

# The Model as a Site of Inspiration

Lars Geer Hammershøj

ARKEN's construction of Palle Nielsen's *The Model* is, as we know, a reconstruction of his original playground installation at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1968. Which is what makes it interesting, because a reconstruction is a repetition. But a repetition is never the same: Due to the distance generated by the passing of time, it inevitably becomes something else. *The Model* today no longer appears as an emancipatory project for social change, just as the playground today is a less anarchistic and more controlled experience than it was in 1968, if we are to rely on the photographs and documentation from that time. Furthermore, the exhibition is hardly going to revolutionise the art museum, since no self-respecting museum today is without a department and activity programme for children.

These differences between *The Model* now and then are interesting, since the distance between the original and the repetition creates a mirror image, which can cast a different light on the work and the role of the work in contemporary society and at the museum.

These are differences worth exploring. Children today seem just as enthusiastic about *The Model* as they were then, so what is it that makes *The Model* work as a playground? What were the anarchistic powers of play Palle Nielsen unleashed at the museum that have apparently not left it since? Is there a closer relationship between art and play than we usually admit? And how can the playground and the museum be understood as places where these forces are set free?

## 1. The Model as the Expression of Sensory Forces

Children love playgrounds, but not all playgrounds. Some years ago, Copenhagen City Council started closing down traditional playgrounds and replacing them with sensory playgrounds and aestheticized playgrounds. One of them was the playground on Bopa Square, in the heart of the Østerbro neighbourhood of Copenhagen. Today it is one of the most deserted playgrounds in Denmark, despite the fact that it is in one of the areas of Copenhagen with the largest population of children. The slide has been removed, as have the tower and the rockers on springs. It usually takes about a minute before one of the children visiting the playground for the first time says 'This is boring, let's go ...'.

This was what originally prompted me why children love traditional playground elements like sandboxes, paddling pools, slides and swings. And what about new 'classics' like garden trampolines and water slides in activity parks? That children love them, might not be coincidental. These activities might be important for the same reason that children are naturally curious and want to learn and want to get bigger.

My answer is that children love this kind of playground equipment because it enables the immediate expression and experience of sensuous forces, which can be seen to form the basis for and cause processes of formation or the cultivation of character, as well as processes of creativity.(1) Sensuous forces are what cause us to change our way of relating to the world, others and ourselves: They are what determine whether we react openly or sceptically to what we encounter and the new. There are four sensuous forces that have been described by others, but not previously been connected: The imagination, which enables synthesis and is a prerequisite for cognition(2); judgement, as in immediate judgements based on subjective emotions(3); transcendence, which causes and enables us to transcend habitual ways of thinking and acting(4); and vitality, which through repetition generates an intensity that erases differences and changes the state of life.(5)

My hypothesis is that traditional playground equipment can enable the expression and experience of these different sensuous forces. In the sandbox, the force of imagination is given free

rein, since the sand can be moulded into anything from a cake to a town with buildings and roads. 'Look!' the child exclaims and points. In the paddling pool, the force of judgement is at play, determining the direction and patterns of moving water and whether the child playing with the water will get wet, and not least when and how wet. This usually provokes a screeched 'No!'. On the slide, the force of transcendence is at play, as the child takes off and experiences a momentary suspension of gravity. This experience usually provokes a scream of joy like 'Whee!'. On the swing, the force of vitality is at play, as the monotonous swinging back and forth can gradually bring the person on the swing into an almost trance-like state. The swinging is often accompanied by monotonous, repetitive singing, like 'My mummy is coming to pick me up, my mummy is coming to pick me up ...'. Similarly, the trampoline can be seen to combine the suspension of gravity on the slide and the monotone movement on the swing, here in a vertical movement of up and down, just as the water slide combines the force of judgement in the paddling pool with the force of transcendence on the slide.

