

“My Art is Not Made for the Art World”

An interview with the artist Palle Nielsen

Stine Høholt, Chief Curator, ARKEN Museum of Modern Art

Let's start with what's most important first. Or what, after many conversations with Palle Nielsen, seems to remain as the purpose of the vast, chaotic and creatively expanding work with the bureaucratic title *The Model*: Its confrontation with a specific model of society that creates alienation through consumption. Palle Nielsen doesn't formulate his critique in revolutionary slogans, but his criticism of our current model of society, his indignation at the goal-oriented rationalism governing human relationships, and his general scepticism about the increasing staging of the forms and phenomena of everyday life (like advertisements, the media and language) run like an undercurrent throughout his practice and philosophy of life. Palle Nielsen is angry, especially on behalf of children. Deep down, his work is a critique of capitalism, even though he considers the phrase a bit old-fashioned. The aspiration is to build a better society, step by step. Palle Nielsen's response to alienation was *The Model*. Its goals were to help children to thrive, to generate self-worth, to emancipate children, and to create communities through experiments and play. All of this is something we've discussed continuously over the past year, when *The Model* has been at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art. Now we're talking about it again – this time with a dictaphone between us.

Stine Høholt (SH): It's exactly 46 years ago since you opened *The Model* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm at the invitation of

Pontus Hultén, the director of the museum at the time. What are your conclusions if you compare *The Model* in 1968 and *The Model* in 2014?

Palle Nielsen (PN): I find it incredibly exciting to walk around *The Model* at ARKEN. It is, of course, a different model to the one back then, which filled the entire Moderna Museet. It's striking seeing the work again, and seeing it in a new way. For years I thought the project was dead. It was just lying there in my drawer doing nothing. I'm glad to see that it's been built again, because its message is even more important today. If I'm to compare *The Model* in 1968 with *The Model* in 2014, first and foremost it's been a lesson in EU regulations. According to the EU, children can't hammer a nail into a plank. They have to wear hardhats and kneepads and there has to be one adult per child. Things were different in 1968, and even though *The Model* was full of children every day (20,000 came over three weeks) we had no problems and only one accident. Children look after each other. And learning to be considerate of each other is one of the educational goals of the project. I think *The Model* is even more important today, because children are actually worse off than they were then. In today's globalised world, our priorities have changed and creativity has slipped down the teaching agenda. That's a shame. You can't raise intelligent people without creative subjects in school. There's also an atmosphere of fear in the world today. We're filled by anxiety – afraid of terrorism and war. In 1968 there was an atmosphere of expectation. Back then I gave the exhibition the subtitle 'a model for a qualitative society'. I used the subtitle to emphasise the contrast to a model of society dominated by quantity, which is precisely the society I think we have today. In 2014 I decided to leave out the subtitle, because it doesn't make sense anymore. 1968 was influenced by the belief that society could be changed for the better through reforms. Today the word 'reform' has become another word for cutback. We've started to speak Orwellian newspeak in which words no longer relate to their content.

What I wanted to do then and what I want to do now are the same, but they have very different points of departure. In 1968 it

was about saying that children had lots of resources and that Denmark's agricultural society needed to be changed into a more workable industrial society. A lot more needed to be done for children that were no longer at home with their mothers, who had entered the workforce. Politically, people knew something needed to be done. But what? And how? My focus was pointing out the importance of taking a stand on children's creativity, also in school reforms. And people did. During the 1970s schools became much more creative. But that all changed with the economic crisis of the 1980s. And we can see the same thing happening today. Every time there's an economic crisis, people say that children need to use their heads - that creativity is not enough. But today they also say it's really important that they're innovative. We've cut arts and crafts out of the curriculum, at the same time as there's a demand for craftsmen. It just doesn't add up. There's not as much creativity in schools, and that's a shame. Politicians say one thing but do the opposite. My response is: Come and see, the children are happy, they can do so much, and it's not only their brains they should use. It's their bodies, it's their imagination, it's their heads - all three dimensions. I hope we can start to take the *whole* personality of children seriously. They shouldn't just sit there with their tablets. They should use their bodies too and try things out - lots of things. So when I compare 1968 and 2014 my conclusion is that *The Model* is even more necessary today.

