Between Activism, Installation Art and Relational Aesthetics

Palle Nielsen's The Model – Then and Now

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I am lucky enough to live near Utterslev Mose, a nature reserve close to Copenhagen, not far from several large, activity playgrounds that are popular with local children and adults alike. There used to be a troll's head carved into an old tree that the adventurous could climb with ropes, but nature has gradually reclaimed it, and today the tree has totally disappeared. On the other hand, the area now hosts the artist Peter Land's sculptural playground, where brave children can enter the jaws of a submerged giant and find their own way out through the hole in his head. Such fairy-tale places for the imagination and creative, physical play are not, of course, unique to my local area of Denmark. But the question is whether we would have them without Palle Nielsen's *The Model* from 1968, the activity playgrounds that emerged during the same period, and most of all the progressive educational and activist movement for better and more free conditions for children's creativity and play – a movement Palle Nielsen was also part of. Probably not. The lively participation of both children and adults in *The Model* at ARKEN in 2014 confirms the extent to which the culture of both children and adults in Denmark is indebted to the pioneering work of the late 1960s.

As Palle Nielsen recounts in this book,(1) there was an acute lack of playgrounds in the 1950s and well into the 1960s, just as children's creativity was under-prioritised in schools.(2) These factors, together with his involvement in the construction of an unauthorised playground in Copenhagen by activists in 1968,

inspired the idea behind the project *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the autumn of 1968. A crucial source and key to understanding *The Model* is Lars Bang Larsen's book *Palle Nielsen*. *The Model*: *A Model for a Qualitative Society (1968)* from 2010. In the book, Lars Bang Larsen attempts to reconstruct *The Model* in words. His goal is to 'attempt to recreate the event's particular time and language'(3) on the basis of a thorough analysis of archive materials, conversations with Palle Nielsen, and an in-depth historical investigation of *The Model's* links to contemporary movements.

My reading is directly indebted to Bang Larsen's convincing analysis and thought-provoking art and art historical contextualisation of *The Model*, but it also shifts the point of view. Whereas Bang Larsen transports us back to 1968 – albeit with a reflective awareness of our historical distance to the event – I am more interested in the relationship between *The Model* then and now.
In what follows, I therefore begin by looking back and locating *The Model* in two art historical frameworks. I examine its connection to installation art, which became established as a genre during the 1960s, then identify potential parallels between *The Model* and so-called relational aesthetics, both of which can contribute to our understanding of the meaning of *The Model* today. As others have noted before me, *The Model* can be seen to have worked with what became known as relational aesthetics during the 1990s. Seen from this perspective, Palle Nielsen's project can be seen as twenty-five to thirty years ahead of its time. Bang Larsen is thus right in describing *The Mode*l as a project that cannot be confined to a single art historical category of either the past or the present.(4) The high social ambitions of *The Model* move it beyond the ideals of the open artwork of its time, and its appeal to the involvement of the audience goes way beyond the most radical art projects of the period, because it involves children. In other words, a comparison with neither installation art nor relational aesthetics can fully encompass *The Model*: In both its historical and current form the project is far too complex and multifaceted. Such comparisons are, however, useful in analysing key aspects of the aesthetics of *The Model,* and make it possible to specify how *The*

Model relates to key categories in art since the 1960s. Here, I am thinking primarily about the body, space, time, the audience, participation, interaction, collaboration, the art institution and, last but not least, the still widespread expectation of meeting 'the artwork' in the form of a static, physical object. Given that *The Model* was beyond the field of vision of most Danish and Swedish art historians before Lars Bang Larsen's book was published in 2010, a discussion of the project's relationship to the artistic currents of both its own period and posterity would seem timely.

The art historical considerations of the aesthetics of *The Model* then lead me to a discussion of the differences between exhibiting and experiencing *The Mode*l then and now. After following my own children's schooling at a Danish state school over the past 10 years – attending the openings of their painting exhibitions, watching several plays written by the pupils in collaboration with their teachers, and seeing lots of creative audiovisual project presentations – it is my impression that there are some fundamental differences between the socio-cultural context of 1968 and the early 21st century. I therefore argue that we should look for the artistic, cultural and political meaning *The Model* has for us today in the historical and cultural span between then and now. When I write 'us', I primarily mean adults. My approach is that of an art historian and cultural analyst: I possess neither the empathic art communicator's close experience of working with children in *The Model*, nor the toolbox of systematic interview techniques and field studies of the researcher of children's culture to investigate what children 'get out of' playing in *The Model* at ARKEN.