The next question now is whether *The Model* can be understood from this perspective. *The Model* consists of several elements. First and foremost it is a large construction with two towers joined by a suspended bridge, above what can best be described as a dry pool full of pieces of soft foam rubber instead of water. Children can go up into the towers, then onto the bridge, where they can jump down into the pieces of foam rubber.

It is a simple playground construction, but it works. Children love it, and are excited and enthused by jumping and landing and diving into the pieces of foam rubber. Sometimes tension builds when, for example, children walk back and forth before they jump, or when they jump with their eyes shut. Sometimes they continue to play with the act of judgment by hiding between the pieces of foam rubber, or allowing only an arm or leg to stick out.

In my analysis, *The Model* can be seen to work because the construction combines the slide's suspension of the body's weight and the paddling pool's judgement of when and how to

land in the foam rubber the children can pretend is water. In other words, the tower construction apparently gives children the opportunity for an immediate expression and bodily experience of the force of transcendence and the force of judgement.

## **2. The Model as a Creative and Formative Activity Playground**

As mentioned above, it is far from coincidental that children enjoy and are drawn by activities that give them these opportunities. Because the force of transcendence and the force of judgement are sensuous forces crucial in any creative and formative process.

In this article I use the word formative (and formation) in the sense of the cultivation of character, as in the German concept of *Bildung*, which occurs through the transcendence of our own world – including our habitual ways of acting and understanding and our own ideas and preferences – to involve ourselves in a larger world in one way or another. This transcendence is a condition for experiencing the world as different. These experiences are formative and cultivate the character if they change the way we relate to ourselves and to others.

Inherent to *Bildung* or the cultivation of character is the process of developing taste, since the issue is not only changing the self, but improving the self. The cultivation of character therefore always involves general ideals and concrete models for cultivation. It is not only an issue of having knowledge of and assuming the values and taste of others, but about developing our own taste and exercising our own judgement. Which groups should we get involved in? What should we take a stand on - and what not? How should we relate to ourselves and others?

In a similar way, creativity can be described as the interplay of these sensuous forces. In contrast to the cultivation of character, creativity is not about changing our way of relating to ourselves and others, but about being open to the creation of a new idea or a new expression. The standard definition of a creative product is that it is both novel and relevant.<sup>(6)</sup> But what the processes that lead to the creative product are remains unclear. The incubation phase in particular, when we are no longer working with the problem but have not yet had a new idea, seems

to be surrounded by mystery and characterised by a disturbing feeling that something is out of synch or amiss.(7)

The incubation phase can be understood as a process of orientating discernment, drawing attention to areas between which similarities can be sensed and which has the potential for combining different elements in a new idea or a new expression. This incurs the force of judgement by allowing what is not relevant to fall aside. This is a largely sensuous process, which explains why people usually have their best ideas in places like in bed at night, in the shower in the morning, or on walks or holidays when they are often in a semi-conscious state. The judgement process is the process that gives the creative product its character of relevance. On the other hand, it is the transcendence process that gives the product its character of being novel. It is the force of transcendence that causes the break with existing thinking and enables two elements that were previously separate to be combined in a new idea.(8)

Play is important, because play is the original form and source of all later forms of creativity and formative interaction with other.(9) During play, people create something that did not previously exist. It could be inventing and playing in a make-believe world, or making something that resembles something real without actually being real. Similarly, play is a formative activity since it presupposes that everyone involved transcends themselves, identifies with the game, and surrenders themselves to the same playful atmosphere. This gives play its characteristic character of intense interaction. The transcendence of the self is very concrete in games when we play at being someone else and interact with others in new ways, for examples when playing 'house' and taking on the roles of mother, father and children.

*The Model* can be seen to not only inspire play as the expression of sensuous forces in the towers, but also play as a creative and formative activity. *The Model* also has wardrobes with a wide range of costumes children can dress up in, as well as face paints they can use to paint their faces or other parts of their bodies. This has become a standard play activity in Denmark, not only in day-care centres, but also museums where children can dress up according to exhibition themes, etc. The point is that these

play activities work because they support one of the central, transcendent elements of play: Playing at being someone else.

