AK:

Has that tension subsided? Do people realize the great work that you're doing there?

HM:

Yes, it has.

AK:

You mentioned there being "owners" of the Kunsthall. Is it an independent entity, or does it have private owners?

HM:

It is a member-based organization, and the members are the owners. We hold an annual General Assembly where the members vote on decisions.

AK:

So, it's above and beyond an advisory or financial board. That's very interesting and I've never heard of this. You have a General Assembly that's made up of the members. How many people is that?

HM:

At the moment, we have around 250 members.

AK:

Do you literally have to have a town hall, where all 250 members will show up and talk about the issues relating to the Kunsthall?

HM:

Yes, but not everyone participates. The General Assembly votes over new board members, and also over mayor decisions, such as starting a kunsthall or selling a sculpture.

AK:

Are you responsible for reporting to them? At these meetings would you do an annual report presentation and say, "This is what we did this year; this is what we're thinking about; these are our statistics."

HM:

I report to the board. At the General Assembly, I do present the annual report, the accounts, statistics, and our plans for the upcoming year.

AK:

Because this project has so much to do with language, I'm really curious that if the Kunstforening runs the Kunsthall, how are those distinctions made about what the Kunstforening means versus what the Kunsthall represents? In the American context, these are words that can get conflated here and thrown around—they don't have the specificity in the United States context that they do in Europe.

HM:

The "kunstforening" is in Norway one of the oldest institutional models to exhibit art to a general audience. As mentioned, Stavanger Kunstforening was established in 1865; Stavanger Art Museum did not open until 1992. Stavanger Kunstforening was the first in the country to build its own building. We are part of the organization Norske Kunstforeninger, which represents all the kunstforenings in Norway. Several of the kunstforenings have become kunsthalls in the last five to ten years, as they are moving towards an international program. The kunstforenings did traditionally have a more local or Norwegian focus.

AK:

Was the Kunstforening exclusively contemporary art, or was the focus on the contemporary a

shift that took place with the transformation into the Kunsthall?

HM:

Stavanger Kunstforening did show contemporary art, but mostly local and Norwegian artists, at least during the last 20 years. During the 1960s and 1970s there was an international focus, probably because two of the directors were German. There were a lot of German male painters exhibiting. The Kunstforening also built up an extensive collection of paintings and sculptures, which was donated to the art museum free of charge upon its opening in 1992.

AK:

Interesting.

HM:

This was also an important shift, when the collection disappeared in 1992, and the Kunstforening was free to use the space to host rotating exhibitions. But it also alienated the audience, which was used to visiting the Kunstforening to see the collection. Some visitors still ask to see the paintings.

AK:

Right. Do you own anything anymore? Was the Hepworth the last piece of art?

HM:

That was the last piece.

AK:

You talked a little bit about the shape of your finances, and you have a couple of different boards. You have an advisory committee and you have a board that you go to with structural issues. Do they help you raise money? What is their role?

HM:

We have the General Assembly, consisting of our members. There is a board with eight members, elected at the General Assembly for two years each. We have around five board meetings per year. The board supports with different tasks when needed, such as strategy and the renovation of the building. I'm in

charge of the daily operations, fundraising and the programming. I have full freedom when it comes to the curatorial program—the board has an arm’s length relationship to this.

AK:

Are you responsible to anybody for your program? Is there anybody that could come back to you and say, “Oh, we don’t want you to do that.” Or do you really have complete freedom?

HM:

So far, I’ve had complete freedom, as long as the programs are kept within the budgets.

AK:

That’s great. You can’t buy that. In terms of building up the institution—you mentioned it was just you and one colleague who was in the beginning —how many people work at the Kunsthall now, and how have you grown the staff? Is there anybody else who curates exhibitions?

HM:

In 2015, after the sale of the Hepworth sculpture, I hired a Curatorial Assistant, and in 2016 an Exhibitions Manager. We now have four employees at 100% capacity (Director and Curator, Assistant Curator; Curatorial and Operational Manager, and Programs Manager, Kunsthall Live); one at 70% (Administrative Assistant); and one at 20% (Memberships Coordinator). We also have reception staff, technicians, educators, and assistants paid by the hour when needed, and a really great group of volunteers. I’ve curated most of the exhibitions, but we also invite in guest curators, and our new assistant curator, Kristina Ketola Bore, is curating our educational program and events, and she will start curating exhibitions from 2020.

AK:

So, there’s really been a kind of robust growth in terms of infrastructure.

HM:

We are still a very small core team when you look at how much we're doing. In 2018, we did nine exhibitions and 111 events. This year we did eight exhibitions and 120 events. Now that the kunsthall is established and we're planning for the long run, I am looking to focus our program and do less but more ambitious exhibitions and projects.

