

The Model 2014

- A Model for Qualitative Participation

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'I loooove this place!' a schoolboy shouts enthusiastically to his classmates, who are in full swing playing in Palle Nielsen's *The Model* at ARKEN. The air is full of squeals of delight, laughter and shouts, mixed with soundscapes from the loudspeakers surrounding the play area. Flushed and sweaty, the children jump around in a big pool of foam rubber, have pillow fights or perform elegant somersaults from the bridge wearing princess dresses, matted wigs and face paint. Those who need some peace and quiet after their foam-rubber escapades, are building cardboard-box cities, gluing and painting. Some sit at a work-table, others have put everything they need on the floor of the gallery, where the polished concrete has virtually disappeared under a sea of colour and drawings.

Right Here, Right Now

In 2014 ARKEN dedicated its largest and most striking gallery – the Art Axis – to children. Adults are also present, either watching from the sidelines or joining in: Parents and grandparents, teachers and 'play hosts' – the museum's name for the people wearing dungarees who inspire and look after the children as they play in *The Model* on a daily basis. *The Model* is Palle Nielsen's (b. 1942) reinterpretation of his legendary, activist 'artwork as project as exhibition' *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society*, which was originally installed at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1968. Palle Nielsen's work fills the space with life – with an open field of

situations, possibilities, exchanges and interactions, which everyone present contributes to and creates on equal terms.(1)

This article is an introduction to *The Model* at ARKEN in 2014. It attempts to answer questions like why the latest chapter of the story of *The Model* has unfolded right here, and what kind of model *The Model* is now. The reinterpretation of the work generates engagement and critical reflection, which touch on some of the social relations and political realities *The Model* has the potential to reveal. *The Model* at ARKEN is not a historical reconstruction, nor does it document the work of 1968. It is about action and presence here and now, but with a historical background – the only sense in which it is an artistic ‘re-enactment’.(2)

As the curator of the exhibition, I am neither impartial nor in possession of critical distance to what, as I write, is happening and unfolding full blast at the museum. On the other hand, I have privileged access to a work that once the exhibition closes after ten months, will only exist in the form of documentation, correspondence, eye-witness accounts, this publication and memories that change and fade. I write on the basis of a close knowledge of the preparations for the exhibition, and many conversations with Palle Nielsen about the history, motivation and process behind *The Model*. I am also part of the organisation that supports the daily rhythm and functioning of *The Model*, and which is challenged by the process. In this article I draw on both my practical experience and art theory, primarily the art historian Claire Bishop’s location of participation-based art between the social and the aesthetic, and the philosopher Jacques Rancière’s analysis of ‘the emancipated spectator’.

A Feeling of Freedom

In 1968, a time when childhood and children’s power were political issues, the young activist artist Palle Nielsen was given permission to install a huge activity playground in the main gallery of Moderna Museet in Stockholm for three weeks in October by the museum’s director Pontus Hultén. The die for a political event had been cast.(3) Katarina Havermark, who was eight at the time and who is now a conservator at Moderna Museet, was

one of the more than 20,000 children who queued with their parents to get into the museum and play. This is how she remembers the experience:

'[It was] a really positive experience for me – the feeling of freedom at being allowed to rush around and jump in the foam rubber sea with so many possibilities to paint and build and play. As far as I remember there were activities in different rooms surrounding the foam rubber sea in the middle. Jumping off the bridge was probably my biggest experience. It was really exciting, and there were lots of other kids there to share it with. I remember jumping again and again and getting hotter and hotter and charged with static electricity by the foam rubber. I was wearing a pair of long, pink and maroon checked trousers made of some kind of synthetic material that attracted lots of tiny bits of foam rubber that stuck to them. My hair was also electrified and standing on end. Everything created a feeling of freedom, a feeling that anything was possible.'⁽⁴⁾

The activity playground gave children a free space where they could release raw energy through physical play, a sensory and experimental presence, and creative development – either alone or with others. The adult volunteers joined in either by inspiring

