

A Brief History of The Model

Palle Nielsen, 2013

The Model was created in a period of history marked by economic optimism and the desire for change.

In 1968 industrial society had replaced agrarian society economically, but a lot of social norms and control mechanisms were still rooted in the past.

Some of the younger generation therefore wanted to confront the authoritarian barriers that prevented the changes necessary for a new age.

The imagination and creativity were to be liberated.

We didn't write newspaper articles, but took direct action in city spaces to show alternative solutions and dreams.

As a young artist, I was part of planning and making playground actions in Copenhagen, to show the lack of possibilities for development that children in the Nørrebro area lived with.

Which is why I was invited to Stockholm in 1968, to help plan *Action Dialogue*, a series of direct actions in the Stockholm area that made conditions better for children.

I also had another, more spectacular dream:

Taking over Moderna Museet in Stockholm and turning it into a big, creative space for children to play.

There were several reasons for this imaginative intervention at an illustrious Museum of Modern Art.

First of all, I wanted to deconstruct 'the white cube' as the idea of an art museum.

The idea of a large – usually white – space with flexible walls with paintings hung in rows. Here the audience could walk around reverently, admiring the paintings of the past and the present.

This idea of an art museum was to be changed by the live presence of active, playing children in the museum.
The story of a totally different interactive and participatory art form.

Secondly, for several years I had been interested in the relationship between the artist and the surrounding society – and realised that two completely different worlds existed in the same society.

A cultural elite with the art scene as a platform that continually created 'civilisation norms' for a ruling economic elite – a closed, symbiotic system.

And beyond it: 75% of the population, that had very little knowledge of this closed symbiosis, but were entertained by theatrical displays of silly hats and medals from the age of Hans Christian Andersen and Kierkegaard.

I also knew that beyond it another cultural force existed: community. I knew this because this is where I spent my childhood and youth.

I wanted to open a crack between these two, locked worlds.
To make it natural to visit a Museum of Modern Art because it was exciting and fun.

And to get other artists to seek out normal, social life and relate to community as an important, cultural factor.

And thirdly, I had been given a Master's grant at The School of Architecture in Copenhagen to research children's play in housing areas – beginning in 1969.

The director of Moderna Museet, Pontus Hulten, was positive about the project, which could begin in October 1968. But we had to fund it ourselves - and build it and run it.

I collaborated closely with Gunilla Lundahl, the editor of the journal *Form*. She had a lot of contacts in Stockholm. We managed to raise the money, partly because the exhibition also provided a context for researching children's play.

And thanks to the hard work of many volunteers, we were able to open the exhibition *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* in October 1968.

It was open for three weeks, apart from two days when the chief fire officer in Stockholm insisted it be closed down. During those two days, *The Model* was rebuilt. It was visited by 34,000 guests, 20,000 of them children.

I was given the opportunity to remake *The Model* on a council estate in Vesterås in the winter of 1969, in a hot-air dome we called *The Balloon*.

Action Dialogue, *The Model*, and *The Balloon* generated a lot of debate on children, play and the freedom of the imagination in Sweden.

The exhibition *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* slowly but surely faded into oblivion. Not until 30 years later, in 1998, did the art historian Lars Bang Larsen pull the material on *The Model* out of my drawer. He went on to write about it in international art journals, because by the end of the 20th century the place of art in society had become interesting again.

Since then, I've made a slideshow about *The Model*, which has been shown at many European art museums.

In 2009 I donated all the material on *The Model* to MACBA Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona – in exchange for them publishing a book on the exhibition.

This, of course, increased the amount of interest, because knowledge is always important.

In autumn 2013 *The Model* was erected outside for a week in Paris on the basis of my instructions. But sadly in a version adapted to the EU. Because there are such strict rules for children's play in the EU today. If, for example, children are to hammer nails into a plank, they have to wear more safety gear than Polish workers on a building site – and be supervised by an adult.

Now, in February 2014 *The Model* opens at ARKEN in an adapted form.

So it's natural to ask questions like 'How was 1968 different from today, 46 years later?' and 'Is giving children a space for free play and creativity even necessary today?'

I would argue that it's even more necessary today than it was in 1968.

Whereas society then had momentum – was driven by optimism and increased participation – the society I see today has started to deep-freeze in insecurity and fear. Social exclusion, foreclosures, surveillance and rule-binding are daily realities for many, many people.

We have to compete internationally, so we make PISA surveys that are meant to qualify children in scientific disciplines so they can become as clever as Chinese children living in a dictatorship. The capital of finance and the market are used against us as the last bastion, and an Internet under surveillance has become our new social idol.

I want us to stop for one minute with our digital devices in our hands and think about what we really want for the future of our children.

Dear parents, set their joy, imagination and creativity free – it makes them free, social and curious children. ▲