SH: You raise the issue of the market permeating our everyday life. We live in a thoroughly aestheticized and commercialised lifestyle culture. The spaces we move in, bodily as well as digitally, are meticulously designed worlds where consumption and marketing play a crucial role. We know that the first thing a lot of us touch when we wake up in the morning is our smart phone. The majority of children in Denmark have Internet access from their bedroom that they use all the time. So has the alienation you identified in 1968 become more extreme?

PN: The alienation I identified in 1968 has become massive. The more power capitalism has, the greater the alienation will be. We have become consumers.

SH: I'd like to stay with 1968 for a while, and the critical bite of the work. Around the same time as you made *The Model*, the French theorist Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). (1) Debord's book was intended as a critique of the period, expressing his conviction that consumption, entertainment and advertising were destroying human life in modern society. Debord wrote that 'Everything that was directly lived has receded into representation'. (2) Did you have a similar reading of society, and did it form the basis for the creation of *The Model* (and your other interventions)?

PN: Yes, definitely. But I was inspired by the leftist radical social philosopher André Gorz (1923-2007, ed.). He worked with the concept of self-sufficiency, which I found very useful. He was one of the only ones who didn't just talk about how bad things could get, but about how we could avoid them getting bad. You had to build things up yourself: New forms of cooperatives. André Gorz was one of the few political theorists who provided some alternatives. That was – and is – key.

SH: You start with children. By opening up for their own desires and freedom of action do you think the contours of a new society can emerge? In the introduction to the 1968 catalogue you wrote: 'Perhaps it will be the model for the society children want. Perhaps children can tell us so much about their own world that it can also be a model for us?'

PN: Those words express what I meant very precisely. I'm an advocate of a positive approach, and critical of a lot of the political theory formulated from an elitist position that doesn't take the conditions of a lot of people in society into account. I've always been critical of the Frankfurt School and intellectuals like Theodor W. Adorno, who wrote their social critique from an ivory tower. I think it's a load of bourgeois Marxism – maybe because of my working class background.

SH: Would it be true to say that in making *The Model* at such a young age, you had already discovered that a conventional art-

work couldn't be a solution because it's a perpetuation of the structures created by the existing society? That *The Model* was an attempt to start from scratch, without the adults, to allow children to develop a new model of society adults could learn from?

PN: Yes it's true that I didn't think a conventional work of art could be a solution. That's also the reason I had a really tough time at the art academy – and loads of lousy experiences. I didn't subscribe to the premises for art put forward by the professors. And they didn't understand me. I was rebellious, both in high school and at the academy. I couldn't learn any more there. So I left the art world and started a normal life with a job at Gladsaxe Council, where I could make more of a difference. My work is not made for the art world. I had to get out of there to make any kind of difference. The art world was and is a very closed world. That's why I got involved in activism. And yes, it was an attempt to start from scratch. Which is why *The Model* is a free zone – nothing that makes it part of the commercial market is allowed to enter it. Our commercialised society is insane and grotesque. It infuriates me.

The introduction of an open, process-oriented concept of the artwork

SH: What was it that led to the creation of *The Model* and its groundbreaking social aesthetics, which have almost become standard practice today?