FACTS ABOUT THE MODEL

- Installed at ARKEN from February 9-December 7 2014 in The Art Axis - the largest gallery at the museum.
- During the exhibition 158,180 people visited the museum, including 34,633 children. The highest known number of visits by a single child was 11.
- The first time since 1968 that *The Model* has been installed in a museum.
- *The Model* in 2014 consisted of foam-rubber pools with jumping bridges and painting and dressing-up tents for children aged 3-6 and 7-12, as well as inflated inner tubes, cardboard construction areas and music and soundscapes that could be played on an iPad. From April 9-September 7 there was also a plant station where children could plant seeds.
- Approximately 65m² of foam rubber.
- Around 50 play hosts during the entire exhibition period (artists, designers, students, people on sick leave, museum curators, a vice director, IT support workers, etc.).
- Acquired for ARKEN's permanent collection in 2014.

play or helping according to Palle Nielsen's guidelines. If conflicts arose, for example, they were to hug the children or jump into the foam rubber with them, instead of trying to resolve the situation verbally, educationally or intellectually.

According to Lars Bang Larsen, who has researched *The Model* in 1968 exhaustively culminating in the publication of his book *The Model* in 2010 (5), in 1968 *The Model* was 'concerned with the meaning of the social and subjective change that the playing child generates within the machinery of society. As such, the event was nothing short of a mass utopia of art activism, aimed at applying an anti-elitist concept of art for the creation of a collectivist human being.' (6)

Through the alternative communities generated through spontaneous play and creativity, children were to guide adults, providing them with a model for a qualitative society, which in Palle Nielsen's rhetoric meant a society of freedom and community, self-determination and solidarity. (7)

The Model was not only a fantastic playground for children, where they could lose themselves as individuals in an emancipatory flow of sociability, bodily senses and creativity. It also created a symbolic space that assigned adults a double participant/spectator role so they could observe and use the children's patterns of behaviour to think about alternative social and community structures. There were even eight video cameras in the space – one of them controlled by the children – that transmitted the activities so children and adults could look inside *The Model* from the outside. Three students from the Child Psychology Institute in Stockholm also made observations for their research. Finally, *The Model* was a Trojan horse (8) full of children that Nielsen rolled into the museum to transform the white cube into a space where people no longer contemplated art with passive reverence. Instead, visitors were met by playing, active children, who in Palle Nielsen's own words could change this concept of art through their very real presence in the room, creating a 'story of a totally different interactive and participatory art form.' (9)

As Lars Bang Larsen notes, in 1968 *The Model* emerged in a complex mesh of oppositions between art and anti-art, the indi-

vidual and the collective, the child-led and the adult-led, freedom and regulation, idealism and pragmatism, etc. (10) These polarities permeated the work as a concept, as a project, as an event, and as a dream and reality. To this I would add the social and the aesthetic as a key pair of concepts the project/work operates between. Palle Nielsen's goal with *The Model* was not to move utopia out of the domain of art into the anti-aesthetic or ethical field, but to make the work a motor for social change in art and everyday life. The cultural theorist Mette Thobo-Carlsen has a similar take on *The Model*, noting that the idea of art being simultaneously aesthetic and aimed at social change is rooted in Rancière's idea that the belief in the autonomy of art and the promise of social change co-exist – paradoxically – in all art. (11)

Community and Participation in *The Model* 2014

With *The Model* in 2014, children have also radically transformed the gallery space. Not only have they and their adult hosts literally taken over the floor, walls, foam rubber pool and workshop tents, even exhibition elements like signs, photostats and other texts have been written on, scratched, coloured, covered and decorated to form a multi-voiced, visual and textual patchwork of statements, signs, comments and tags. As the images in this book show, *The Model* changes continuously as an environment in which sounds, movements, dialogues and materials constantly shift in atmosphere, intensity and quality. Together with the energetic presence of the children, a complex network of actions, gazes, voices, and subject and spectator positions have emerged, comprising the nervous system of the work as a social organism and participation-based art form: Spontaneous games of tag, jumping and building games, squeals from the 'pool' and deep conversations in front of the mirrors; children and adults alternatively taking the initiative for different activities; anxious and disapproving parents who interfere, or parents who relax and watch from the sidelines; friends that upload photos of each other on social media; endless 'tags' on the walls and comments in the visitors' book; play hosts and museum guards explaining the playground to curious and sceptical museum guests.

