



# INTERVIEW WITH LARS RAMBERG

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DOUBT AS A STRATEGY

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Lars Ramberg is an international artist, born in Norway, today working and residing in Berlin. He was educated at the National Academy of fine art in Oslo. Through his work with installations, photo manipulation and performance he tries to express his ideas on freedom and social life. He mainly operates in the public space by using existing social and historical material as a platform. He has been part of a number of different exhibitions all over the world in addition to biennales in both Venice and Sao Paolo. Among recent work, the Zweifel installation, the Liberté and the newly won competition for the ventilation towers in Bjørvika, Oslo can be mentioned.

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According to the artist Lars Ramberg, the understanding of doubt is very different in Germany than in Scandinavia and especially in Norway. If you in Norway say that you are a little bit in doubt, you are saying that you have already moved over to the negative side, you have made up your mind and moved away from the motivation to do something. While in German it means that you are in the process and you haven't made up your mind yet, you are in a state where you are able to make new decisions. "Zweifel" as it's called in German is directly translated "to think twice" and is more like a 3 dimensional room which gets bigger the more you are in doubt and the more you explore your doubt. This room is required for all types of creative, philosophical, emotional or religious processes.

Lars argues that doubt is a fundamental part of Germany and the German people. Descartes wrote "Der metodische Zweifel" which was giving philosophy the tools how to formulate a thesis, but also an anti-thesis creating space for doubt in between. Goethe also wrote that "the more you know, the more you are in doubt", and in Germany doubt is an indication of an elevated society with the knowledge and complexity making it unable to become

demagogical. With the fundamentalism spreading today there is less and less space left for doubt. "The truth" is being pushed on us more than before, and it is visible in art, architecture and in all forums. Doubt is an important quality and an essential part of democracy. As long as you are in doubt you cannot become totalitarian. When you stop being in doubt everything runs on its own, and you stop reflecting.

The consciousness about doubt in Germany becomes clear, to Lars, looking at Peter Eisenmann and Frank Stella's memorial in Berlin. The memorial indicates that there has been too much focus on the Jews as victims and not on the tragedy as a tragedy. And in the memorial on Potsdamer Platz, they have been able to create space for reflections and a physical space for doubt (This being opposite of what the Jewish museum of the Daniel Libeskind where empathy is in focus and everything is prepared). The problem with these kinds of monuments is that they offer only one possible way of reading history, they conclude (Instead of opening up for a continuously rereading of history, the way that it really is). Lars thinks that this is also the case for a lot of architecture.

When the Germans wanted their united history back after the two world wars and the fall of the Berlin wall, they wanted to tear down Palast der Republik and rebuild Kaiser Wilhelm's Stadtschloss as a symbol of a united Germany. Lars argued instead to preserve the building as a space for reflections on: "are the east Germans like the west Germans? The west like the east or are we simply Germans?" Lars renamed Palast der Republik into Palast der Zweifel and wrote ZWEIFEL with big shiny metal letters on top of the building. The installation is symbolizing the completion of the Palast and as a spatial manifestation for doubt and reflection.

☉ **How is doubt reflected in architecture, are we talking about dynamics and flexibility?**

LR: Yes, and cognition. Architects is talking about that the building is finished, but I think the opposite when I do a piece, I am not thinking "now I am done", but rather "now it starts". Very few architects are concerned

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with this. Their main focus is to win the competition and get the building built. While I think that there should be elements of entropy, changes over time which continues after the building is completed. Architects are in general not interested in this.

☉ **Is this trend accelerating, that architects are just concerned with the completion of the building and then move on to the next project?**

LR: Yes, I think it is because of the speed, there are so many things to deliver. I think we are in a new phase of modernism, where we are only delivering good looking design, where fashion is playing an important role, only it's called futuristic. But calling it part of the future is in best case the latest news in fashion.

☉ **Does this have anything to do with doubt?**

LR: Yes, because then you become aware of your limitations. You enter a room where you do not know anymore, you are forced to acknowledge that you do

not know where you are in the future, in 30 years. This does something to you. At least it effects my work, because when I work I have to do something that is more than flashy and looks like something else than what you can find in the last issue of Flashart. I am hoping that I am starting a process and not finishing one. A piece of art is like a ship that is completed and setting sail, going through storms, being rebuilt etc. I see very little openness amongst architects in the same way. They do not play with the parameters that the building will be finished in 60 years, one room being built every year, that every generation gets to add a room and that they should be allowed to decide what it should look like. The type of architecture that, in best case, leaves the architect as a director not in control of details and the looks, I have yet to see. I have not seen buildings as processes, only buildings that in best case are changeable. It is not hard to make buildings where the actual building process is part of the architecture, but nobody dares to do it because of the client and the entrepreneurs who demands completed buildings within deadlines. But it would have been fantastic to build a building which wasn't supposed to be finished. Just imagine building a tower with a deadline in 200 years....