PN: Pontus Hultén, the director of Moderna Museet, was a very open person. Previously, in 1966, he'd let the French artist Niki de Saint Phalle build a huge, female womb children and adults could enter. He really wanted to break things down and open them up. In my case, the exhibition originated in some political interventions in Copenhagen in 1961 based on women entering the workforce. We were fighting for children's right to have opportunities to develop, because there was nothing for them. In the Nørrebro neighbourhood of Copenhagen we made a play area for children without asking the owners of the area for permission - they

would just have said no. What I wanted to emphasise was that children's creativity is incredibly important, but that it was under-prioritised. The battle we fought also led to the introduction of a much higher degree of movement and creativity. Which was the goal. In 1968 there was a lot of enthusiasm. There was momentum and reforms in the true sense of the word 'reform' – improvements. I was a reformist because I wanted change and fought for it through direct action in Nørrebro. I was invited to Stockholm to do something similar, and the idea of an intervention at Moderna Museet in Stockholm was at the back of my mind – to turn the whole museum into a big playground to really emphasise the importance of the project. Because that would be something else than small interventions here and there. Occupying an entire museum attracts a lot more attention, and brings a completely different kind of aesthetics into the white cube. I was lucky that Pontus Hultén was positive – as long as I found the money myself. He gave me six weeks at the museum, and because I had a Master's grant I could fund the exhibition, since it was also a research project. It also helped that so many people offered to work for free during the entire exhibition period. I was there myself every day. Students from the design school helped to build *The Model* during the first two weeks, and during the exhibition lots of volunteers ran it on a daily basis. The museum gave us a lot of freedom to do what we wanted. We called ourselves 'The Working Group', even though the group was only one other person – Gunilla – and me. In retrospect, it was probably the collective authorship of the work that contributed to its erasure from history. Because an artwork needs an artist's signature to be recognised in the art world. In the introduction to the exhibition I wrote that for children it was a playground, but that for those who didn't play it was an exhibition. Because in Stockholm in 1968 adults didn't participate actively in the children's play. They watched, and were not part of the work. In 2014 the adults participate, and that's positive. I see parents lying on the foam rubber and catching their kids. It's great, because that relationship to their parents is something the children can use. There's much more interaction today, and it's really important that the parents are part of it all. But the fundamen-

tal idea behind the work is still that it's a free zone for children.

SH: The work is sometimes described as utopian. Do you agree that it has a utopian potential?

PN: It did in 1968, but it doesn't today. Back then the utopia was for adults – the children were the utopia. Today it's not a utopia. Today it's a critique of the concept of reality that exists for children. I don't think the concept of utopia is a very precise framework for the project. It's too broad. 'Model' is an accurate term. I simply present a model.

SH: How would you define the concept of the artwork you operate with?

PN: I call it social aesthetics: The work consists of the people in it. Without the children, it's just a framework – just timber standing there weeping. The work is not interesting without the children. It was ahead of its time, and the time it was made in reacted very critically. There was a professor at the art academy, for example, who stood up in the canteen at lunchtime and shouted that I was destroying art with the shit I was doing up in Stockholm. As a student I found the academy obsolete in its methods and its teaching, so at the end of my studies I chose to work for Gladsaxe Council, where I was allowed to design playgrounds. Several of those playgrounds still exist today. At the end of the 1970s I left the art world completely and started to teach. In 1998 I got a call from an art history student called Lars Bang Larsen. The artist Ole Sparring had told him that if he wanted to know anything about social art in the 1960s, he should talk to me. Lars Bang Larsen and me talked, he wrote his master's thesis on *The Model*, and organised a couple of exhibitions with my documentation photos of *The Model*. I later donated the photos to the museum of contemporary art MACBA in Barcelona, on condition that they published a book on the project. The book suddenly gave the project a voice.⁽³⁾ Everyone had forgotten it, because it hadn't been written about. Nobody knew about it. The book meant the project

was rediscovered and more exhibitions documenting it followed - most recently the reconstruction of *The Model* at ARKEN.

SH: What differences do you experience between exhibitions documenting the work and its reconstruction?