On a daily basis, what happens is what could broadly be called relational exchanges between the artist, the children, accompanying adults, play hosts, museum guards and visitors to other exhibitions at the museum. The play hosts who welcome school and kindergarten classes to *The Model* have been instructed by Palle Nielsen in their key, relational role: To mediate between the physical framework of the work and the children's own play as friendly protectors and inspirational helpers – in Palle Nielsen's own words, as 'models'. At other times the space is full of families with children, and the play hosts are constantly aware of how and where they should join in with inspiration for play, adult dialogue or practical assistance. Since the exhibition opened, these play hosts have engaged in a continuous process of sharing experiences, ideas, and play experiments. This is a process that takes place daily, but also in monthly study groups, which are regularly attended by external researchers, the artist and me as curator. (12)

As in 1968, the play hosts were there to support the children in their 'play flow', resolve conflicts and make playing as safe as possible. In this sense it is not (nor was it in 1968) total child anarchy. The goal is not unregulated chaos, but a flow of play that gives the children the opportunity to experience a feeling of freedom.

Children and parents interact differently at different times. One minute they might be playing on apparently equal terms with inflated inner tubes or painting on the floor, the next we hear "Watch me jump dad," as dad stands on the edge of the foam rubber pool taking a photo for Instagram on his smartphone. Other parents relax on the sofa, enjoying their children playing together without needing adult attention.

But who is the spectator and who is the subject in these situations? Who influences whose behaviour and actions? When is there equality and the exercise of power, or togetherness and distance? Is *The Model*, for example, a performative, democratic conversation between the artist and spectator, as Mette Thobo-Carlson suggests, or is the voice of the artist entirely absent from his own work? (13) One thing is certain: A lot of conversations between a lot of different people take place in *The Model*. It is, however, difficult to say what kind of conversation takes place between the

artist and the spectator. For visitors to the museum who play in *The Model* and then thank us for a 'great kids' event' neither the voice of the artist nor the symbolic dimension of the work have apparently been part of their experience. But for visitors who read the introductory wall text, handout or quote from the artist on the wall above the sink, Palle Nielsen is present as the voice of the artist, as a result of which they also experience *The Model* framed as a symbolic space. Maybe Rancière's concept of a 'theatre without spectatorship' can inspire an understanding of *The Model* as a space where there are many different conversations with and without the voice of the artist. Because it is the participants and whatever understandings they bring with them to the museum who activate the work, filling it with their actions and interpretations.

In 'The Emancipated Spectator', Rancière defines his model of spectatorship as an emancipated community and collective site of action in which viewers become 'active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it.' (14) For Rancière, such a theatre represents the potential for the performers and the audience to have an equal relationship in which the very act of spectatorship is a performative act that generates meaning, thus removing the 'traditional' distance between the subject and the spectator. In the context of *The Model*, this can be seen as the absence of a barrier between the artist and the audience, or between the children and the adults when both parties are seen as active and passive, acting and observing, creative and reflective. As a participation-based art form, *The Model* at ARKEN can be seen to have the potential to create this kind of community in which the participants cross borders, abolish differences, and generate new bodily and social experiences. But it is a community that occurs momentarily, in specific situations, only to disappear again as soon as any of the many individual factors at play in *The Model* change.

