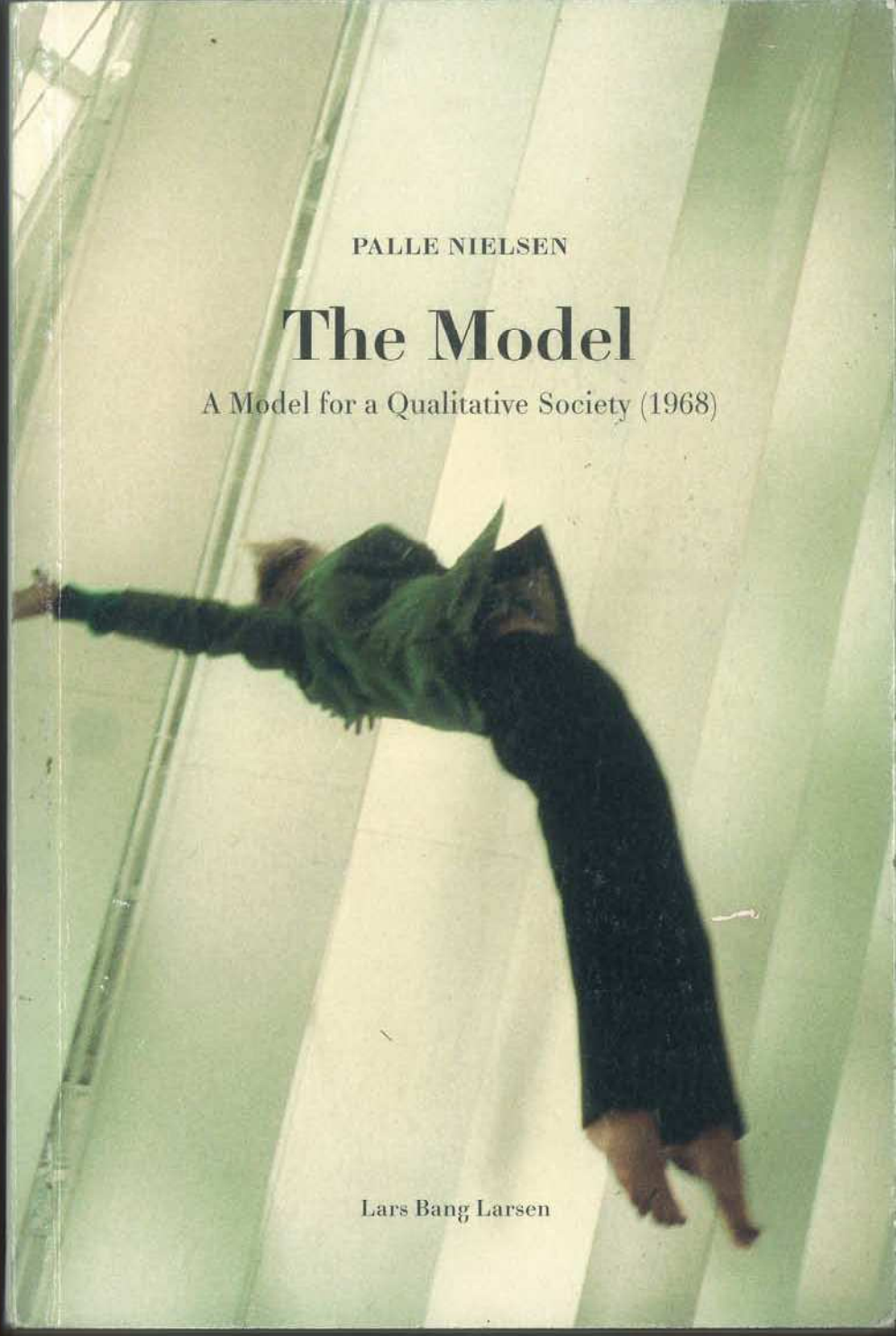
PALLE NIELSEN

The Model

A Model for a Qualitative Society (1968)



Lars Bang Larsen

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The Mass Utopia of Art Activism: Palle Nielsen's *The Model* – *A Model for a Qualitative Society*

In the autumn of 1980, a curator at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm wrote a letter to Palle Nielsen:

> Palle,
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> It has been difficult to reach you, but I hope that I have sent the letter to the right place this time. I have worked on the children's outreach programme at the Moderna Museet for seven years. As you can see from the enclosed letter, the programme is to be documented in a catalogue for a big exhibition in Brussels in the autumn of 1981.
>
> I hope that you will contribute an article to the catalogue, since *The Model*, which you initiated in 1968, is one of the most important events in the history of the museum – it was, so to speak, the starting signal for a whole new form of organisation, not only at the Moderna Museet but also in most other museums in Sweden.[1]

1. Letter from Birgitta Arvas to Palle Nielsen, Stockholm, 25 November 1980.

Modellen. En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle (The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society) was an adventure playground for children that Nielsen organised inside the Moderna Museet over three weeks in October 1968. *The Model* made available to children space and means with which they could play, including tools, materials and paint, costumes and masks of world leaders, and LPs that could be played on a large sound system.

People queued to get in, and newspapers carried photos of children running around the museum. Nielsen's adventure playground used the child's experience to humanise the art institution, and the photos he took to document the event radiate delight and exuberance. But if *The Model* embodied all this positivity and immediacy, today it can no longer be understood in those terms. And even though it was subsequently referred to as a forerunner for the outreach programmes that art museums established during the 1970s, it was not this kind of institutionally provided service.[2] And so Nielsen never replied to the misunderstood praise of Moderna Museet's curator.

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2. See for example Stig Brostrøm, 'Louisiana og børnene', *Information*, Copenhagen, 21 May 1970. A number of art museums presented children's exhibitions in Denmark in 1979, declared Year of the Children by the UN. To Nielsen – not one to mince his words – there was a risk of decontextualising children's problems: 'It is really nice of the museums that they address children as a theme, but if it is completely without perspective and only appears as another form of bourgeois art, then the children and their parents are in fact getting shafted. Because in Denmark today, children are really in a tight spot and the aim of any undertaking has to be tremendously clear: to create here and now those playgrounds, day nurseries, kindergartens, youth centres and clubs that are necessary – the living, exciting hous-

This was not the first time that children had been proposed as producers and consumers of art in exhibitions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Whitechapel Gallery appealed to the children of London's East End with pageants and a toy exhibition; while in the 1940s MoMA in New York held the annual holiday exhibitions and art workshops *Children's Holiday Circus of Modern Art*. *The Model*, however, was more closely aligned with the avant-gardes' energetic destruction of meaning and value, and their ushering in of the art work as a new psychic arena: in the spirit, for example, of André Breton's declaration that 'the mind which plunges into Surrealism, relives with burning excitement the best part of childhood'.[3] In a similar way, *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

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ing areas where children can experience things on their own – and those work places that build self-esteem. This must be our demand. But is still art, then – is it something that can be placed in an art museum? Isn't it politics and shouldn't it be placed elsewhere?' (Palle Nielsen, 'Børn – kunst – og så krisen', *Cras*, no. XXI, Copenhagen, 1979, p. 49.)

3. André Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 1924. Breton's Surrealist agenda resonates in Roger Caillois' description of the primal aspects of play as an '...attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind... Surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness.' (Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001 [1958], p. 23.)

human being. The result, as one reviewer put it, was 'almost frightening for adults'.[4]

Based on archive material – photographs, press clippings, various textural sources – and on conversations with Palle Nielsen, what follows is a retracing of *The Model*. In an attempt to recreate the event's particular time and language, I will read it through the way it was torn between polarities such as art and anti-art, idealism and pragmatism, inside and outside, the child-led and the adult-led. Jacques Derrida writes that the starting point for deconstruction is *exorbitant*, since one thereby sets out to find a way to exceed the sphere (orb) of metaphysics, and the ways in which it still shapes thinking. This way, one proceeds 'like a wandering thought on the possibility of itinerary and of method. It is affected by non-knowledge as by its future and it *ventures out* deliberately.'[5] If my reading is a deconstruction, *The Model* itself can also be seen as a paradigm of a critical attitude of venturing out: it was an exorbitant event because of the raw energy that it unleashed inside the museum, but also because of the unmapped potential that was laid bare in the tug-of-war between its anti-authoritarian agenda and its rather administrative title, *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society*.

In the early twentieth century, two Russian art critics wrote that the distinguishing feature of children's art is the

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4. Clas Brunius, 'Paus i barnastressen', *Expressen*, Stockholm, 10 October 1968. Moderna Museet's and Palle Nielsen's archives have provided the cuttings for this and the following quotations from news media.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 (1967), p. 162.

'sudden event': the accident, the coincidence, the miracle.[6] A similar discontinuity characterised the unlikely appearance of *The Model* at the Moderna Museet in October 1968 – as well as its disappearance. Both in Sweden and in Nielsen's native Denmark, the event slipped out of the art historical field of attention.[7] Several factors have contributed to this, one of them simply being that Nielsen stopped making art. Having always worked in and between the fields of art, teaching and architecture, he had dropped out of the Copenhagen art scene by the end of the 1970s, disenchanted with the incipient entrepreneurial spirit amongst artists there. *The Model* is also historiographically off the beaten track. It can't be understood as a neo-avantgardist project (at least,

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6. Abram Efros and Yakov Tugendkhold, *Iskusstvo Marka Shagala*, Moscow, 1918, quoted from John E. Bowlt: 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society', in Edward Weisberger (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1986, p. 179.

7. The catalogues for the exhibitions *Information* (edited by Kynaston McShine, New York, 1970) and *The Nordic '60s: Upheaval and Confrontation* (edited by Maaretta Jaukkuri, Helsinki, 1991) feature a few documentary photographs from *The Model*. It is also briefly mentioned in Leif Nylén's book *Den öppna konsten: Happenings, instrumental teater, konkret poesi och andra gränsöverskridningar i det svenska 60-talet* (Stockholm, 1998), and Stuart Burch discusses it in the context of institutional models for audience participation in his essay 'Taking part: performance, participation and national art museums' in Knell, Simon et al. (ed.): *The Nation Exhibited*. London: Routledge, 2010. I have written articles about the event in, among other publications, *Afterall*, no. 1, Autumn/Winter, London, 1999: 'Social Aesthetics. 11 Examples in the View of Parallel History' and *Afterall*, no. 16, Autumn/Winter, London, 2007: 'True Rulers of Their Own Realm: Political Subjectivation in Palle Nielsen's *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society*.'

not in the strict sense of that term). Its relationship to the art institution was different to that of the Conceptual art work, for example, that, in a more fundamental way, relied on the art institution to subvert the art object. At the same time, *The Model*'s vaulting, social ambitiousness took it well beyond the now domesticated ideas of the 'open' art work and audience participation, and therefore it can hardly be understood in terms of later artistic developments. On top of this, it subverted authorship to a degree that – even today, with the death of the author a theoretical given – it still appears as a radical critique of the way institutions and markets fetishise the artistic persona and signature.