☉ **Do you see the structuralist-pixel concepts that have been developed the later years as an illustration of this? Most of the time there are room for alterations, additions etc to these concepts...**

LR: Maybe the pixel concepts are heading in that direction. As an example it is not possible to add to the Norwegian Opera, it is not open for a process, it is finished. It is a huge success and in many ways I think it is a great building. But the interesting thing is that it initiates / imitates a piece of ice drifting away from Greenland. But taking this seriously you should have been considering the fact that ice drifts, changes its shape, flips when it melts and the bottom becomes the top a real process. If you took this seriously you should have made an opera built as a ship, where it could float around and move, not just in shape, but also geographically. The discourse of

a piece of ice is missing, and the opera is reduced to an illustration of a piece of ice. But it is not in any way a piece of ice, it doesn't freeze, melt, shrink, grow, flip etc. It is very static.

☉ **Are you able to find the doubt in Scandinavia?**

**LR:** I feel that Scandinavia has the ambitions of showing the rest of the world that they are part of what's going on, in a way this is a phenomenon for a country with newly acquired money. And I think it is great that they are spending money on architecture, but it is kind of strange that this is happening now and not 30-40 years ago. But again it is great that money is spent on architecture realizing that it has a value on its own. Previously in Norway it has been looked upon as showoff to spend money on architecture and design. After the Second World War the focus has been quantity over quality. So the change is good, but I cannot see that the debates have come any further than "nice and ugly". But the discussions concerning values are absent, what architecture represents politically and in humanistic perspective. While in Germany architecture is political for one simple reason: All the great ideologies have built a lot and it is impossible to stand in front of Tempelhof and think that this has nothing to do with politics.

☉ **Is architecture in Scandinavia detached from its conditions, such as politics?**

**LR:** Yes, the architecture is more based on fashion and not in dialogue with its conditions.

☉ **Architecture relates to money and economics when building, but is politics and architecture two parallel things or is it dialogue or an influence between the two?**

**LR:** Good question. When Norway is spending money in the new part of Oslo, Bjørvika, it is because it is prestige and that they want to show that you are new.



But this is very reactionary and an attempt to show off, to win the competition with Stockholm and Copenhagen, to win the region. This is again based on fashion. Do not misunderstand; I think it is healthy that the capital of Norway shows that it is a capital. And that a capital has a part of the city dedicated to culture is just weird that it hasn't happened a long, long time ago. So again it is healthy, but the problem is that it everything is being built at the same time. The danger is that it becomes a new Potsdamer Platz where it looked nice for exactly 1 year and after 10 years it all looks a bit alike. And after another 20-30 years when you want to add some buildings it is full, no more spaces left to build. You could say that you wanted to develop Bjørvika and that the span from building the first building to the last should be 50 years because you wanted one building from each epoch.

☉ **Time is an important aspect of doubt ...**

**LR:** Absolutely, doubt is time, it is the space-time axis. This is why I think including doubt turns it into a 3 dimensional space, it is the z. This is why doubt and architecture is connected. To me a lot of the architecture today is very 2 dimensional and missing the z.

☉ **You are saying that doubt as a strategy or attitude is missing in Scandinavia when it comes to architecture.**

**LR:** I wouldn't say that it doesn't exist, but what I am saying is that Scandinavia is on some levels missing pluralistic thinking. And I think pluralism is closely related to doubt. We tend to be very mainstream, especially in Norway, something is either totally out or totally in. This is not the case in Berlin where some people do their hair standing up and others color it

pink. It is room for several fashions at the same time. I feel that this is reflected in architecture as well, the ability to see the complexity and pluralism without having to decide what is nice and what is ugly, but what has got substance and not. I am really missing this debate in Scandinavia, especially Norway. What kinds of issues are deciding our identity, identity is also changing. What is our identity when the oil runs out? What is our self-confidence based on? Nobody is talking about this, it seems like people are dreading the future.