A Model for Qualitative Participation

The Model at ARKEN is the first installation of the work in a museum since 1968. It marks a return to the original museum context of the work, at the same time as representing a change in context that is key to the potential of work – and the museum – to generate sensory perceptions, dialogues, relationships and meanings. In recent years, ARKEN’s research and public activities have focussed on utopia in art, the future role of the museum in society, and ‘participation’ as a key dimension of art and the communication and curation of art. (15)

The Model is a new art form at ARKEN, and a new kind of democratic conversation with visitors young and old, for whom it provides a shared framework in which they can express themselves individually and collectively. The statement ‘It is only an exhibition for those who are not playing’ was Palle Nielsen’s own summary of the relational structure of *The Model* in 1968. (16) It describes a static and almost confrontational situation which might – or might not – have been true back then, but which is certainly not true at ARKEN today. A brief visit to *The Model* at the weekend – or glance at the visitors’ book full of the comments by children and adults – reveals the extent to which adults participate in play with the children, and how much they themselves use the opportunities for self-realisation provided by *The Model*. It is also clear that some children are conscious of the museum context for their play, and thereby its symbolic dimension.

One of Bishop’s central themes is ‘the social turn’ in art, i.e. art forms that have a participation strategy and practice, frequently with a political, social or ethical goal. She argues that an aesthetic rather than an ethical perspective is more useful in any criticism of participatory or participation-based art, in order to make ‘dialogue a medium’. (17) According to Bishop, the discourse of participation-based, social art forms often seems to exclude them from the realm of art criticism in favour of ethics, and as a result ‘a common trope in this discourse is to evaluate each project as a ‘model’, echoing Benjamin’s claim in ‘The Author as Producer’ that a work is better the more participants it brings into contact with the process of production.’ (18) An ethical discourse prioritises the

process and the intention of the author of the work, which blocks any discussion of the work's meaning as a social or aesthetic form. I would argue that it is precisely its aesthetic form that is central to *The Model* as a participation-based artwork in 2014.

The quote from Bishop points to the title Palle Nielsen gave his legendary work *The Model*, which had the subtitle *A Model for a Qualitative Society*. At the request of the artist, this is no longer part of the title of the work. The decision expresses his disillusionment with the capitalist society of 2014, and the absence of the community spirit and optimism of 1968. Palle Nielsen would probably agree that in the world we live in today 'we are reduced to an atomised pseudo community of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition', calling for direct human interaction and engagement with reality. (19) *The Model* is his utopian yet feasible idea of how to free ourselves from alienation by creating an alternative for children and thereby ourselves.

Perhaps the absence of the subtitle makes it easier to see the work as more than the social experimentation and political activism dictated by the zeitgeist of the 1960s. I am convinced that whilst *The Model* was first and foremost created to generate social change for children, it was also a way for Palle Nielsen to make an art form – social aesthetics – that could give this change symbolic form, visual substance and visibility via the media and political debates.

The Model builds bridges between project and artwork, sociology and aesthetics, participation and spectatorship. The work is created by the participants in a museum context in an open central gallery that leads directly to the other galleries at ARKEN. In this context, it gains an inherent, symbolic meaning that supports consciousness of and reflection on the social potential of play and the nature of the sensations that fill the museum on a busy day in *The Model*. Bishop's reading of the aesthetic as 'an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality' (20) can be seen to support the claim that it is the bodily and mental experiences of children in *The Model* – the buzz, laughter, bumps and knocks, static electricity, feeling of a wet brush on their faces, absorption in play and creativity – that have an aesthetic dimension. For the adults it could be seeing, hearing and

moving through the lively space, joining in and playing, or experiencing the gallery as beautiful, pleasurable, distracting and noisy. For me, there are not only ethics but aesthetics in the very act of participation, which means participating in *The Model* in 2014 has the potential to be stored by the body and in memories, thus become a meaningful experience like the one Katarina Havermark had 46 years ago in Stockholm. If I was asked what kind of model *The Model* is today, my answer would be is that it is a model for qualitative participation, a real community in which people have real experiences, where relationships are formed and interrupted, challenged and liberated. It is a model with a feeling of freedom and the potential for social change. ▲