The Model's reappearance in this book may be a sign that it had, or has, its roots in the future; a more important consideration to lamenting its exclusion from art history. As such it might throw new light on certain artistic developments of the 1970s, such as art activism and institutional critique. The term 'art activism' was coined in the 1970s, among other things inspired by artistic and theatrical forms of protest from the 1960s. The spirit of the *The Model* can be found, for example, in the workshops for neighbourhood children that the New York collaborative Group Material ran in their exhibition space. But while unruliness and anarchy defined *The Model*, there were rules for the Group Material workshops: 'everyone helps clean up after class; everyone takes proper care of art materials; no rough playing or fighting in the gallery,' one invitation stated.[8] Nielsen's insistence on using institutional space for advancing artistic critique was also

8. Quoted from the invitation to the children workshop organised by Group Material in December 1980. Group Material archive at Fales Library, New York University.

precocious. By choosing an institutional site for his model for a qualitative society, he subverted Herbert Marcuse's claim that the utopian is what social power prevents from coming into existence. While Nielsen thus realised a tactical and less deterministic concept of the institution than the dialectical posturing of many artists and activists at the time, the range of possible meanings *The Model* released through its acceptance of process-oriented and collective work are far removed from institutional critique's documentary procedures and textual aesthetics.

I will argue that Nielsen failed to take into account the aesthetic metaphysics he evoked by staging his critique in a museum, something that destabilised the social concretism of his playground activism. Once inside the art institution, a playground is no longer just a playground; and a materialism that is related to play will invariably be a volatile one. In this way contradictory subtexts were raised that evoked disciplinary tropes in the middle of *The Model*'s emancipatory programme, but at the same time it was propelled towards new forms of speculation with which it replies to, or even upsets, the theoretical tools which seem to be the most obvious ones to approach it with. Thus *The Model* cannot be reduced to, for example, activism's sociological concept of art or to a heterotopic politics of space.

Contrary to what one might expect, *The Model* didn't distil children's play to its ludic essence. It wasn't an attempt at transforming work into play, which was how thinkers at the time, such as Marcuse, conceived of the subversive potential of aesthetics. It was rather about the transformation of *play into work*. This is arguably a fine distinction in relation to the former, but it is a way of breaking down the play/work antinomy that harks back to the early nineteenth century

utopian socialist Charles Fourier's idea of how children's spontaneous participation in the work place will reveal the big lie of civilisation:

> If one can make the children work and make them participate for the sake of pleasure, it will be all the easier to make their parents enthusiastic, who are more inclined to renounce pleasure for the sake of money.[9]

In this way, Fourier argues, the monster – 'this wretched metal called money' – can be tamed by a troop of children, history's true actors.[10] Like the infantile utopian republic in *Pinocchio*, where there is nothing but play, bedlam and uproar, *The Model* was an anarchist Playland; but it produced and represented something beyond this.

Starting with urban activism, Nielsen's adventure playground in the museum was part of a longer series of events that zig-zagged in and out of artistic practice, and therefore never simply sought the real or the social. *The Model* also took place in the museum simply because the museum is *not* the city, and children here could exert and express themselves unfettered by the urban environment. In other words, the children's play in the art museum was the dream of a city space that had to be made susceptible to new social imaginaries and artistic critique. This was how *The Model* became located within aesthetics as a problem of meaning, and within politics as a problem of representation.

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9. Charles Fourier, *Børnene og arbejdets forvandling* (Children and the transformation of work). Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1972, p. 11. The translation is mine.

10. Ibid., p. 132.

1. Confront the specific issues

In May 1968, students occupied universities and took to the street in cities around the world. But the youth revolt cannot be summed up in one cause, one ideology. It is significant that not only the establishment was challenged, but also conventional forms and signs of the political itself. Beyond the specificity of the many struggles that made up the social and cultural upheaval that culminated then, and continued to develop in the years and decades to come, the reinvention of the forces of transformation themselves was a crucial factor.

In this way, every form of post-war Humanism took into account the unique position of the child. For art, this had two implications. Firstly, in artistic movements such as Art Brut and COBRA, the child's creativity and point of view were accorded integrity and distinction. Art-into-life experiments, such as Otto Mühl's 'action-analytical' communes, radicalised childhood and proceeded to purge the subject of bourgeois ideology by means of a 'fundamental infantilism' (*prinzipieller Infantilismus*).

Secondly, childhood was no longer considered a perennial poetic truth. It was now a *political* issue, in which the child became one of the subaltern subjects to which the youth revolt sought to lend institutional autonomy. If youth could be conceived in terms of class, then why not childhood as well? Thus, before the big social movements in the 1970s – feminist, environmental, homosexual and anti-nuclear – got under way, there was the 'children's crusade'.[11] In a rewriting of the Black Power movement, 'Child Power'

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11. See Günter Amendt (ed.), *Kinderkreuzzug, oder: Beginnt die Revolution in den Schulen?* Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968.

was being talked of in Scandinavia, and all over West Germany New Left activists set up *Kinderladen* in abandoned shop fronts: anti-authoritarian day care centres dedicated to children as political and sexual beings. In Paris, high school students organised committees against the Vietnam War, and went on strike with workers and university students. Journalists Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville described how thousands of high school students took to the street on 10 May:

> A long tradition of schoolboy passivity had been broken. The CALs (Comités d'action lycéens) had preached that the pressures of home, school and police were all faces of the same repression. At the barricades that night the lesson was rammed home: faced with the choice at midnight of going home to mummy, or staying out all night to fight, many chose to stay. From then on the *lycéens* were never absent from the front line.[12]

Accordingly, those who didn't man the barricades or in other ways kept the old political system in place were denounced as 'the adult left'.

Writing in 1972, Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt discussed how any proletarian revolutionary movement encompasses every age of life and not only those that capitalism defines as the productive part of the population. As a result, children in revolutionary movements have always produced their own spaces for experience: Kluge and Negt offer the example of how free associations – 'children's

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12. Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *French Revolution 1968*. London: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 127.

republics' with playgrounds and their own meeting places – arose spontaneously following the October revolution, as the children's own reply to the political upheavals, and not as an extension of adult organisations. These were manifestations of a *Kinderöffentlichkeit*, a children's public sphere – one as sovereign as play itself.

The bourgeois public sphere relegates children to ghettos and surrogates, such as children's television. In order to develop their particular sensibility, however, children need different spaces and time scales to adults:

> If they are to realize their specific form of sensuality, to 'fulfill' themselves, children require a public sphere that is more spatially conceived than do adults. They require more room in which to move, places that represent as flexibly as possible a field of action, where things are not fixed once and for all, defined, furnished with names, laden with prohibitions. They also need quite different time scales from adults in order to grow.[13]

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13. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 466. English edition: *Public Sphere and Experience. Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 284. Kluge and Negt's politicised concept of a children's public sphere dislodged the discussion of play from the realms and vocabularies of anthropology and cultural history, in which Johan Huizinga's seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1955) has a prominent place. In contrast to the oppositional stance emphasised by Kluge and Negt, Huizinga sees the hermeticism of play, and its suspension from ordinary or 'real' life, as its main characteristics: '…its secludedness, its limitedness. It is "played out" within certain limits of time and space. It contains its own course and meaning.' (Johan Huizinga,

For Kluge and Negt, the children's public sphere represents an oppositional dynamic that can't be isolated, but which, like all proletarian public spheres, shows a tendency to include all of society.

Aligned with Kluge and Negt's *Kinderöffentlichkeit*, Palle Nielsen's research into playgrounds in the late 1960s responded to children's need to play. While still training as a painter at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, he managed to talk the municipal architect of the Copenhagen suburb Gladsaxe into employing him as artistic consultant. In this capacity, Nielsen dedicated himself to producing what he called spatial formations for children. Experiments he carried out show that the intensity of play and the frequency of group playing increased when the spaces set aside for them were made smaller, such as screened, angular spaces or elevated vantage points, rather than with large, open areas. Working with these principles, Nielsen designed a 5,000 square metre play space that opened in the autumn of 1967 with – as a Copenhagen newspaper described it – 'playing field, toboggan run, adventure playground with a place for bonfires, animal house, jungle gym, sand box, roller-skating rink, open air theatre, suspension bridge, outdoor doll's house and playhouses'.[14] This was a playscape that offered a wealth of play opportunities, but which also lacked man-made play equipment, so that children could make a mess and experiment on their own. It wasn't, however, a *Kinderöffentlichkeit* in the strict sense that it was a

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Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955 [1938], p. 8.)

14. GH, 'Her ligger legeland', *Politiken*, Copenhagen, 15 September 1967.

space produced by the children themselves; like Nielsen's other projects it was a children's public sphere produced on behalf of the children.

Nielsen soon took his research onto the street. During one Sunday in March 1968, activists and residents erected an adventure playground, designed by Nielsen, during a raid on the back yards of some old working class housing in Copenhagen's Northern Borough. Residents were woken up at seven by activists who told them that their backyard had been selected to be the site of a new adventure playground: a roll call that convinced residents to spend Sunday morning building a playground (and not call the police).

To Nielsen and his fellow activists, building illegal playgrounds was an alternative to protest forms such as demonstrations or squatting, and aimed at offering a constructive critique of city planning. Nielsen wanted to 'confront the specific issues' of urban space through a tactic that addressed specific instances of injustice, adopting the point of view of an individual who is empowered through the struggle.[15] Agency, in other words, consisted in producing an extra-parliamentary space open to individual participation on a collectively identified site. By participating spontaneously, the Northern Borough community acknowledged that the erection of a children's playground represented a need that had not previously been identified for the site.[16]

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15. Louise Rydén, 'Angrip dom konkreta punkterna' (Confront the specific issues). *Paletten*, no. 4, Gothenburg, 1968, p. 8. See the interview with Palle Nielsen in pp. 119–29 of this book.