☉ **Where do you think this uniformity comes from?**

**LR:** I think it is all about trying to show that you are modern. Norwegians are so concerned about being modern that they on a good day turn out to be a good/bad copy. Norwegians are worried about getting confirmations, for others to say that

they are great, that they are not good at being themselves despite of what others might think. Norwegians are not brave enough to be something else. They are very mainstream and concerned about others liking them which is typical for a young nation. Norway does not have much culture and this is why they haven't learnt that doubt is a sign of a developed nation. Doubt is what the Germans are basing their self confidence on.

☉ **Do you feel that this is general for Scandinavia or does it apply only to Norway?**

**LR:** I think this is more present in Norway than Denmark and Sweden. Sweden has a closer relationship and communication with the rest of Europe. Denmark, Germany and France have always had a stronger aristocracy; they consider themselves Europeans in a different way. This is the

reason why they are part of the EU. Denmark is just a continuation of Schleswig-Holstein and really half German in many ways, while Norway has based their identity on a post-union-identity, something I understand. Norway has liberated themselves from the union of Sweden, then Denmark and then Sweden again. Norway is opposing everything that has got to do with the European cultural heritage. But they would very much like the Europeans to visit and like them, but they don't want to be a part of it. They would like for the Europeans to be impressed, but they do not want to join and solve the challenges in Europe. Dealing with these issues Sweden and Denmark are more complex.

☉ **There are a lot of people "looking to Scandinavia" when it comes to architecture. Is this because we are good with the latest within fashion architecture?**

**LR:** We are the first ones to get mobile phones. And within a week everybody has one. When dotted jeans are in everybody has got it within a week. The Norwegians are very fast with trends and because it's a small country they are able to adapt very quickly.

☉ **Despite the absence of doubt in architecture in Norway, the fact that we are only continuing fashion, and just responding to the changing fashions, we are ahead without contributing with any existential values in the discourse?**

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**LR:** I think that this is one of the reasons. I believe that Norway has a need to show that they have liberated themselves from Sweden and Denmark and when they now have extra money and possibilities they have the urge and need to show that, and why not? I do not see anything wrong with that. But the Norwegians have ignored their old building traditions and have built pragmatic and inexpensive housing the past 5-6 decades which is without qualities.

I think this has something to do with the education system, architecture has never been looked upon as important, maybe the last decade things have changed. When you are building a house it is much more important that there are bedrooms for the kids, big kitchen for mom and a nice garage for dad, than how it looks. It also needs to be cheap and spacious and quickly built. Houses and homes drawn by architects have been looked at as fashionable and show off. Norway is very anti-elitist, the opposite from Denmark and Sweden were they are not afraid to think in an elitist way. Norway has a sociodemocratic anti elitist esthetics. Because Norway is putting a lot of effort and money into architecture, this will hopefully change.

In Norway everybody wants to build and own their own house and not buy an old one to rebuild, add and change. There has been, what I call a pragmatic non-architecture which goes back to the 19th century up until today. Sweden and Denmark have different culture for this, it is not as important to build your own house and there is a different culture for renting housing. There you can rent your whole life, which today is a very foreign thought in Norway.

● **What would be a strategy, opposed to fashion to ensure evolution?**

**LR:** I do not have a good answer to that. I think we have to cultivate the debate and give the discussions a value, the discussions concerning architecture, the doubt and the questions about the foundations

of architecture. I think we have to start in the other end and let architecture and design be a result of these discussions not the beginning. Most of the discussions today are initiated with shapes and looks and I think this is the reason why we are not able to abandon modernism and the idea of architecture as shape.

I think if we need to make the discourse of architecture more available for the public, but also the educational institutions. I believe an architectural debate without the need for consensus and having to defend and explain what is good and not, would be very healthy, not draw conclusions all the time. What I mean is that we should have a discussion which is continuous, being about what Norway is, what Oslo is, what Bergen is? Should Bergen for example be developed into a folkloric fishing village, a postcard look alike? Should Oslo become a big city and be the missing piece of Lego, the missing piece which fits to the pieces of Lego in Europe? What if you start thinking about Oslo and its identity in relationship to Europe?

● **We are then talking about an “anchored” or rooted discourse. You are not making architecture for the sake of architecture, but architecture which is deeply rooted in society ...**

**LR:** Precisely, this I experience in a very profound way in Berlin. The architecture is “attached” to its history because there is no way around it. It is not because they are so intellectual or have decided to be, they just don't have a choice, they are, no matter what they do, confronted with it. They have to anchor their architecture.