Our small team has accomplished a lot in a very short time. Our staff members are, and have always have been, really dedicated to the Kunsthall, and have given it a lot of their time and energy. I'm very lucky and thankful to be working with such engaged people!

AK:

How many exhibitions can you have at a given time, and how large is the space? What is your season like? How many shows do you do in a year, and what is your regular rhythm?

HM:

We have six exhibition spaces: Gallery 1 is 400 square meters and Galleries 2-5 are 70 square meters each. We also have a black box gallery/concert space that is 70 square meters. We usually do at least two exhibitions in the spring, two in the summer and two in the fall. We've also done one offsite project each year. We could have four exhibitions up at the same time, but this is usually not possible, as we don't have the budgets or the resources.

AK:

What is your operating budget for the year right now?

HM:

The total budget is around 6 million NOK, or about \$700,000 USD.

AK:

I imagine there must be issues of fatigue and also economy that come into play with everything that you take on.

HM:

I'm looking at the kunsthall in phases. We've just gone through Phase 1 (2013-2018), which was about starting up and establishing Kunsthall Stavanger.

We've done a lot, and the programming has been diverse: Exhibitions, public programming, an extensive educational program for children and youths, concerts, collaborations, publications, off-site projects and events. To establish something, you need to have a very active program, and we also wanted to test what programming would work in Stavanger.

We are now in Phase 2 (2019–2025), which is about securing the Kunsthall for the long term. First and foremost, to make sure that the programming stays at the level we've established. But in order to do this, we need to secure the operations, the funding, the building, and last but not least, the staff. This is my current focus. The most important part of the Kunsthall is the staff. Without a dedicated staff, the institution will fall apart.

TAUSIF NOOR:

Something that I thought was really interesting is that there seems to be a lot of attention given to children's programming.

HM:

This was one of the focus areas I wanted the Kunsthall to take on from the very beginning, to include children and youth, and to maintain an educational program of high quality. There is also long-term thinking involved; kids and youth are our future adult audience. Our kids' educational programming is very popular, and we take it as seriously as we do our exhibitions. It is important that the kids and youth who come to the Kunsthall get to meet professional artists at each event, and that they also get to exhibit their own work.

AK:

Oh fun!

HM:

At the end of each season, we do an exhibition and big party in our galleries where the kids from the Kids' Art Club and the youth from Mobilizing Citizenship get to exhibit their work.

AK:

Is there an art school in Stavanger?

HM:

Yes, there is a two-year Foundation Course.

AK:

Is there a robust artist community in Stavanger? You mentioned some artist-run spaces.

HM:

There is. The City of Stavanger has put solid funding into new studio spaces. There are additional co-working spaces for artists and creatives, and several artist-run spaces.

AK:

You mentioned in the beginning that the website was one of the first things you worked on. I noticed on your website it says that you see it as a second exhibition space in a way, to put online projects in conversation with documentation and maybe also with your publications. Can you talk a little more about that?

HM:

When we started the Kunsthall, there were online projects alongside the brick and mortar exhibitions. Since we are doing so much on-site now, we only do online projects occasionally, but we do want to do more of them. Our focus right now is on maintaining our presence on social media and keeping the documentation on our website up to date.

AK:

Maybe building off of that question, because the website is bilingual, is the institution also in English and Norwegian?

HM:

We have an international staff, so our working language is English. Our Curatorial and Operations Manager, Jessica Morris, is from New Zealand. Our former Exhibitions Coordinator Heather Jones, who just left, is from the U.S.; our Memberships Coordinator Katharina Bjelland is from Germany, and our Technician Matt Bryans is from England. We also have several international volunteers.

AK:

I'm assuming that it's been part of the mission to be in a more international space. Before you arrived, was it operating in mostly Norwegian?

HM:

Yes, all in Norwegian, and there was not much communication, texts, or contextualization in general.

AK:

Right, so I'm assuming you had to reacclimate your viewers, because that's a big difference in how interpretation works in an exhibition.

HM:

It is important that our exhibitions – and our exhibition texts and other written material – are approachable.

AK:

Do you charge admission at the Kunsthall?

HM:

We do, but not much—it's about \$5 USD. The members get free entrance to all exhibitions and most of our events. Most of our events for kids are free of charge.

AK:

Does that go towards your funding?

HM:

Yes, exactly.

AK:

Do you pay artists? Is compensation something that's built in?

HM:

Yes—we always pay the artists.

AK:

That's great. You're also a female director who's had a child in the last few years. It's wonderful to see women in the field now who are in positions to help re-structure organizations to think more about labor practices and family leave. I know you live in a social democracy, so some of those questions are maybe a little pressing where you are, but I'm wondering how you as a director have shaped a work-life balance and ethos in the institution?

HM:

When I had my daughter, I got nine months maternity leave, with a full salary.