16. To charm and engage the residents, Nielsen's group went around to all of them with a paper bag containing freshly baked rolls and a flyer attached to it showing an image of two children

The scene for the playground action was a city space in which there was still room for informal change. Urban functions had not yet been fixed by rising real estate values and a city planning favouring retail; instead Copenhagen at the time was not short of obsolete housing and derelict neighbourhoods. The precondition for change was, as always, in people's minds and bodies, and the reason why residents recognised the activists' intervention was psycho-social or psycho-spatial as much as anything. Young parents had gone through the disciplinary school system of the 1930s or forties, women were typically still stuck at home and the Scandinavian welfare state's high (or highly praised) standards of economic redistribution were in many ways still in the making. Play spaces for children were non-existent.

For Nielsen and his fellow activists, playground activism was not guided by any particular political doctrine; nor

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playing on the kerb. The text – collectively written by the activists – read: 'Do you have children yourself or do you just hear the children scream and shout in the stairwell and entrance when you come home? Do you remember having few opportunities to play as a child? Why do the children still make noise in the entrances? Not many things have changed since you were a child. You can now follow up the demands for more kindergartens and day nurseries, for better playgrounds and youth centres, and for greater investment in children's well-being by actively participating in a public debate. Have you asked your council or your local residents' association about investments in child-orientation? Do you know that the authorities are empowered to give grants and are willing to invest in children's well-being if you demand it? It is your attitude towards the needs of adolescent children that determines the amount of investment that will fund the clearing of more backyards, better play facilities in future developments and new designs for municipal playgrounds. Sensible facilities for play mean that children will stop making noise in the entries and stairwells. They won't have time. They'll be playing.'

Offset printing press installed by Palle Nielsen for the exhibition *Festival 200* at Charlottenborg Exhibition Hall in Copenhagen, 1969

was it a creativist gesture like the nocturnal wall-painting actions that the Scandinavian Situationists had carried out in Copenhagen in the years before. It was, rather, a kind of potlatch, a confrontational generosity that took the form of the illegal improvement of public space. Faced with the architectural vernacular of an adventure playground built by activists, authorities faced hard choices: either to bring in the bulldozers and rase it, which would look wicked and authoritarian, or to accept it as an uninvited monument to the lack of urban planning. Once the activists got the media wheel rolling, ignoring the playground was difficult: it was then too late to return the gift.

Although they both ended up being rased by the authorities, two illegal playgrounds that Nielsen designed and helped build in Copenhagen in 1968 and 1969 were successfully launched as media-actions that were covered

in the daily newspapers as well as on national television. By being extended from a new kind of public space for children into photogenic events they differed as a means from what the garden architect C. Th. Sørensen in the 1930s had named 'junk playgrounds' (*skrammellegepladser*). Sørensen encouraged giving children the possibility to build their own 'cities' on unused plots of land in urban areas where they could themselves be creators. The junk playground was a site beyond pedagogy, in that children here should be allowed to play with a minimum of adult interference: no educational relation was necessary in the children's city. In 1943, the first junk playground in Copenhagen was opened, and after the Second World War the concept travelled abroad. Among its proponents was the landscape architect Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who introduced adventure playgrounds to the UK in the late 1940s after having visited the Copenhagen prototype; it is also to her that we owe the term 'adventure playground'.[17]

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17. C. Th. Sørensen writes for the first time about junk playground in *Parkpolitik i sogn og købstad* (Open Spaces for Town and Country, 1931), and many of his ideas were implemented by John Bertelsen who was the leader of the first junk playground and talked about the necessity of producing pro-child physical space and a pro-play psychic space (see for example John Bertelsen: *Børn bygger* [Children Build]. Copenhagen: Aktieselskabet Rockwool and Dansk Gasbeton Aktieselskab, 1958). The Danish history of junk playgrounds is of course more comprehensive than what is sketched out here, and it also provides more examples from vanguard art-related activities and forms of organisation. In the 1960s, Provos would – in a more anarchic manner than Nielsen and his fellow activists – encourage the building of *ad hoc* playgrounds by simply dumping building materials from trucks in schoolyards. Together with unpaid volunteers, activist and poet Carl Scharnberg initiated in May 1968 *Børnenes Jord* (Children's

2. A large pedagogical model exhibition at Moderna Museet

In June 1968, Palle Nielsen travelled to Stockholm to participate in the organisation of *Aktion Samtal* (Action Dialogue), several months of activities in the urban space. These were carried out by FNL activists (Front National de Libération or the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam), architects, teachers, parents, social democratic youth organisations and other left-wing groups united against 'the building of motorways, backyard slums, cheerless schoolyards and the commercialisation of environments'.[18] Much like the playground actions in Copenhagen, Action Dialogue built temporary areas for play but also engaged in confrontations with the authorities. In one housing sector, residents used blowtorches to remove an iron fence between common areas, because they wanted to

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Earth), spaces for older children and teens designed for play and other kinds of activity such as animal husbandry. *Børnenes Jord* still exists in several cities in Denmark. (See Carl Scharnberg, *Børnenes Jord, svar på en udfordring*. Århus: Aros Forlag, 1969.) For an outline of the architectural and English history of adventure playgrounds, see Nils Norman's book *An Architecture of Play: a Survey of London's Adventure Playgrounds*. London: Four Corner Books, 2003. Other efforts developed around the same time, such as the more than 700 *speelplatsen* that the architect Aldo van Eyck built in Amsterdam from the end of the 1940s and over the next thirty years. These were also inserted into the gaps left by urbanisation. Unlike Le Corbusier, for example, who placed environments for play in idealised architectural surroundings, Van Eyck used interstitial spaces that had been left empty, thereby supplementing the (lack of) city planning with his stylish, minimal playgrounds.

18. GL, 'Aktion Samtal', *Form*, no. 8, Stockholm, 1968, p. 504.

enlarge their leisure space. When the police arrived, they were met by a blockade of residents.

At a rally in preparation for Action Dialogue, Nielsen shared his experiences and emphasised method. Just as important as direct action, he claimed, was reaching people and decision makers through the news media. He proposed taking over a cultural institution – the Moderna Museet, for example – by organising a children's adventure playground there, an event that would raise the profile of Action Dialogue and enable the activists to disseminate their views on a large scale.

Nielsen's idea for an institutional extravaganza for Action Dialogue was criticised. Counter-cultural orthodoxy considered institutional space to be by definition conformist, and Nielsen's idea was therefore seen as elitist, as an artwork, something that would alienate ordinary people. An activist was first and foremost part of the movement: being an artist was a mere ego trip. In its own way, the counter-culture fulfilled Roland Barthes's demand for an active reader who might replace the author's individual prestige, which was 'the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology'.[19] Barthes called this active reader 'a *someone*': for the activists, it was a collective 'someone', who existed outside the ideology of the aesthetic.

Despite the scepticism of his activist peers, Nielsen insisted that a strategic alliance with the cultural establishment would benefit them all. In July 1968 he met Carlo Derkert and Pontus Hultén, the curator and director of

19. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Bishop (ed.): *Participation*. London/Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006 (1968), p. 41.

Palle Nielsen (right) with activists from *The Model* in the Moderna Museet Café, Stockholm, 1968

Moderna Museet, who, surprisingly enough, agreed to make the museum available to Nielsen, on condition that he assumed full responsibility for funding and implementing the project.[20] In view of how cultural institutions are administered today, it is astonishing to think that Hultén lent Sweden's most prominent art museum to an activist in his mid-twenties in order to realise 'a pedagogical model exhibition' – whatever that might turn out to be.[21]

Why was Pontus Hultén convinced by Nielsen's idea? Perhaps Hultén detected an affinity between the 'pedagogical model' and the historical avant-gardes; he had previously organised retrospectives of both Dada and Russian

20. Nielsen's event was to take place in the large gallery hall. In two smaller galleries are shown exhibitions with Jean Pierre Raynaud and Eva Aepplis.

21. Quoted from Nielsen's fundraising paper, Stockholm, 1968.

Constructivism at Moderna Museet. But he had also turned the museum into an internationally renowned institution, and was therefore somebody who didn't need to give any reasons for opening it up to the zeitgeist; in this case the 'pressing task for the new museums' to provide space for precisely these kinds of 'experimental models', motivated by dissatisfaction with a reactionary education system that disregarded a child's artistic creative potential, as Hultén put it in the exhibition catalogue.[22] On the other hand, Hultén's embrace of activism could be seen an instance of repressive tolerance, to use Marcuse's term; that is, when the authorities, rather than openly excluding certain people, follow the more cunning tactic of implicating them in the processes of their own alienation. But this is of course a counterintuitive (if not paranoid) point of view, and probably does no justice to Hultén's personal motives, which can also be read through the notion of play. In an open letter, the artist Öyvind Fahlström complained that the Moderna's director was '"an old anarchist" prone to "the polymorphously perverse" total openness, *joie de vivre* and immanent beauty of childhood – in exhibitions of the artistic playpen type'. These were references to Hultén's *Movement in Art* exhibition, among others, but could potentially also be an indictment of *The Model*, if one considered this an example of anarchist mysticism.[23] In fact, during Nielsen's stay in

22. Pontus Hultén, 'Museernas nya roll', in Nielsen (ed.): *Modellen. En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle*. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968, p. 32.

23. Öyvind Fahlström, 'Sausages and Tweezers – A Running Commentary' (1966), quoted from Manuel J. Borja-Villel (ed.): *Öyvind Fahlström: Another Space for Painting*. Barcelona: MACBA, 2001, p. 176.

Stockholm, Fahlström – who had a hard time accepting the adventure playground at Moderna as art – invited the Danish art activist home to suss him out. Agreement between the two grew when Nielsen argued that he wasn't interested in promoting himself as an artist, but in questioning the gallery space and in opening it up to new audiences.[24]

In July 1968, Nielsen received a doctoral grant from the Royal School of Architecture in Copenhagen, which he used to give *The Model* the status of a research project – the only way to raise the money needed to realise it. With the help of two journalists from Stockholm's left-wing media, who made use of their local networks, *The Model* became an interdisciplinary endeavour with sponsors and research partners such as the Ministry of Education, the Swedish Building Research Institute, the Stockholm Council for Children's Welfare, and a media partnership with the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*.[25] A mixed group of volunteers holding less intransigent political positions than Action Dialogue helped build the playground; amongst them were polytechnical students as well as designers, artists, theatre professionals and writers who had become enthusiastic about Nielsen's idea.