The Model as Installation

When the young Danish artist Palle Nielsen headed the transformation of Moderna Museet in Stockholm into a gigantic activity playground in 1968 it was a groundbreaking project that generated debate in both the media and the urban activist environment that Nielsen himself and the idea for the project came from. From the activists' point of view, it was transgressive to enter an alliance with the art institution, and for the art institution it was a radical critique that transformed the hushed, white halls into a

free space for children's noisy, physical play. In 1968, *The Model* included a large wooden structure children could climb on and jump down from, landing in a large sea of foam rubber. Children could extend the structure using hammers and saws, paint it, or dress up in old theatre costumes, wear masks of the political icons of the day, and play loud music from several gramophones simultaneously. *The Model* thus reflected Palle Nielsen's belief that the free play, curiosity and creativity of children could show adults how to create a better society.

The health and safety regulations of today have penetrated the very structure of the work, so also physically *The Model* made at ARKEN in 2014 is a different model. But the ideal of children as guides to making a better society and the message that happiness is to be found in free creativity and play remain intact. As Bang Larsen wrote of *The Model* in Stockholm, for a short interval children became 'agents with an identity of their own who could question the supposed authority of adults. The play of the child seems to tell the adult producer-consumer, 'You know nothing of fun, of the disinterested obtainment of pleasure.' (5) For Palle Nielsen, in other words, childhood is a political subject relating to children's well-being, development, freedom, creative learning through play, but also to childhood as a role model for adult life.

The Model realises this vision of the playing child as a guide in a spatial structure that children and adults can spend time in and interact with. In art historical terminology, this kind of work can be called an installation.(6) It was during the 1960s that installation art became established as an art genre, so on this front Palle Nielsen also had his finger on the pulse. An installation is a work that organises different objects and materials in a spatial structure, making the formation of space a crucial, signifying element of the work. Installations often form a spatial whole, and are therefore often what recent media research calls *ambient*. 'Ambient' is a loanword from Italian, meaning 'surroundings' or 'environment'. When used in an art context, it refers to the experience of all-embracing immersion into the environment. The word comes from the Italian *ambire*, which means 'to surround', pointing to the subject's sensory experience of being surrounded by a more or

less clearly defined and demarcated whole. In the case of Palle Nielsen, it is the staging of children's collective activities to form a spatial whole that makes the work into what the 1968 subtitle defines as 'A Model for a Qualitative Society'. Teeming with children, the installation becomes a populated model for a future society – a radical utopia.

Because installations are often transient works, closely related to their time and place and highly dependent on external circumstances, they have often been used to express a critique of the modernist idea of the autonomy of art, defending instead an understanding of the work as closely related to the historical and social contexts it emerges within. In retrospect, it seems obvious that Palle Nielsen, who actually trained as a painter, would choose the new medium of the day – installation. Whereas a painting adheres to the flat surface of the wall, and a sculpture has traditionally been separated from its surroundings by being elevated on a distancing pedestal, an installation opens a wealth of possibilities for interesting bridge-building between three-dimensional art and architecture. In fact, installation has also become a favourite medium for architects to try out and present new ideas and visions. On top of which installations, like buildings, usually allow visitors to enter the work itself, instead of standing outside observing from a distance. Many installations actually need the participation of the audience to be complete as works. It was this artistic, aesthetic potential and invitation to participation Palle Nielsen drew on when he developed *The Model*.

The Model's approach to the audience was, however, more advanced. Nielsen used different approaches to children and adults, and it was in the interaction between them that the utopian, political perspective of *The Model* emerged. How this interaction was imagined was explained in the introductory statement in the exhibition catalogue. Entirely in keeping with the spirit of the project, Nielsen signed the statement with the collective pseudonym *Arbetsgruppan* – 'The Working Group' – despite the fact that no such group existed.(7)

[...]
Their play is the exhibition.
The exhibition is the work of children.
There is no exhibition.
It is only an exhibition because the children are playing in an art museum.
It is only an exhibition for those who are not playing.
That's why we call it a model.
Perhaps it will be the model for the society children want.
Perhaps children can tell us so much about their own world that this can be a model for us.
We hope so.
[...](8)

Participation as a New Ideal

The Model was, in other words, constructed as an activity playground and interactive exploratorium for a child audience for whom the performative was central: Play, the kinaesthetic involvement of the body, creative self-expression. For the adult audience, who in 1968 largely stayed on the sidelines of the installation watching, the installation was to function didactically and re-educationally. As Bang Larsen notes, *The Model* actually revives the original, historical educational and civilising function of the conventional public art museum, despite the declaration in the catalogue that 'there is no exhibition', only play.(9) That the apparent conflict between play and education in active citizenship is negligible, becomes apparent when *The Model* is seen in the context of the branch of installation art the art historian Angelika Nollert and others have called 'performative installation'.(10) Performative installation is a term that emphasises the work's active involvement of the audience and its character as a situation where there is an exchange between people or between the work and its audience. It is a form of work that – expressed in didactic terms – creates learning through play or, even better, by involving the audience in an experimental investigation of scenarios that, at the outset, they do not really know what are. A performative installation can involve people or other

elements that activate the audience as a kind of participant in the work. In this way, the installation is as much a performance in time as it is an object in space.