AK:

Wow.

HM:

After living in the US, I was very much aware of how fortunate I was, and I was extremely appreciative. I was also thankful that I had an amazing Curatorial Assistant at the Kunsthall, Maya Økland, who took over my directorial duties for almost a year. It was challenging getting back into the job after such a long absence, but it also felt really great—being alone with a baby all day can be just as challenging as running a kunsthall! One of the main challenges was that before I had a baby, I used to work 24/7, which is impossible to do when you have a small child. But it did bring an important balance to my life.

I'm proud to say that Kunsthall Stavanger is a very parent-friendly place to work. Several women staff members did actually become pregnant in the year after I did, so we were many who became moms around the same time,

and were dealing with the same challenges. It is important to allow some flexibility. At the kunsthall, I allow flexible hours, and the option of working from home when your child is sick. It is also ok to arrive late or leave early for kindergarten delivery and pickup, as long as you're able to finalize your tasks later.

AK:

I'd love to hear more about your program and how you think about the exhibitions that you do. Is there a typical Kunsthall Stavanger show? Do you focus specifically on solo exhibitions or group exhibitions? In addition, we'd love to hear what drives the ethos or the mission of your programming. Do you have a mission statement?

HM:

The Kunsthall mission statement is the same that Stavanger Kunstforening has had since 1865: to "exhibit and distribute art and culture to a wide audience." It is a very open mission statement, which is a good thing. An underlying focus in our programming has been to show a high percentage of exhibitions with women artists. I've also focused on artists from Stavanger who has an international practice, and artists working with new technology, which has always been an interest of mine. Most of our exhibitions are solo shows, as I find it important to give artists room and freedom to present their full potential. As I talked about before, the educational programming is integrated into everything we do.

AK:

Who do you think of as your audience? The other question that we're asking people is, do you think of your audience as being the same as your community?

HM:

Our main audience is in Stavanger. And in Stavanger, since it's a small town, our audience is also our community. Our core community is people working at other institutions and galleries—we often meet up to talk and discuss our

work and common challenges. The artists in Stavanger are also an important part of our community. Then we have a national and international audience, who follow our programming from afar.

AK:

I've personally followed your program since the beginning with great interest, but I've never actually been there in person. I'm assuming there must be a lot of people who have that kind of relationship.

HM:

I guess that's how most of us experience art nowadays, especially if you're not living in a big city. For me, it's always been second nature to work with art and artists through the internet. In 2004, when I curated my first exhibition, I'd only seen their websites of all the artists I invited. I'd never met them, I'd never seen their work in-person, until we started installing. It worked out anyway.

AK:

On an institutional level who do you think of as your peers? This could be who you feel yourself in dialogue with, or who you think there's a synergy with. It could also be a conceptual or historical position, or people in the field that you're looking to and are in conversation with.

HM:

When the kunsthall opened, I started an advisory board, which you're also a part of. These are people I feel some kind of kinship with, and who I admire, and who I thought would be helpful support when establishing the kunsthall. The person I've been in contact with the most is Steinar Sekkingstad at Bergen Kunsthall. Bergen Kunsthall is definitely the institution in Norway that we've looked to because they've had a similar process, from kunstforening to kunsthall, but ten years before we did.

It is definitely the *people* I get inspired by, rather than the institutions. The staff is definitely the most important part of any art institution—they make the institution, in fact. It is very important to understand how much

work it takes to run an art institution. I do admire the people who make it all happen and who put down the hard work.

AK:

For a lot of people, exhibitions just magically appear.

HM:

I've had people commenting on how great it must be to work at an art institution, since we "just hang artworks on the walls".

AK:

You are touching on a central aspect of this project: to highlight the invisible labor and the thinking processes of the people working in institutional contexts. We'd love to hear a little bit about what your plans are for the future, where you see the Kunsthall, and where you see yourself. And then, maybe tied into that question—because you have really remapped the institution, and it's so identifiable with your curatorial position—do you think the Kunsthall needs you to survive in its current formation? How much are you working to set it up independent of you and your curatorial vision in the future?

HM:

If we manage to secure our operations, team and the programs for the long run in the next few years, the kunsthall will not be dependent on me to survive.

We are currently working on renovating the building before its 100th anniversary in 2025. We've realized that it's not possible to do this in addition to our programming, so we will close the Kunsthall January through March. As mentioned, in 2020, we'll be doing fewer, but more ambitious exhibitions and projects. We're doing an exhibition of new works by Jonathan Baldock. We're doing a collaborative project with Rhizome, an affiliate of the New Museum in New York. We have a large-scale project that will be on view during the fall;

not all of the details are in place but it will be announced in the new year. Last but not least, we will continue our focus on our educational programs and make sure that our future generations stay involved.