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24. Nielsen in an e-mail to the author, 21 August 2009. It was typically in the respectable, engaged form of social realist photography that social protest (such as the US civil rights movement) had so far found a place in the museum. Jean-François Chevrier writes of the 1960s that 'the spectacle of the street had long since entered the museum. But it was in the street itself that the social protests and riots against segregation took place.' With *The Model*, Nielsen's idea reversed this logic, by claiming that freedom could also exist *inside* the museum. Jean-François Chevrier, *The Year 1967. From Art Objects to Public Things. Or: Variations on the Conquest of Space*. Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1997, p. 136.

25. The journalists were Gunilla Lundahl and Kirsten Oswald.

In a working paper, carefully worded for the purpose of raising money, Nielsen presents *The Model* as an event based on participant interaction and the observation of a children's environment. It is a completion of art's radical promises:

> The idea is to establish a large pedagogical model exhibition at Moderna Museet between 20 September and 20 October 1968.
>
> The reason for making an educational exhibition at the Moderna Museet is the following: The debate about new art has increasingly developed into a debate about environment. The individual work of art is becoming less interesting. It is the context, the social implications that are moving to the foreground... The Warhol and Tatlin exhibitions [that took place at Moderna Museet] point in a direction that must be pursued. A communicating environment that activates people is the logical outcome of this line of work... The idea is to further explore the following hypothesis: Children's patterns of play vary with changes in the physical framework for their play, and there is a positive connection between the degree of variation in the playing unit and the satisfaction of the children's physical and sensory needs.[26]

In order to establish what the needs of children were, it would be necessary to set up the best possible conditions for observing their play. *The Model* would be unique because, in the museum, play can be isolated: only in a space where

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26. Quoted from Nielsen's fundraising paper, Stockholm, 1968.

children can freely choose their play 'will it be possible to show an example of children's creativity and great need for group interaction', as Nielsen put it.[27] Such a model will be the frame for 'the maximising of play [in a] new and extreme situation' – what is effectively a simulated environment:

> It is in terms of space alone that the exhibition can be considered a pedagogical model. Both motor and sensory exertions comparable to what would turn up in an open playground would turn up here. And they will turn up – the confrontation with the many possibilities alone will increase the children's capabilities for play.
>
> The frame itself is conceived as being built of wood, including many spatial formations and bridges. The frame will contain no fixed play functions – only the children's use of it will determine its function. The frame is also aimed at making the space more unpredictable.
>
> Whole lengths of 3 mm chipboard will be laid across the entire floor, and soft hardboard will be hung on the walls. This shielding will increase the possibilities for free exertion.
>
> The idea, then, is that children arriving by bus from kindergartens and schools, as well as from institutions for the disabled, would work with all sensory materials available. For sound experience there will be marimbas, metal tubes, gasoline cans, drums and old musical instruments. At the same time, rock music will be played all day so the children will have something to react in relation to, something to work through and to be stimulated by. Clothes for

27. Ibid., p. 3.

dressing up and paint will become an essential part of the sensory group experiences. In the same way, wood and tools will be provided with which to further process the frame. Physical play will be provided for by the large play frame of beer crates and car tyres, both with and without wheels. A big and varied shielding in the middle of the space contains a mass of foam rubber, also to be placed over most of the gallery. It will also be possible for the children to take slide photographs and see their works enlarged on the walls by projectors...

From this jumble of possibilities, certain patterns will appear in the course of the exhibition, representing the children's own choices. The subject of our observation will be the alternatives chosen compared with the degrees of interest for the different patterns of play. In order to record the varying patterns of experience, the idea is to thoroughly film and photograph the individual phases in the exhibition. The exhibition will only finish when it has been built...

The proposed pedagogical model as exhibition at Moderna Museet has the ambitious aim of sparking debate about the artist's role in society. It is to focus public attention on the individual's isolation and lack of opportunities for interaction – and especially the child's need to create its own framework and to express itself in relation to this. What is more, it is to become an indispensable part of an investigation about the concrete working out of children's environment.[28]

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28. Ibid., pp. 3–4.

The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society opened on 30 September 1968, and was, by and large, carried out as described. In the event, the idea of making slide projectors available to the children was not used; instead, five closed-circuit video cameras transmitted footage from the playground to television monitors lining the entrance, and the children could operate a remote control to zoom and turn the cameras above the playground. The entire gallery space, and the children's patterns of movement in it, were transmitted to one of the monitors in a live feed from a camera placed high above the 'diving pool' filled with foam rubber. Nielsen even managed to change the museum's normal admissions policy by making entry to *The Model* free for children up to the age of eighteen, while adults had to pay five kronor to enter.

In the midst of this buzzing practical reason, Nielsen surprisingly outlined a metaphysical dimension in *The Model*.

> Efficient education and large production cannot alone create the qualitative human being. Only the understanding that the human being as an individual needs a number of religious relations can do this; a need to realise oneself through one's own creation and through open communication with others.[29]

To evoke religion surely goes way beyond the idea of building a *Kinderöffentlichkeit* defined by social relations alone. Either that, or Nielsen gives an unusual name to play as the event's pivotal passion. But if the individual needs religious relations, does this mean that play is in fact a ritual? Nielsen's

29. Ibid., p. 2.

metaphysical exclamation is symptomatic of the way he intends to realise a surplus of meaning through *The Model*:

> … when they ask us about our specific political model, we can only answer that we want to do more than take over the means of production. This 'more' is what we call *qualitative values*, and the system a *qualitative system*.[30]

However, this surplus of meaning created by *The Model* ends up beyond value and system, in a messianic flickering between what is ideal and absent and what is concrete and present.

3. Aesthetic conflicts

So far, Nielsen had successfully navigated between institutional authority and activist opposition. His grassroots supporters in Action Dialogue had accepted 'the pedagogical model exhibition' as a tactical move, and Pontus Hultén has given him *carte blanche*. But because activist ideology prohibited artistic statements, Nielsen never claimed *The Model* as his work. Instead *The Model* ended up having a double, if not triple, agenda: it was a pedagogical research project and an activist critique of everyday life, as well as – unofficially – concerned with introducing an inclusive, process-oriented concept of art.

The exhibition catalogue that Nielsen edited was a kind of extended pamphlet, containing articles about the way children are subsumed by consumerism, mass media, repressive institutions and a dysfunctional urban space. The

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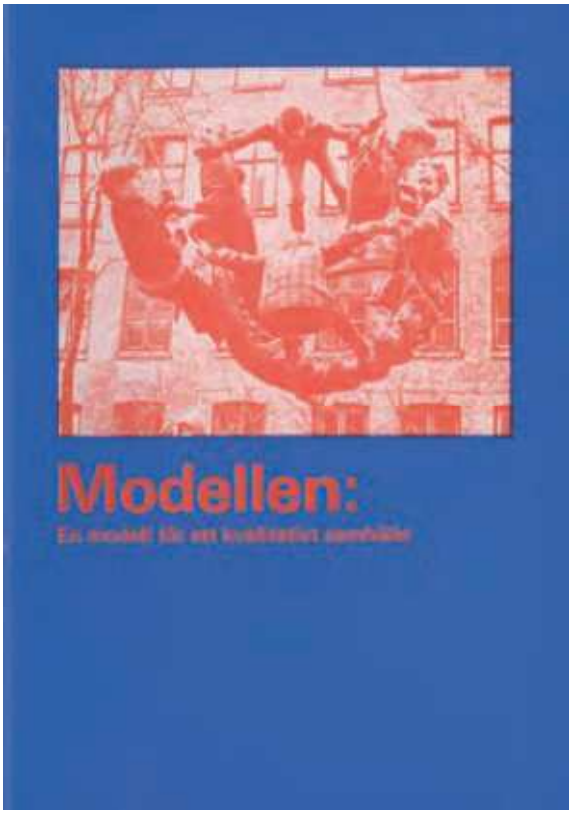
30. Palle Nielsen, 'Den kvalitativa människan', *Form*, Stockholm, 1968, p. 503.



Cover of *The Model* exhibition catalogue, 1968

texts were accompanied by children's drawings and statements, along with quotations from figures as different as R. D. Laing, Mao Tse-tung and Søren Kierkegaard. Nielsen chose to omit an essay about the role of the engaged artist that he had written earlier the same year, in order not to 'stab Action Dialogue in the back' with his artistic intentions.[31] Instead he contributed an essay to the catalogue

31. Palle Nielsen, 'De sociale kunstnere' (The social artists) in Clausen, Højholt, Hejlskov Larsen et al. (eds.), *MAK*, no. 1, vol. 1, p. 6, Copenhagen, 1969. See this essay in pp. 136–44 of this book. In another text from the same year Nielsen – by then a Ph.D. stu-

about alienation in the new satellite towns. Significantly, the discussion of art that was prominent in Nielsen's fundraising paper has altogether disappeared from the catalogue, in favour of a social critique that broadly revolves around a demand for legitimate power over judgment in everyday life. To this the title added its mass utopian superstructure: *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society*.[32]

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dent in architecture – continued to discuss aesthetics, now using concepts of space and social process: 'Space is the delimitation for activities. Form is our relation to these activities. This implies that form is no longer a static notion. Because it changes the perception of aesthetic problems from being visual to also being social… The formatics of functionalism: form defined by function gives aesthetic pleasure. When those spaces we create have the form that responds to the task we have been asked to do – and fulfils this task perfectly – these spaces are also the most aesthetically pleasing.' (Palle Nielsen, 'Rum – form – aktivitet', *Arkitekten*, no. 71, Copenhagen, 1969, p. 642.)

32. I rely on Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's development of the terms artistic and social critique in their *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris, 1999). The title of the event paraphrases André Gorz's definition of a new priority scale for human relations, which Nielsen also quoted in the catalogue: 'And in a developed society needs are not only quantitative (the need for goods for consumption) but also qualitative: the need for a faceted and free development of human beings' skills, the need for information, communication and a human community, the need for emancipation not only from exploitation but also from coercion and isolation at work and during leisure time.' Nielsen's use of an institution to usher in qualitative change could conversely also have a transformative effect on the institution. This was the point made by Marcuse a few years before: 'Contemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change – qualitative change which would establish essentially different institutions, a new direction of the productive process, new modes of human existence.' (Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. London: Routledge, 2006 [1964], p. xiii.)