On the other hand, *The Model* is a different kind of playground because children are free to continue building on the cardboard constructions that have already been made by others, to paint the wooden constructions, and to move tyres and other elements, just as they are allowed to paint the museum's floor and walls. In the 1968 version of *The Model*, there were even tools like hammers and saws. These forms of play are typical of the activity playground. There is a strong tradition of activity playgrounds in Denmark, dating back to the 'junk playground' in Emdrup in 1943. (10) Here the idea was that children should express their creativity and build their own playground: The original playground consisted solely of a lean-to and a field with lots of crates, planks, car seats, etc. that the children could use to build their own houses, dens, towers, furniture and wooden horses.

What is special about play in activity playgrounds, is that children build and paint things – towers, dens, ships, furniture, etc. – that are imaginative, but resemble real things, not least by virtue of the fact that they are 'child size'. These are things children can play with physically and play imaginary games in. The activity playground therefore enables different forms of *spatial* make-believe and production, in which children can be in and move between what is created through play. This is an important experience and sensation of how people live and organise life, not only in buildings but also in the spaces between them.

### **3. Art Versus Play**

The original version of *The Model* was a huge success and a major draw. The Swedish Minister of Education at the time, Olof Palme, even came by and jumped into the dry pool. On the other hand, *The Model* was highly provocative in the art world, not least at the Danish art academy, where Palle Nielsen was increasingly isolated. He was even attacked by one of the professors, who accused him of undermining the authority of the academy because he 'had let children make a mess of that fine museum in Stockholm'. (11)

Where *The Model* still apparently has the potential to provoke, is in questioning what art is. With its intention of turning the art museum into a playground and liberating the creative force of play, *The Model* creates an encounter that more than hints at the affinity between play and art as creative processes. But at the time this was an affinity the art world was reluctant to acknowledge. Palle Nielsen's work therefore – more or less inadvertently – thoroughly rocked the self-perception of art and the artist as exclusive and original. A trace of this can be seen today in the way artists have stopped using the word creative or describing themselves as creative now that everyone else has started to talk about the importance of creativity in knowledge-based society – a phenomenon seen in both Denmark and elsewhere.

According to Arthur Koestler, we could also claim that art and play are basically variations of one and the same process. Both are creative processes, and both pass through the same phases, but they differ significantly in producing two different kinds of 'creative products'. According to Koestler, art is the expression of *confrontational* elements that are joined and frozen in the artwork. In play and humour, on the other hand, a series of 'jokes' of *colliding* elements is produced by pointing out the similarities between normally disparate things that usually have nothing to do with each other, for example by playing 'this stick is a horse' or by jokes staging a clash between concrete and symbolic similarities, which either create a play universe or provoke laughter. (12)

#### **4. The Playground and Museum as a Site of Inspiration**

In 1968 *The Model* had the subtitle 'A Model for a Qualitative Society', underlining its original political and activist intentions. The idea was that unleashing the anarchist forces of play could contribute to changing society. This is an intention familiar from the politically oriented part of the progressive education movement in Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s, which was rooted in left-wing politics and cultural radicalism. Here, emancipatory education was seen as a means to create a different society. But it was a more moderate and developmental-psychology oriented part of

the progressive education movement that became dominant in the development of Danish schooling. The goal here was not to change society, but rather the conditions and view of children. Danish liberal education was seen as a means to allow children to develop according to their true nature, and learn and play according to their own desires.(13)

The reconstruction of *The Model* at ARKEN reflects and confirms this development. The immediate and obvious idea of the museum as a site of political activism has been lost. On the other hand, the repetition of *The Model* confirms that valuing and focussing on children and their play is taken for granted today, also at the museum. Indeed, to such a degree that instead of seeming provocative, today the playground of *The Model* seems affirmative, or rather it demonstrates what is taken for granted as taken for granted: Today nobody would disagree that there should also be room for children to play and express themselves at museums.