The performative installation had its forerunners in the 1960s, with American artists like Allen Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg and not least Robert Morris, whose retrospective exhibition at Tate Gallery in 1971 I would like to explore briefly, because it was almost contemporaneous with *The Model,* was made for a major art museum, and has also been reinstalled in recent years in a modified form. At Tate Gallery Morris broke the institutional codes of the museum and the pompous presentation of sacrosanct artworks as objects of quiet contemplation by building an environment with 'participation' objects that physically active visitors could use – not dissimilar to the fitness equipment currently being erected in city spaces for free use by the public. There were steel ramps with heavy objects that could be dragged up and down, large objects that could be set in motion, a beam to balance on, etc. Critics were generally sceptical of all the bodily abandon Morris' aesthetic playground unleashed, but the audience took to the installation with alacrity.(11)

Both Morris' and Nielsen's projects were intended as radical institutional critique. They aimed to subvert the white cube and the norms that dictated museum visitors assume a contemplative and distanced position of spectatorship. Both artists wanted to open possibilities for sensory cognition through the body at play, but whereas Morris involved an adult audience, Nielsen's work was made for children first, then adults. It is important to remember that Nielsen's institutional critique distinguishes itself from the more general, categorical attitude to the art institution at the time, when artists and art activists were either entirely pro or anti the institution. Nielsen's process-oriented, collective project, which he made in collaboration with Moderna Museet and a group of activists and volunteers, was also methodologically and materially different to the documentary and text-based works of institutional critique.(12) It is precisely these differences that form the basis for a comparison with the relational aesthetics of the 1990s.

The Model and Relational Aesthetics

The term relational aesthetics was introduced by the French art theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998 to describe a major current in art in the 1990s, which grappled with what he saw as one of contemporary art's most urgent challenges: the creation of relationships with the surrounding world for a field – i.e. visual art – that is generally perceived as consisting of 'representations'. Art was no longer to merely 'represent' existing conditions in the world, so the audience could experience them second hand. Art was to be an activity that created new conditions in the world and involved its audiences and participants first hand. Art was to be a 'state of encounter'.(13) The art practices Bourriaud refers to experiment in this way by using social relationships as a method to connect art with the lifeworld.(14) Bourriaud therefore sees relational aesthetics as a development of the historical avant-garde's emancipation projects and the critique of capitalist society's impoverishment of everyday life - from Dada through Surrealism to the Situationists.(15) There is, however, one crucial difference: Whereas the historical avant-garde had issued revolutionary visions for a utopian future world, the ambitions of relational aesthetics are more modestly concerned with life here and now. The point is not to aim for the impossible, but to realise what is possible. As Borriaud writes, relational aesthetics builds models of possible worlds. The change it seeks consists of '*learning to inhabit the world in a better way* [...] the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real'.(16) The relational artist thus works socially and practically with interpersonal relationships and social communication, initiating temporary changes at an everyday level and forming transient 'micro-communities' or momentary groupings that dissolve again when the group the artwork gathers within and around itself disperses.(17)

> 'Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies, any stance that is 'directly' critical of society is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that is nowadays impossible, not to say regressive.(18)

Seen from the perspective of relational aesthetics rather than in the context of installation art, the material, spatial structure plays a secondary role. The playground becomes a stage and a prop – a means to the end of generating social activity, creative play activities and the mutual interaction that constitute the work's real micro-utopia.

From Utopia to Micro-Utopia

Does children's play mean the same thing today as it did then? The titles of the two exhibitions give us a clue. In 1968, the title was *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society*. The title pointed to the project as a symbolic space that functioned both as an ambitious social experiment, as well as presenting a visionary model of society that put freedom at the top of the agenda and let children show the way – a utopian, political model to be followed. The steering hand of the artist was also hidden behind the collective pseudonym *The Working Group*. In 2014, *The Model* is presented in the artist's name. The subtitle has also disappeared, and the somewhat abstract main title is instead accompanied by a motto in the digital museum on ARKEN's website announcing 'A Feeling of Freedom' – putting an individual feel-good experience firmly centre stage.(19)