Another aesthetic conflict took place under the aegis of *The Model* when two different conceptions of counter-cultural art clashed. The artist Sture Johannesson was invited by Hultén to make the exhibition poster, but was vetoed by Nielsen, since Johannesson's underground graphics revolve around the use of hallucinogenic drugs – something that for Nielsen had no place in a project involving children. Johannesson, in turn, promised to make a 'clean' work. His poster for *The Model* was a montage in saturated orange, blue, pink, yellow and gold that became a phantasm-event in its own right. Its main component was the Swedish flag, tilted by the photo of a little boy to destabilise patriotic expectations of the qualitative society. Semi-abstract shapes of high rises reverberated in the flag's four blue fields, while the yellow cross carries a rash of elements from *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations, pop song lyrics and photos of children playing. However, Johannesson managed to slip in psychedelic contraband: in the flag's horizontal bar, caricatures of straight society (the army, the police, the church, the medical profession and the petty bourgeoisie) chase a joint-smoking hippie out of the flag. But Johannesson also adhered to the activist code of authorship. Rather than signing the work, as a bourgeois artist would have done, he instead inserted a collectivist signature in the bottom left corner: a group photo where he poses together with workers from his printer's workshop.

Meanwhile, across the 660 square metres of the main gallery in the Moderna Museet, towers and bridges had been erected, along with pools of foam rubber for jumping into, climbing over and swinging across. Constructive forms of play were encouraged by making available tools and brushes, and the gallery space was gradually transformed by the children's interaction, as they painted, worked on and destroyed

Exhibition poster for *The Model*, designed by Sture Johannesson in 1968. Silk-screen on paper, 70 x 100 cm. MACBA Collection. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona Consortium, 2009

materials and surfaces. The Royal Theatre in Stockholm donated discarded costumes for the children to dress up in, and Nielsen provided 200 carnival masks of Fidel Castro, Chairman Mao, Charles de Gaulle and President Johnson (an even match of two revolutionaries versus two reactionaries) to emphasise the political nature of role-playing.

Like in Charles Fourier's socialist utopia, where concerts of all kinds would be played in créches in order to stimulate the musicality of the commune's infants, children in *The Model* were able to play LP records that resounded quadrophonically from loudspeaker towers placed at each corner of the gallery space. As promised, rock music was at hand – Dylan, Zappa, The Incredible String Band – but also music from other historical eras, such as organ concerts. The albums in highest rotation were Ravi Shankar, dance music from the Renaissance and an LP with recordings of the industrial sounds of steam trains: all in an operatic collage of noise and masquerade.

There is no doubt that Nielsen managed to communicate what he intended on a mass scale. During the three weeks it ran for, the 'play exhibition at Moderna' – as *The Model* became known in the media – was visited by some 35,000 people, 20,000 of whom were the children it directly addressed. To include other children than those from an already museum-going social class, kindergartens and schools were encouraged to book visits: after only three days, admittance had to be limited to between 350 and 380 children per hour, as children had been hurt in the scrum in the playground.[33] To prevent those waiting in line outside

33. *Dagens Nyheter*, Stockholm, 7 October 1968.

from getting bored, an outdoor playground was improvised at the entrance.

The Model drew more journalistic than art critical interest, largely for being a children's Trojan horse inside a cultural institution. In general, the event divided the right- and the left-wing press, with the former taking a sceptical stance or even running negative campaigns against it, and the latter refraining from controversy. Clas Brunius of *Expressen* credited Nielsen as its author and believed that the event was 'a magnificent construction'. However, he concludes:

> It has a limit. What [Nielsen] brings about is a healthy break for the children, a brief outburst of liberating disorder. His playground can only exist in its present form as long as the children don't know each other, are in effect a horde. The moment the playground becomes an institution, the horde is crystallised into a society, with rulers and oppressed, with specialists in hammering in nails who have a greater entitlement to hammers, with high-jumping champions who dominate those afraid of jumping, with artists who can accomplish sensational things with a brush and a pot of paint and thereby acquire sole rights to these means of production. This is unavoidable, this is our world and inescapably also the world of the children. But it is good that Palle Nielsen is there. He has given children a break from the pressure of being children, and that is enough.[34]

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34. Clas Brunius, 'Paus i barnastressen', *Expressen*, Stockholm, 10 October 1968.

Playground at the entrance of the Moderna Museet during *The Model*, 1968

While Brunius interprets *The Model* as a therapeutic break from normality, other papers regarded the children's *coup de musée* with rather less sympathy.

> On a fence someone has scribbled *Kosygin go home*, and right underneath, *Long live comenism* [sic]. In another place it says *Long live the Beatles*, a few four-letter words are scrawled in a corner, along with a green, partly crossed-out swastika.[35]

35. Tord Bäckström, 'Barnan tar makten', unknown source, 23 October 1968.

'There is nothing new in this', wrote the journalist Hans Evert René, who judged the event harshly:

> Generations of adults have sat in this way and passively contemplated the playing of children. It would, however, be more constructive if parents could be encouraged to play, with one another, with their children, with the children of others, romp around without regard for age… To dissociate oneself this way from the adult world and describe it as harsh, brutal and commercialist and have a wide-eyed trust that a new generation will create a better world is pure illusion. A Rousseauian wind blows across the lines in this confession to the original and pure world of childhood…[36]

In short, *The Model* pointed towards *Lord of the Flies* and not the qualitative society. What subverts René's argument, however, and what complicates *The Model*, is that adults cannot be said to play a passive part in children's play. Rather, adults have narrowly defined concepts of play and childhood.

Not surprisingly for an anti-authoritarian event whose main ingredient was children, security became an issue. One parent fulminated in a headline, 'I was afraid that my son would be trampled!'[37] The same day, *Svenska Dagbladet* informed its readers that only two out of 8,000 children had been hurt, and that in order to prevent further injuries it had been decided to reduce 'the intake of children'.

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36. Hans Evert René, 'Så Gammaldags!', *Expressen*, Stockholm, 9 October 1968.

37. *Expressen*, Stockholm, 8 October 1968.

Articles for and against this were followed by a debate over children's physical safety in the everyday environment.[38]

Throughout October 1968, *The Model* was continuously in the news. At the end of its second week, Stockholm's fire marshal – alerted by a journalist from a conservative newspaper – ordered that the playground be closed unless it was rebuilt to avoid the fire hazard posed by the foam rubber in the diving pool. Nielsen complied, deciding instead on a large slide. Since foam rubber was routinely stored in large warehouses (in the form of mattresses and so on), the volunteers who helped Nielsen rebuild the playground suspected that the fire marshal's intervention was politically motivated. Hence when *The Model* reopened after four days of reconstruction, the volunteers had hung red banners from the ceiling and painted graffiti on the walls. Nielsen was opposed to politicising the protest in this way, but again he bowed to the collective will, provided that the only graffiti they wrote were quotations (from Mao, André Gorz and others) and not slogans. He had to concede, though, that the numerous red banners produced a softer light in the large gallery hall.

One journalist noted how *The Model* paradoxically set an objectifiable limit to the freedom of the playground:

> Around the space, television cameras record every movement, and here and there microphones are hidden, recording every noise. All around, psychologists

38. For example: Marianne Kärre, '"Modellen" byggs om – Ännu mer skumplast', *Dagens Nyheter*, Stockholm, 8 October 1968.

and educationalists are taking notes. It all looks like a clinical experiment with guinea pigs.[39]

Among those studying the playing children were three MA students in education. They concluded that *The Model* was more than a mere 'gimmick': the fact that hundreds of families were queuing up every day to give their children the chance to play proved the 'enormous need' for play environments built to meet the children's 'own wishes'.[40] The educationalists' findings also showed that functional games (jumping, climbing, swinging) were more popular than constructive ones; and considering that it was an environment aimed at stimulating group relations and collective playing, solitary play (painting, for example) was surprisingly dominant. The activists' red reaction to the fire marshal's intervention was seen as a 'naïve and unsubtle demonstration of the purpose of *The Model*': the space that was being qualified by the children should have been allowed to speak for itself.[41]

4. The meaning of play

An art museum is the last place where one would expect to find children playing. By empowering the child, *The Model* reversed the art exhibition's hierarchies of visual and behavioural control and dissolved aesthetic form into play.

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39. Macke Nilsson, 'Ni tror att dom bara lattjar! Men i själva verket bygger dom upp morgondagens samhälle', *Aftonbladet*, Stockholm, 5 October 1968.

40. Anna Lena Wik-Thorsell, 'Modellen – bara ett nöjesjippo?', *Svenska Dagbladet*, Stockholm, 11 February 1970.

41. Ibid.

Nielsen's photographs from *The Model*, showing children engaged in producing their part of the 'model for a qualitative society', look like dream sequences from the space of a rich imagination that has developed in the absence of seriousness and rules.

Nielsen took his pictures from dynamic angles – a worm's eye view of a girl taking off her top, boys floating in a web of suspended rope, receding rows of red banners – as if aiming to reveal patterns of social energy; or 'patterns of play', as he put it. This tendency towards images in which the individual is shown as a component of a bigger structure, a new social body, *socialism*, is counterbalanced by those pictures showing children playing alone, enthroned as faithful monarchs above worlds that belong to them, as Walter Benjamin once described the child on its carousel.[42] For Nielsen, then, social transformation doesn't only start on the factory floor or in the street, but in the space that play demands and produces. Production is the first historical act, Karl Marx said, but play may even be prior to it. If play is production (or production before production), then the child is a subject with a natural inclination towards socialism: this is *The Model* as 'the pre-school of the culture revolution'.[43]

At the same time, Nielsen photographs seem to document what is not there – or at least not yet there. To the degree they appear to have been taken just before the transformation – just before the *Aufhebung* into the qualitative life promised by the title – the photos raise expectations:

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42. Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006 (1950), p. 122.

43. Nilsson, op. cit.

something other than play appears, something other than adulthood is to come. However, from this point of view the photos can also be considered an impossible wish to preserve spontaneous life. Quite literally so, inasmuch as the events unfolding before Nielsen's camera were disorderly and unrehearsed, carried out by undirected actors. As Rosalind E. Krauss has argued, the unique moment of photography is a glitch in time that upsets the temporal continuity of meaning, tradition and history.[44] It is obvious that Nielsen's photos show the art museum as the site of an event involved in a struggle against tradition and history; but do they not also rupture *The Model*'s own production of social presence? In this sense, the photos also document the oozing of symbolic value that invariably takes place in the art institution's rarefied space and, in the case of *The Model*, makes it difficult to distinguish between the child as a qualitative human being and an aesthetic subject, or even an art work.