● **While in Norway we copy fashion and do not have a rooted discourse ...**

**LR:** There is nothing wrong with being modern, but when fashion is not anchored and fashion changes from being flared trousers to being jeans with dots on them, if the fashion is anchored you are able to stand there and say: “I am wearing my flared trousers because where I come from we use flared trousers because...”. It has to

be rooted in relation to who we are and who we are becoming. Identity is changing and moving, but slower than fashion.

If you compare it with the history of the turtle and the rabbit, and you say that the architectural discourse is the turtle and the rabbit the fashion. It is very likely that the turtle will beat the rabbit, because the rabbit will bounce all over the place and does not have a direction or strategy.

I think Norway have the potential of anchoring if they want to. Norway has a lot of tradition, indigenous people, without becoming a cliché-viking fetish. Norway has natural resources, it is part of the arctic. This could be part of Norway's identity, but this they abandon to become more like the others. Maybe it is a quality to be different and maybe these qualities should be emphasized. This should be done through a profound debate without being concerned about falling behind. Then Norway might be able to create their own turtle and have some faith in themselves. This is what Germany and France have done all along while others have been watching them.

But it is important to guide the value discussion as Norway is very young culturally. Norway has a lot of money, but is intellectually and culturally very poor. When you see the resources Norway control they should now start investing in consciousness and not superficial design.



# EDITORIAL N° 2

**We knew that** the topic was immense without finding it intimidating; the topic was and **still** is, too exciting not to be explored. All the contributors, with various backgrounds, have responded in very different ways making this into a diverse and wide-ranging issue, perfect as the launch issue of **CONDITIONS** magazine.

Working out issue number one we have tried to define an environment where **CONDITIONS** operate within.

Each issue will naturally mix the topic and conditions in general. The different sections reflect this in very different ways.

● **Case study**

It is interesting how non-architects think and perceive our surroundings and architecture.

This section is a reminder that architects most of the time does not shape the conditions and do not interpret them in the same way as most people. Seeing the project through the eyes of Regis Cabral and Terho Tikkanen makes you reconsider your image of the Turning Torso.

● **Working conditions**

How to look at and how to act upon the different conditions all depends on your profession, but also what you want to accomplish. Winy Maas as an architect wants to make meaningful architecture in addition to solving an overall challenge. While Bernt Stilluf Karlsen as a real estate developer, is part of the same processes, but with different goals. He is applying a different strategy and therefore considering the same conditions in a very different way.

While talking about the working conditions they are both an introduction to the theme “strategy for evolution”. By having a strategy

you have a direction. Without a strategy you will be drifting with the possibility to end up anywhere depending on where the current takes you.

● **Articles**

The different articles relate to the topic “strategy for evolution” in very diverse ways. As Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair points out, evolution takes time and evolution cannot be seen as a strategy, but as natural environmental adaptations. What separates the Darwinistic evolution theory Leif is referring to and the humans of today, is that we are able to consider the conditions and make conscious choices and not just adapt to them. Fernando Donis argues that the economical situation of today asks for a long term social and political agenda and to see new combinations and possibilities that opens up because of the economical changes.

Even if we are free to choose and in this way may affect the conditions. Matthew Butcher and Megan O'shea are advocating that architecture should not get self referential, but open up and make it receptacle for multiple interpretations where conditions could be read into the architecture.

● **Research**

The research is introducing various attitudes to relate to and understand evolution. Vilhelm Kristensen's cinema research is by interpreting the history trying to predict the future of the cinema. Instead of continuing in the same track as before the research on the summerhouses in Denmark introduces punctuation and thus rethinking the summerhouse urbanism. The research project “Turbine City” is a multiplicity of strategies where the combination of program united with the energy production in a constructive way creates something unique and unexpected.

● **Artwork**

Kalle Grude's structure is adapting to the specific site conditions Grude's ad-hock-problem-solving strategy might resemble many of the “strategies” of city planning today.

● **Manifesto**

In the spirit of the avant garde the manifesto of nOffice offers a methodology and a program how to operate.

● **Interviews**

Lars Ramberg believes in the public space as a dialogue based space for a continuous evolutionary process. Where a fundamental doubt and the ability to second guess makes it possible to reach new conclusions.

● **Dead or Alive**

The announcement of a winner of an architectural competition always hits the news with flashy renderings and happy faces. But the project is depending on the conditions being just right to be built.

Being able to consider evolution from different angles makes it possible to apply the appropriate strategy and maneuver in an ambiguous and unpredictable landscape.

Evolution as a topic will be part of the magazine and bridge the individual topics and re-surface as a theme from time to time. This is a reason why this was chosen as topic for the launch issue.