It is widely accepted that context has an influence on an artwork, and that a change of context can therefore change the way the work appears to its audience. This is especially clear in works that are closely linked to the debates and movements of a specific period. What were once political, provocative and pioneering actions, can for audiences years later seem entirely natural – or the opposite, i.e. as documents from a remote past people no longer relate to. *The Model* is the former: It seems 'natural' in Denmark today. Both installation art and relational aesthetics have – for better or for worse – become mainstream, and today's audiences are, on the whole, used to them. It can also be difficult to see Palle Nielsen's *The Model* as a prototype for a qualitatively different society. Rather, it seems to be a radicalised and thereby clearer manifestation of the ideas and social relationships that are widespread in society today, where creativity has become an

omnipresent buzzword with politicians applauding 'the creative industries', 'the creative class' and growth-generating innovation. *The Model* also no longer functions as an institutionally critical intervention in a museum that created children's museums staffed by qualified art educators years ago, and that has an institutionalised tradition of annual sensory exhibitions for children.

So what does *The Model's* formative and educational potential consist of today? To borrow from Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics, we could say that in 2014 *The Model* has been downscaled from a utopia to a micro-utopia. This is not synonymous with the project being depoliticised, but it does mean that it has been politically downscaled to an everyday, micropolitical level. *The Model* of 2014 makes a virtue out of involving all the audiences present as first-hand participants. Children, parents and grandparents all join in – and there are no demands to think about social alternatives in the midst of all the fun. Instead, we are encouraged to 'feel' freedom. *The Model* of 2014 is also a micro-utopia because its relationship to society is mimetic (or 'imitative', in Bourriaud's terminology), close to the children's museums and playgrounds I know so well from where I live.

I have argued that *The Model* of 1968 and *The Model* of 2014 are two very different art projects and statements, and that the specific meaning of *The Model* for us today emerges in the historical and cultural span between then and now. If we look back at 1968 and admire the art activist drive *The Model* was the product of, and if we lament the loss of the political radicalism of the social utopia the activity playground confronted people with then, we also have to remember the lack of playgrounds in cities at the time, the distance between children and adults, and that the educational activities we take for granted in Scandinavian schools and museums today were few and far between.

In 2014 *The Model* appears not as a utopian model, but rather as a historical barometer for both positive and negative changes in the perception of and conditions for childhood, creativity, play, the freedom of the individual, and the relationship between children and adults since the 1960s. Like the micro-utopias

of relational aesthetics, *The Model* shows us that we actually can learn to live in the world in a better way. ▲

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NOTES

(1) My Art is Not Made for the Art World'. An interview with the artist Palle Nielsen by Stine Høholt in this publication, 54-63.◀

(2) For a thorough account of Palle Nielsen's involvement in activist activities for playgrounds in the cities of Copenhagen and Stockholm, see Lars Bang Larsen's text in *Palle Nielsen. The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society (1968)*, ed. Clara Plasencia, Barcelona: MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2010.◀

(3) Larsen, 32.◀

(4) Larsen, 33-34.◀

(5) Larsen, 23.◀

(6) For a thorough introduction to installation art and its aesthetics see Anne Ring Petersen, *Installationskunsten mellem billede og scene*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009, p. 39ff.◀

(7) Larsen, 76-77.◀

(8) Palle Nielsen's declaration at the beginning of the exhibition catalogue *Modellen. En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle,* Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1968, 2.◀

(9) Larsen, 76-77.◀

(10) Angelika Nollert, 'Performative Installation', in *Performative Installation*, ed. Angelika Nollert, Cologne: Smoeck, 2003, 8-29.◀

(11) Petersen, 287-88.◀

(12) Larsen, 35.◀

(13) Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon, France: Les Presses du Reel, (1998) 2002, 18.◀

(14) Bourriaud, 7-9.◀

(15) Bourriaud, 12. Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics has

been met with criticism by art historians including Claire Bishop and Hal Foster. I will not address their criticisms here, since they are not directed at Bourriaud's analysis of the methods and features of relational aesthetics (which are in focus here), but rather at the optimistic rhetoric Bourriaud uses to describe collaboration and participation, including his high expectations of the political and democratic potential of relational aesthetics and his failure to address its mechanisms of social exclusion. See Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, no. 110, 2004, pp. 51-79 and Hal Foster, 'Chat Rooms//2004', in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, London og Cambridge, Mass., Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2006, 190-95.◀

(16) Bourriaud, 13 (original emphasis).◀

(17) Bourriaud, 17 and 43.◀

(18) Bourriaud, 31.◀

(19) THE MODEL/ PALLE NIELSEN/ A Feeling of Freedom', http://uk.arken.dk/udstilling/palle-nielsen/
Last accessed 18.11.2014.◀