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NOTES

(1) Palle Nielsen's view of the social and situated are informed by the concept of relational aesthetics. Nielsen himself points to relational aesthetics as a framework for his work with what he calls 'social aesthetics' in the manifesto he wrote with Lars Bang Larsen in 2001 called 'Social Aesthetics – What is it?', a text published for the first time in this book (78-79).◀

(2) The German critic Inke Arns writes the following on re-enactment as an artistic strategy: 'The difference to pop-cultural re-enactments such as the re-creation of historic battles, for example, is that artistic re-enactments are not performative re-staging of historic situations and events that occurred a long time ago; events (often traumatic ones) are re-enacted that are viewed as very important for the present. Here the reference to the past is not history for history's sake; *it is about the relevance of what happened in the past for the here and now* (original translation and emphasis). Inke Arns, 'History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance' at http://www.agora8.org/reader/Arns_History_Will_Repeat.html. Last accessed November 18, 2014.◀

(3) It is important to note that in 1968 Palle Nielsen was not the sole initiator of *The Model*. As Lars Bang Larsen points out, Nielsen had close contact with the Swedish activist group *Aktion Samtal* ('Action Dialogue'), who he had previously collaborated with on playground actions. The group saw Nielsen wanting to make *The Model* in an art museum as elitist. Nielsen made the project with other volunteers, and in reaction to the ideological scepticism of *Aktion Samtal* he renounced authorship of the work by using the anonymous and collective name 'The Working Group', which consisted of himself and the activist Gunilla Lundahl. See Lars Bang Larsen, *Palle Nielsen – The Model. A Model for a Qualitative Society* (1968), MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2010, 48 ff and Stine Høholt's interview with Palle Nielsen in this book 'My Art is Not Made for the Artworld', 54-63.◀

(4) Katarina Havermark in an e-mail to the author dated August 8th, 2014.

(5) As well as Bang Larsen's detailed analysis, the book contains Palle Nielsen's own photographs and texts. In 2009 all the material documenting *The Model* in 1968 was donated to MACBA – Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, which subsequently published the book.◀

(6) Bang Larsen, 31.◀

(7) Palle Nielsen, "En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle", in the exhibition catalogue *Modellen: En modell för et kvalitativt samhälle*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968, 3-4.◀

(8) I am indebted to Bang Larsen (60) for the metaphor of the Trojan Horse.◀

(9) Palle Nielsen, 'A Brief History of *The Model*', 2013. Published for the first time in this book (68-71).◀

(10) Bang Larsen, 32.◀

(11) Mette Thobo-Carlsen, 'Deltageren som museumsaktivist. En performativ læsning af deltagelsens politiske potentiale i kunstudstillingen *Modellen: Palle Nielsen*', in *Kultur & Klasse*, no. 118, 2014, 125-138.◀

(12) The play hosts range in age from 15 to 60. They have different nationalities, and very different professional backgrounds. So far the hosts have included visual artists, architecture students, designers, a former children's dentist, a marketing and economy student, and people from a film and music background.◀

(13) Thobo-Carlsen, 12.◀

(14) Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator' in *Artforum*, March 2007, no. 7, 280.◀

(15) Documented by ARKEN's series of exhibitions from 2009-2011, *UTOPIA* and the subsequent publication, *Utopic Curating* (2010). See ARKEN's participation in the cross-institutional research project *Museer og kulturinstitutioner som rum for medborgerskab* ('Museums and Cultural Institutions as a Site for Active Citizenship'), as well as at http://www.smk.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/Billeder/om-museet/museets-projekter/Forskning/RUM_FOR_MEDBORGERSKAB.pdf.◀

(16) Translated quote from the introductory manifesto of 'The Working Group' in the 1968 exhibition catalogue: *Modellen: En modell för et kvalitativt samhälle* published by Moderna Museet.◀

(17) Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London and New York, 2012, 63-64.◀

(18) Bishop, 23. My emphasis.◀

(19) Grant Kester, quoted in Bishop, 11.◀

(20) Bishop, 18.◀