This is also to say that the concept of play itself made problematic *The Model*'s claims to social significance. The patterns of play that would supposedly form the basis of a qualitative society could be said to be produced by subjects who are unaware of they are being productive, and hence liberated from any ulterior motives other than the continuation of play/production. This is how play, and the playing subject, manifest themselves in and by *The Model*. In his classic essay *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind, 1793), Friedrich Schiller argues that play is capable of reconciling aesthetic

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44. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985.

pleasure with societal governance. Schiller proposes that the aesthetic faculty is based on an instinct, the impulse to play. Once it is acknowledged as a form of play, the aesthetic function would 'place man, both morally and physically, in freedom'. Feelings and affections can thus be harmonised with beautiful forms, depriving the laws of reason of their moral compulsion and reconciling them 'with the interest of the senses'.[45] When art is determined by a new relation between instinct and reason, guided by the play impulse, the citizen's ethical and political duties will become internalised as spontaneous inclinations.

For Schiller, art was all that was left to reconstruct an enlightened society following the violent excesses of the French Revolution. In his influential book *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Herbert Marcuse revitalises Schiller's play impulse with a view to reconstructing modernity's aesthetic dimension, now understood as the fulfilment of people's true needs and as the channelling of the pleasure principle into the peaceful coexistence of a 'libidinous morality' which underpins a society of play. For both thinkers, then, the vision of a non-repressive culture leads from art to freedom by means of play: an aesthetic convention, established by eighteenth-century Romanticism and taken up again by emancipatory-utopian thinkers after the Second World War, which is implicit in the concept of sociality and freedom that *The Model* produces from its institutional site – if only because Nielsen did not argue with, or replace this convention's fundamental association with the art concept.

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45. Schiller quoted from Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization. A philosophical inquiry into Freud*. London: Verso, 2005 (1955), p. 182.

But in *The Model* art is no longer conceived as something ideal and harmonious, nor is play ultimately the essence of free subjectivity, as it is in Schiller and Marcuse. In *The Model* there is a different accent on play, in so far as it is a child's form of production. Thus *The Model* not only tended to give in to a romanticist tradition of society and aesthetic subjectivity. The avant-garde metaphor of originality is literally brought back to itself, to the child as a life source. As Rosalind E. Krauss put it:

> Originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination from tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté. Hence Brancusi's dictum, 'when we are no longer children, we are already dead'.[46]

Not only artistic, but also political vanguards operate with a dogma of originality that makes certain subjects especially well disposed for certain historical tasks. Mao Tse-tung is quoted in the exhibition catalogue of *The Model*, urging the necessity of toeing the mass line: for the party member, there must be a practical limit to the degree of brotherhood and equality they can show towards ideologically suspect citizens. Mao writes,

> We must concentrate our energy on the strata and on the groups of people whom we presume are listening, and who can still think. This is where real education is

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46. Krauss, op. cit., p. 157.

> possible. But we cannot choose our audience at random. Indoctrination is far too advanced for that.[47]

In a sense *The Model* even radicalises Maoist education by denying that adults are able to teach children. It is the children who will show us the qualitative society, because the children *are* this society. Leon Trotsky writes in 1923:

> A revolution does not deserve its name if it does not take the greatest care possible of the children – the future race for whose benefit the revolution has been made.[48]

Not only has the revolution been made for the children, as the future race, they are an incarnation of the changes to come: a new human being, a force of pure history. Here, the spontaneous and disinterested need to play that is implicit in Schiller's play impulse echoes metonymically in the child considered as incarnate bearer of the revolution.

The Model's passage beyond art consists in the way art was repressed in the context of Action Dialogue, but also in the event's dismissal of art's typical forms of appearance and privileged distance from the world. At the same time, what tradition has defined in various ways as the essence of art is still active within *The Model*: aesthetic conventions that the ostensibly de-aestheticised event pushes to the margins continue to resonate and lend meaning to its representations.

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47. Rydén, op. cit., p. 10. See p. 125 of this book.

48. Leon Trotsky, 'The Struggle for Cultured Speech', 1923. Quoted in Catriona Jeffries, 'Shaping the Future Race. Regulating the Daily Life of Children in Early Soviet Russia', in Kiaer and Naiman (eds.), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia. Taking the Revolution Inside*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 256.

Yet another rupture occurs on the level of the event's economy of representation; one that results in the unanticipated empowerment of the playing children.

5. A crossing of names

In *The Model* the conventional difference between the knowing adult and the ignorant child is inverted, because the children's play is acknowledged as a productive force. But play also becomes a representational function, as the child's chance for justice and as the chance for a qualitative society. In other words, the children play *something for somebody*.

The entire opening statement of the exhibition catalogue reads as follows:

> All these sentences have their own signals.
>
> But they also are also associated with a model at Moderna Museet on 30 September–20 October 1968.
>
> The idea is to create a framework for children's own creative play. Children of all ages will work on developing this framework.
>
> Indoors and outdoors – in all kinds of play – they should have the right to communicate their capacity for self-expression.
>
> 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 also be a model for us.

We hope so.

Therefore, we are letting the children present their model to those who are working with or are responsible for the environment provided for children outside – in the adult world.

We believe children are capable of articulating their own needs.

And that they want something different from what awaits them.[49]

The text is signed by the *Arbetsgruppan*, the 'Working Group', who – one assumes – built the playground. But even though

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49. Palle Nielsen, 'En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle', op. cit., p. 4. The first line of the text refers to the other texts in the catalogue. Nielsen also contributes to a catalogue essay with the same title as the event, and which he signs in his own name. In this text he defines – seemingly at odds with the primacy of the children's work on the frame that the 'manifesto' talks about – children's play in terms of imitation. Accordingly, a reflexive relation between children and adults is outlined: 'When we see the kids playing down in the yard, we dream. We know they are playing at being us. That they play at what we do every day. Their contact with reality is the account we give them of it.' Nielsen concludes: 'But now we know that we need to change ourselves, our own approach to society and to the people we encounter and know, while giving children the opportunities they need as human beings. Then they will also play at what we do. And that is a model for a qualitative society.' However, the catalogue essay that Nielsen signs does not mention the action at Moderna Museet, and hence addresses the idea of a qualitative society in general terms. See the essay in p. 115 of this book.

Nielsen had volunteers to help him, no such group existed. The signature of the Working Group was a pseudonym used by Palle Nielsen to avoid his authorial signature, and sign his text with a collective identity instead: a way for him to remain loyal to the ideology of Action Dialogue.

The text by the fictitious Working Group can be read as a manifesto for *The Model*. But it is very different from modernism's inflammatory battle cries, signed by a sovereign We that states its demands in a revolutionary Now. Jacques Rancière has written that the manifesto's time of political subjectivation can be conceived as 'a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link… a being to a non-being or a not-yet-being'.[50] The collective that 'crosses its names' in the manifesto is structured by its anticipation of freedom and what it is not or does not yet have (equality, rights). In *The Model*, the universal becoming of the child – the child as an unfinished person, a pre-being or a future race – is turned into just such a not-yet-being that demands its rights and freedom. This process of political subjectivation is emphasised by Nielsen's self-truncated authorship. By disappearing as the author of the event and instead working under a collective pseudonym, he crosses identities and links names outside of his own signature to produce a literally un-authorised space where the children can use play to 'talk about their ability to express themselves'.

This is a dizzying perspective, but also an unexpectedly productive one. The fact that the text of The Working Group is a counter-discourse written by a fictitious author on behalf

50. Jacques Rancière, 'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization', *October*, no. 61, pp. 60–61.

of a collectivity – the children – which can't or doesn't write, inadvertently creates a strange equality. Because three authors who are only half-present write each other, a collective authorship is realised: under its pseudonym, Nielsen writes the text of the Working Group, which passes on the work of signification to the children, who in their turn continue to 'talk about' their work on the framework for the qualitative society. This amalgamation of names would also include Pontus Hultén's, as the event's institutional mediator, and Action Dialogue's, as Nielsen's ideological authority.

What Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, writing in *The German Ideology*, call a communist organisation of society also has consequences for the role of the artist. When there is no longer such a thing as a division of labour in society, 'there disappears the subordination of the artist to some definite art, thanks to which he is exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc.' Hence the 'exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals' is dispersed into the broad mass as there will be 'no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities'.[51] This reintegrated artistic talent, shorn of individual authorship, is known as unalienated labour; but it might just as well be the kind of production that is called *play*. And thus, because he subverts individual authorship by choosing to omit or erase his own signature, Nielsen manages to include the children as producers and realise the full political potential of *The Model*, beyond all the paradoxes and ambiguities the concept of play carries with itself.

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51. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*. New York, 1973 (1846), p. 109.

6. Hitches in time and space: festivals and gestures

In the course of its peculiar interplay of absence and presence, the Working Group's text denies, five times in five sentences, that *The Model* is an exhibition. Of course, *The Model* didn't offer perceptual constants of the passive, contemplative kind that one expects to find in the art exhibition, but instead turned the museum into a place where a new *sensibility* – a febrile communism – could arise. But what is it that cannot be said, and has the exhibition as its limit?

As we have seen, not only the exhibition format but also other aesthetic forms of appearance, including authorship and the art object, are radically displaced in *The Model*, as a way of anticipating the future event. The Proletkult of the Russian Constructivists similarly transformed the artist's historical role as 'decorator of the church and the court jester of secular power', as Nielsen put it in an interview.[52] In a comment on Vladimir Tatlin's famous plan for a Monument to the Third International, for example, the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov expressed his contempt for a similar edifice that had been rendered impotent by its aesthetic context: 'The Eiffel Tower is only 300 metres high, and it was built to adorn a world *fair*.'[53] In other words: The Eiffel Tower is not really a tower. It is only a tower for the bourgeoisie. The spatial politics of Bolshevik agit-prop were also in tune with *The Model*'s redefinition of the museum's function as a

52. Rydén, op. cit., p. 11. See p. 127 of this book.

53. Commissar Melnikov in conversation with R. Broby-Johansen, 1926. Quoted from Bergqvist, Lindegren, Hultén, Feuk (eds.), *Vladimir Tatlin*. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968, p. 63 (exh. cat.).

children's playground. The political imperative could reject a building's or a vehicle's original function and enlist it under a new guise in the service of mass education: the facade of a church could be rigged to appear as a giant tank, a weapon of the Red Army; and, to enlighten the rural population, agit-trains were sent to the provinces as classrooms and exhibition spaces.