PN: I've enjoyed exhibiting documentation of *The Model* from 1968, for example at Tate Liverpool in 2013. But when you exhibit documentation, you remain within the context of art history... You don't build anything new. It seems right to rebuild *The Model* today, because the work's critical and educational point is still relevant. Rebuilding *The Model* in 2014 addresses new issues – that children are no longer particularly physical, but mainly relate to a two-dimensional universe. But the overall goal is intact: The work still offers an alternative to alienation and focuses on community.

An educational project

SH: A central aspect of *The Model* is that it makes children central to the actions of the institution of the museum. Despite ARKEN being known for its outreach projects and strong focus on children and education, *The Model* has changed the museum radically. With the clatter and clutter of cardboard boxes and wallpaper paste, the children fill the museum with a creative DIY atmosphere. It has become a place full of life and children's voices. We've even had to soundproof the entire lower floor because of the noise made by playing children. *The Model* makes a difference at the museum, and has had around 160,000 visitors in 10 months. What's its educational purpose?

PN: The keyword for me is community. Community is an alternative to the commercial market, and *The Model* provides a framework for community. When children dress up and paint their faces, they have the chance to try out different roles and enter relationships with each other. I want to create an extended social aesthetic, where children, teenagers and adults create a cultural base for themselves by being together physically. It's not impor-

tant for me whether art happens or is shown in a museum. The cultural community that thrives in places like allotments is also an important cultural base for society. Museums only reach a very small section of the population, because they're churches for the elite. *The Model* gives children and teenagers who don't usually go to museums a reason to come. We could see that today, when we walked around the work. That group of immigrant kids who were painting on the walls probably hadn't been to a museum before, because they didn't feel the museum was a place for them. I want to encourage a community that can provide an alternative to the society we have now, where all our relationships are commercialised. In 2014 it's about our children reclaiming the three-dimensional world.

SH: Children love *The Model*. The minute they see it they light up and then rush up onto the bridge and jump down into the white and pink sea of foam rubber. They do it again and again until they're red in the face. Then they play with the tyres, and often get engrossed by putting on face paints and dressing up in costumes – usually with their classmates. Then they start jumping off the bridge again ... When children play in *The Model* they actually have the freedom to do what they want, yet it's all pretty level-headed?

PN: Children are highly social and conscious of what they do. They take care of each other, even if they don't know each other. And you can see that when they paint on the walls and floors, they never cross the yellow and black dotted line that surrounds the exhibition. The three-dimensional is central to the work. Instead of sitting playing on an iPad, they have to move and relate to other children. Mentally, we're becoming more and more closed. We have to consume and consume. I see alienation on a massive scale. Educational work with children should be given far more attention. I worry, for example, that kindergartens today have become storage facilities. If you compare 1968 with 2014 there was much more freedom and openness in 1968. The effervescence of play has almost disappeared, because all the rules and regulations make playgrounds really predictable – places

where children are not allowed to do anything. Today there's only one activity playground left in Denmark, and that's illegal because the EU is so afraid that something will happen to the children.

SH: What are your dreams for the future?

PN: I dream about building a project on one or more of the large housing estates in Denmark together with parents, so the kids can have an area that's more interesting than a lawn or a maximum-security playground where they don't want to be. I was recently talking to two young, Swedish artists who are trying to raise the money to reconstruct *The Balloon* in Sweden.⁽⁴⁾ I hope it works out, because I'd like there to be someone take over after me. ▲

Stine Høholt

holds a PhD and MA and is Chief Curator at ARKEN.

Palle Nielsen

is an artist.

NOTES

(1) Quote from the English translation of Guy debord's *La Société du Spectacle, The Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, Detroit, 1977.◀

(2) Ibid.◀

(3) Lars Bang Larsen, *Palle Nielsen. The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society (1968)*, Barcelona: MACBA, Museu D'art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2010.◀

(4) *The Balloon* was originally built on a housing estate in Västerås on the outskirts of Stockholm shortly after *The Model* had been taken down.◀



**It happens in the
Modern Museum
in Stockholm.
October 1968.**





**It is only an
exhibition,
because children
play in an art
museum.**