It does, however, raise the issue of what kind of place the museum is. What is interesting is that *The Model* also and originally asks this question by moving the playground into the museum. Because the playground is by definition a place that inspires a specific form of creative activity, i.e. play.

As far as the museum is concerned, it is also interesting that the Greek origin of the word for museum 'mouseion' actually means 'the seat or shrine of the muses'. Like the playground, the museum was originally a place for inspiration, something made very clear in early modern museums like The British Museum from 1759, Le Louvre from 1793 and Museumsinsel Berlin from 1810. These museums were public, national institutions with the goal of inspiring people to become cultivated citizens according to the ideals of civilisation prevalent at the time. The art of antiquity was to cultivate the universal subject according to the ideal of humanity, natural history the educated subject according to the ideal of enlightenment, and national cultural history or art the national citizen according to the ideal of patriotism.

The question *The Model* helps raise, is what the museum of today should inspire. If today's museum can be thought of as a place that inspires the cultivation of character, which artworks,



cultures and role models express the civilisation ideals of our age? What, after all, does it mean to be a human being today? Maybe the return of *The Model* implies that being a human being today is about being playful. About being open to new thoughts and not dismissing 'playing along' in advance. About relating to the world, oneself and others prepared to be open to the new and change ones ways of relating if necessary.

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#### NOTES

(1) See Lars Geer Hammershøj, *Kreativitet – et spørgsmål om dannelse*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel Press, 2012 and Lars Geer Hammershøj, 'Creativity in Education as a Question of Cultivating Sensuous Forces', *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, Vol. 13, September 2014, 168-182.◀

(2) As described by Immanuel Kant in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft 1*, Frankfurt: Surkamp Verlag, 1995 (1781).◀

(3) As described by Immanuel Kant in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp Verlag, 1995 (1790).◀

(4) As described by Friedrich Nietzsche in 'Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben'. Volume I in *Sämtliche Werke*, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag de Gruyter, 1988 (1874).◀

(5) As described by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. New York: Bantam Books, 1963 (1920).◀

(6) See, for example, Margaret A. Boden, 'What is creativity?' in *Dimensions of Creativity*, Margaret A. Boden (ed.), Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994, 75-118 and Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds*, West Sussex: Capstone Publishing Ltd., 2011.◀

(7) Originally described by Henri Poincaré in 'Science and Method' in *The Foundations of Science*, Henri Poincaré (ed.), Washington, 1982 (1908).◀

(8) Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, London: Hutchinson of London, 1964.◀

(9) Lars Geer Hammershøj, 'Hvorfor legen er vigtigere end nogensinde' in *Leg gør os til mennesker – en antologi om legens betydning*, Jacob Zakarias Eyermand et al. (eds.), Taulov: 55 NORD, 2013, 6-18.◀

(10) The playground in Emdrup was the initiative of the Danish landscape architect C.Th. Sørensen.◀

(11) See Lars Henriksen, "Jeg er stadig Palle Nielsen", interview with Palle Nielsen in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 15.12.2012, <http://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kultur/jeg-er-stadig-palle-nielsen> (last accessed 10.11.14)◀

(12) Take, for example, the sequence in Mel Brooks *History of the World, Part 1* (1981) which depicts the historic appearance of the first artist. A caveman painting a cave painting is joined by another caveman, who starts urinating on the cave painting. The scene is accompanied by a voiceover saying "and with the artist came the critic".◀

(13) See, for example, Lars Henrik Schmidt, *Diagnosis III – Pædagogiske forhold*, Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut, 1999 and Ellen Nørgaard, "Pædagogik og kulturradikalisme" in *Dansk pædagogisk Tidsskrift* 3/2000, 78-92.◀