The exhibition catalogue of Pontus Hultén's 1969 exhibition *Poetry Must Be Made by All!* featured an essay on the Bolshevik mass festivals of the 1920s; parades that would snake through the city as mobile propaganda sculptures. One A. Mazaev defined the mass festival as:

> ...the living intercourse between human beings, unrestricted by objects or hierarchic structures. Its specific feature is play, self-realisation, without which no one truly exists... The [festival] as an aesthetic phenomenon hereby overcomes the 'illusoriness' of art. The principle of play, action is the antithesis of watching, it supports the tendency to eliminate all differences between actor and spectator...[54]

In the carnivalesque Bolshevism of the mass festival, play eliminates 'all differences' and the illusion of art is overcome. But play at the same time *restores* illusion by being inextricably associated with theatre; at least if one brings the word back to its root of *in-ludere*, to be in play. So if play frees up

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54. A. Mazaev, 'Mass festivals of the 1920s', *Dekorativnoe isskustvo*, no. 11, 1966, here quoted from Waldén (ed.), *Poetry Must Be Made by All! Transform the World!*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1969, p. 47 (exh. cat.).

space and subjectivity it is also an aesthetic form in which political ritual – as a conceptual space enclosed by illusion – inheres. From this point of view, play doesn't get us any closer to the real or the political than does the art exhibition.

In José Triana's *Night of the Assassins* (1965) – a theatre play that, like *The Model*, was also presented in Stockholm in 1968 – three siblings play a forbidden game in which they kill their tyrannical parents and demand the right to remake the world. For their revolution at home they chant their demand for a space in which things are given new names and places: 'the living room is not the living room, the living room is the kitchen. The kitchen is not the kitchen, the kitchen is the loo.'[55] The museum is not the museum, the exhibition is a playground… However, in Triana's play the children's revolt turns against itself. Through the repressive norms and habits they have instilled in their offspring, the parents end up having the last say. Something similar occurs when you put an adventure playground in the museum: which, of course, is not just any architecture to be appropriated and detourned, but enshrines a very sophisticated appropriative power that became entangled with *The Model*.

As Nielsen said, the exhibition space provided the perfect research context for surveying chaos. But this also implies that when *The Model* enrolled children in an evolutionary process, it was really acting no differently to those nineteenth-century museums which were mechanisms for progress and citizenship. In this way, *The Model* raised the ghost of the museum as an organ for public instruction. By having played a decisive role in the formation of disci-

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55. José Triana, *La noche de los asesinos*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2001 (1965), p. 50.

plinary society, museums and exhibitions are fundamental instruments of the educative and civilising functions that constitute the state. 'The exhibitionary complex', to use Tony Bennett's term, isn't a power that operates by force or correction, but enlists people on its side and offers them a role in its own operation.[56] Exhibition audiences celebrate and regulate each other by occupying a consensual space defined by certain values where they look at art, and where they look at each other looking at art. So *The Model* may have emptied the exhibition space of objects and given it over to uncivilised bodies, but it also turned childhood into a spectacle of civics – albeit an emancipatory or utopian one: 'A model for people who want to look at people,' as one newspaper put it.[57]

In his book *Inside the White Cube* (1976), Brian O'Doherty defines the artistic gesture as an artwork that uses the exhibition space itself as artistic material; for example when Christo and Jeanne-Claude in 1968 wrapped the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in tarpaulin. By employing the architecture around art, the artist investigates the ideological presuppositions behind isolating certain objects in the gallery space and according them value, or she displaces the physical parameters of the exhibition space towards artistic representation. The gesture is often an indexing and a staging of the entire way the reception of the artwork is structured, just as the adventure playground in the Moderna Museet intervened in conventional expectations of art and

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56. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.

57. *Dagens Nyheter*, Stockholm, 2 October 1968.

the art exhibition. Hence the gesture 'is not art, perhaps, but art-like and thus has a meta-life around and about art'.[58]

Since a playground is neither exclusive nor difficult to understand, *The Model* fits easily with O'Doherty's critique of the exhibition space as a bearer of social, intellectual and economic snobbism. The gesture is a sudden shift of perspective, a surprise raid on the exhibition space or on the museum's claim to be a place that contains all historical times. The gesture makes energy and surprise erupt by pointing towards a future development:

> …there is a hitch in a gesture's time which is its real medium. Its content, as revealed by time and circumstance, may be out of register with its presenting form… Gestures are thus the most instinctive of artworks in that they do not proceed from full knowledge of what provokes them. Indeed, they

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58. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. London: Lapis Press, 1986 (1976), p. 70. O'Doherty's characterisation of the gesture as meta-art is prefigured by Henri Lefebvre, writing about appropriation as a particular kind of production of space: 'An appropriated space *resembles* a work of art, which is not to say that it in any sense is an *imitation* work of art.' Lefebvre argues that most modern experiments in collective lifestyle have lost their power because of what he calls insufficient spatial morphology; namely, the risk of a passive takeover inherent to the way communes have started to use existing spaces for their own purposes – the suburban villa, the farm, more or less ruinous castles and so on. In order to produce new space through qualitative differentiation, the invention of a 'space of enjoyment' has to consciously pass through an 'elitist phase', a phase of abstraction. *The Model* was perhaps such an 'elitist phase' expressed through a variation of activist strategy in favour of pressing the demand that critical art belongs in the institution. (Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999 [1974], p. 380).

> are born out of a desire for knowledge, which time may make available.[59]

Something only halfway sayable that is based in an unresolved tension between the present time and the historical forms available to it – a desire for something to come, something *more*, which refuses to be reduced to positive knowledge. Hence the children in *The Model* continue 'work on the frame' in order to provoke a future content, the model for a qualitative society.

However, a gesture can only be made once. The white cube, ideologically elastic as it is, soon reconfigures itself and expects the unexpected. So if the gesturing artist works with the cunning of a bullfighter, as O'Doherty puts it, the artist can also be compared with the crafty lawyer who finds loopholes in the institution's 'legislation' through which the exceptional meta-work can evade history and pre-empt criticism. In this way the gesture makes for an odd mix between subversion and legalism. The question, however, is what happens with the gesture's irony when it is no longer the result of a (false) dialectic between the individual artist and the institution – when it is not the author who 'wises you up', but an anonymous crowd of 'someones', as Roland Barthes characterised the active reader? When the gesture's juggling and shifting of the logic of the white cube isn't meant to be inscribed directly on art history, but might actually leave the gallery, and enter the city outside? When its formal content is the uncontrolled play of children?

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59. Ibid., pp. 105–06.

Thus, in several respects, Nielsen's went further in his reconstruction of the white cube than what O'Doherty had in mind when he wrote about the gesture. Moreover, the manoeuvring that Nielsen had to perform to please his fellow activists in Action Dialogue shows that he was painfully aware that the white cube isn't an uncontested space. On the other hand, *The Model* relied – both as a pedagogical laboratory and as a mass utopia – on the idea of the white cube as a mute and universal site.[60]

7. Swimming in paint

In an essay from the end of 1968, the poet and journalist Hans-Jørgen Nielsen exemplifies the youth culture's dream of freedom with *The Model*. He writes:

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60. Even if the gallery gesture is an endemically sixties mode, it is only a little later that one finds projects that approximate the way that *The Model* turns the gallery space inside out towards social space: Hélio Oiticica's multi-sensorial installation *Tropicalia* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1969, or Martha Rosler's *Garage Sale* at the University of California in 1973 (a fleamarket of everyday objects collected by the artist and sold in the university's gallery), are probably the nearest examples, both in time and artistic philosophy. Interestingly, a similar project took place in 1971 in Frankfurt, when the artists Thomas Bayrle and Wolfgang Schmidt, along with students from the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach (Linette Schönegge, Regina Henze and Karin Günther-Thom), initiated the event *Kinderplanet* (Children's Planet), an adventure playground inside the Frankfurt Fair for children who couldn't leave the city for the summer holidays. In *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (1999), Rosalind E. Krauss proposes a historically normative concept of the gesture, by arguing that the conceptual gesture has become the legitimate road to producing artistic work, in the absence of medium specificity as absolute criterion.

> Palle Nielsen here managed to put together the very same dream, for everybody to see and to live: a huge, self-multiplying society for happy, free people, which in this case were mainly children but could just as well have been adults; a deeply integrated communal way of life that nonetheless did not hamper the individual's free expression; a qualitative society where the point was precisely that it built on an intensive quantity: the real and free choice between a profusion of possibilities. There were, for example, a large number of costumes and masks from every period, so the children could freely construct their own roles. This is what the dream of freedom looks like. To think with roles is to conceive of revolt. Or that, at least, is what it ought to be. For it implies the ability to imagine other roles than those society imposes in an authoritarian manner.[61]

In Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's portrayal of *The Model* as a kind of aesthetic free state, the event's critique of the city and of childhood recedes. Instead he describes it as providing an ideal arsenal of subjectivities, in contrast to the few and fixed roles of bourgeois society. This is what he called *attituderelativisme* (attitude relativism): an idea of subjectivity that displaces Existentialism's concept of choice onto the forms of social appearance. Put simply, you are the roles you assume, and through which you appear as yourself. When personality is performed in such complex and discontinuous sequences of attitudes, 'behaviour belongs to the specific form of playing

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61. Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, 'Drømmen om frihed', *Information*, Copenhagen, 21–22 December 1968.

that is called a game'.[62] Even if Hans-Jørgen Nielsen considers this a rebellious mindset, it also represents a certain political fatalism – at least from the point of view of Palle Nielsen's more robust and oppositional activism. In attitude relativism, art can only offer another field of play. You may 'massage' and colour the roles you inhabit, and inscribe yourself subjectively on them in various ways, but you will always have to play along.

If Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's idea of role swapping doesn't apply to *The Model* and its complicated freedom, his commentary does raise the question of exactly what relation Palle Nielsen's ambiguous model of social transformation has to subjectivity. In 1969, Nielsen revised and published the essay that he had written – and omitted – for the exhibition catalogue of *The Model*. Entitled 'The social artists', the text expresses his scepticism about existing concepts of social transformation (such as that of an orthodox dialectical materialism), just as he had earlier seen the event's purpose in an indefinable surplus, 'a qualitative "more"'. Nielsen confesses to having 'dictated to the kids' in *The Model*, by assuming that they would work with the materials in the same way he would have, rather than wasting or destroying them.[63] But if the social artist lets the child play freely he must also let go of ordinary criteria of production. As always, politics

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62. Quoted from 'Spillets regler. Til attituderelativismens psykologi', in Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, *Nielsen' og den hvide verden. Essays Kritik Replikpoesi 1963–68*. Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968, p. 13.

63. Palle Nielsen, 'The social artists' in Clausen, Højholt, Hejlskov Larsen et al. (eds.), *MAK*, no. 1, vol. 1, p. 6, Copenhagen, 1969. See the essay in pp. 136–44 of this book.

get complicated when the unique perspective of the pleasure principle is employed in a project of social reconstruction. Nielsen acknowledges that he is forced to drastically scale down his artistic critique:

> Only the fact that [the kids] are swimming in paint is a step towards a changed social structure. It is small. It is slow. But it initiates a movement of desires and actions.[64]

Nielsen here departs from the encompassing vision of a social model, and begins instead to think on a micro-level, where the playing child is beyond the reach of collective projects or *Realpolitik*. Here the question is how to articulate levels of being *before* society and *before* the personal, in a space in which perception and meaning are still in flux. In this perspective, the challenge of how to constitute power, and hence the preconditions to change, are not about setting up ideal parameters for social processes, but about becoming smaller. It is artistic, subjective potential as much as collective political action that must be liberated. As Gilles Deleuze puts it, art says what children say; this is the celestial state of art 'where nothing is personal or rational any longer, and where the infinitesimal act can be activated as a gigantic perception, an oceanic vision'. [65]

At this level of critique – of the spaces in ourselves and in the crowd that haven't yet been given a name or a designation – it becomes clear that *The Model*'s utopianism not only had temporal, spatial and subjective, but also

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64. Ibid.

65. Gilles Deleuze, 'Ce que les enfants disent', *Critique et clinique*, Paris, 1993, p. 86.

linguistic consequences. This in terms of Nielsen's struggle to find the right vocabulary to articulate the kind of critique that *The Model* gestured at, but also with regard to the theories and vocabularies with which we approach the event today. Michel Foucault writes of utopias that even though they have no real locality, they offer society in perfected form, or they offer consolation in the form of fantastic, untroubled regions; 'they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical.'[66] Outside of the lyrical and systemic utopias we find heterotopias. These are the 'other spaces', the pockets in official reason – in our culture, sites such as prisons, psychiatric wards, or the cinema. Heterotopias are counter-sites, as Foucault calls them, in which all other real sites within culture are 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.' A heterotopia has no moral destination, and therefore poses a challenge to knowledge and language:

> *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'.

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66. Quotation about utopias from Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 1967 (http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html) (22 February 2010), and quotation about heterotopias from the same author: *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2000 (1966), p. xviii.

> This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias… desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.[67]

To base a social model in a playground is to give a heterotopia a utopian superstructure: it is the equivalent of proposing to turn a brothel, a cemetery, or a museum for that matter, into a model for society. Imbued with the potential to satisfy society's symbolic and political economies, heterotopia becomes functional and operative – or conversely, when the idea of a qualitative society is subjected to children's play, utopia becomes messy.

In other words, *The Model*, as a utopian political fable, was marked by the heterotopia's conflictive relationship with language and time: its fable was deferred, with the representational parameters – language, the photographic image, the art institution, the authorial subject, the exhibition format, the art object – all in one way or the other derailed or 'stopped in their tracks'. Instead, a vocabulary had to be produced that could deal with the ideally unformed subjectivity of a future race that necessarily contests grammar at its source: the 'splash' and 'squish-squash' of the kids' swimming in paint, their 'Aaaaaaaajjjjöööööööööö' (adieu) to adult reason.[68] This is the frail and contradictory basis

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67. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, op. cit.

68. The onomatopoetica are from Nielsen, 'The social artists', op. cit. See p. 137 of this book.

for *The Model* as a political fable, with which it opened up a view to a potential, as saturated as it was uncertain.

In fact the text of the 'Working Group' – Nielsen's 'manifesto' for *The Model* – addresses the search for such a critical vocabulary. The text claims that the children continue 'the work on the frame'. A surprising phrase, first of all because it describes the fullness and teeming activity of the adventure playground as a transitory phase towards an essence that may or may not arrive. Secondly, if the children only work on the framework they are not producing any content towards the qualitative society but rather *a discourse about their play*, as a way for them to 'talk about their ability to express themselves' and 'tell us… about their world'. With this, Nielsen states that more important than the adventure playground that the children make is the fact that they represent, frame and give meaning to it, by articulating a 'language' that is spoken from the empty place of power.[69]

A pedagogical model can petrify as a power structure. 'The domination of a pedagogical model,' Foucault writes, is where we may 'encounter the tyranny of goodwill, the obligation to think "in common" with others.'[70] In this way, the mass utopian aspects of *The Model* had it filtering 350 children per hour through a giant playground, as if it di-

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69. We may compare with Giorgio Agamben who writes about children as 'the signifiers of the signifying function, without which there would be neither human time nor history'. Giorgio Agamben, 'In Playland. Reflections on History and Play', *Infancy and History. On the Destruction of Experience*. London: Verso, 2007 (1978), p. 93.

70. Michel Foucault, 'Theatrum Philosophicum', *Critique*, no. 282, Paris, 1970. The translation is mine.

vided human capital into a social analysis of quantitative and qualitative. But the heterotopic side of the event is always easy to see, as the points at which it shifts into something unrecognisable that checks its utopian impulse. In an almost Dadaist way, *The Model* was also a derailed sacred act in which the distinction between utopia and heterotopia breaks down, opening up towards new vocabularies where difference and potential don't risk being ruled and recaptured by dialectics.

8. *The Model* as miniature

Beyond its inclusion of the children as a future race, *The Model*'s relation to historical time can be more precisely determined if we address it as a miniature; another instance, perhaps, of liberating potential by scaling down critique.

In spite of its being a mass utopia, *The Model* was – like a toy – a miniaturisation; that of a qualitative society. The toy and the game, Giorgio Agamben writes in his anthropological essay 'In Playland. Reflections on History and Play' (1978), are 'what belonged – once but no longer – to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economic'.[71] This is because toys and games on the one hand contain the residue of sacred rituals from ancient ceremonies and divinatory practices. In ball games, for example, we can discern the relics of the ritual representation of a myth in which the gods fought for possession of the sun. But toys and games have on the other hand a practical-economic model, because they refer

71. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, op. cit., p. 54.

to objects which still belong to the realm of utility (a car, a gun, cooking utensils and so on). Agamben writes:

> What the toy preserves of its sacred or economic model, what survives of this after its dismemberment or miniaturization, is nothing other than the human temporality that was contained therein: its pure historical essence. The toy is a materialization of the historicity contained in objects, extracting it by means of a particular manipulation. While the value and meaning of the antique object and the document are functions of their age – that is, of their making present and rendering tangible a relatively remote past – the toy, dismembering and distorting the past or miniaturizing the present – playing as much on *diachrony* as on *synchrony* – makes present and renders tangible human temporality in itself, the pure differential margin between the 'once' and 'no longer.' [72]

Miniaturisation through play, then, is nothing other than the cipher of history.

It is obvious how temporality was made tangible in *The Model* inasmuch as the children's presence accelerated the museum's ritualised historical time. After it was over, however,

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72. Ibid., p. 80. Charles Fourier also gave special significance to children's relationship to 'the industrial miniature' and their predilection for 'little workshops', to be used for the purpose of their self-education and to motivate them to take part in the day-to-day running of the phalanx: '…The noise from the kitchen appeals to the child, and it would be delighted to take part in [the kitchen work] if provided with a complete set of small kitchen utensils: pots, pans and saucepans *en miniature*. This would put them in the seventh heaven.' Fourier, op. cit., pp. 115 and 127.

Nielsen did nothing to evaluate the event as a research project. He doesn't, for example, interview any participating children about their play experience in the supposedly ideal playground of the museum, or their recollection of it. As it turned out *The Model* would, to a large extent, have fulfilled its purpose as an event that generated certain effects through the impact of its exposure through the museum and the mass media. These effects would emerge from the symbolic meaning of the image of the children's playground in the museum and from its media reception, as much as from the playground's physical presence and its effect on visitors to the museum.[73] After all, on many days children could only play for a very limited time in *The Model*. In this way, the event could just as rightfully have proclaimed its reality as a model on its first as on its final day.

But even if it was a playground, *The Model* was paradoxically *not* a toy or a game, nor was it in this sense a model. *The Model* was a miniature that dismembered the

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73. Jean Baudrillard writes how a theory of 'symbolic action' was elaborated in the revolutionary movements of May '68, vis-a-vis the supposed possibility of redirecting mass media towards an amplification of subversive agency. But this is merely 'a large strategic illusion': 'At the limit, the subversive act is no longer created; it is produced directly as a model, like a gesture. The symbolic has slipped from the order of the production of meaning even (political or otherwise) to the order of its reproduction, which is always that of power. The symbolic becomes *coefficient*, pure and simple; transgression becomes exchange value.' In this way Baudrillard would probably also have judged that the anti-authoritarianism of the adventure playground was destroyed by being passed through the medium of the art museum. (Jean Baudrillard, 'Requiem for the Media' (1971), *Utopia Deferred. Writings for Utopie (1967–1978)*. New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2006, pp. 80–81.)

past ('adult society'), but it didn't miniaturise anything that already existed. Instead it miniaturised the future by aiming to accelerate time towards the moment of its own application and enlargement. *The Model's* tendency, then, is not to conceive of play as being derived from something else, as having belonged 'once but no longer' to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economic, as Agamben puts it. Instead play is an independently becoming ontology of a future that should not be repressed.

Nielsen could be said to have used the insight about the toy as a historical essence as not only offering a perspective on the future, but also in the Marxist sense of use value. At the same time, what Agamben calls the sacred model for play is in a sense recuperated by Nielsen's repeated engagement in playground actions. Political action also has its ritual objects: for Nielsen, they are playgrounds. In the same vein, *The Model* could be seen as a rite of initiation in which children become producers. And so in Nielsen the playground becomes a site that not only points to the structural correlation between ritual and play, as two opposing tendencies that for Agamben traverse human societies. Nielsen draws them closely together in order to use them in a single oppositional movement against existing society. The playground becomes a dynamic unit of tightly interwoven synchrony and diachrony. On the one hand, as a playground action it is the explosive moment of an intervention into a site (whether urban space or museum); and on the other hand, as a possibility to play it has a long diachronic perspective onto human and social time, in which it may become a duration for the individuals whose future being is constituted by play, if only in the sense that the playing you do – or don't get to do – as a child comes before everything else you do later in life.

9. Create two, three… many playgrounds

A model is something paradigmatic, exemplary, a matrix for how things should be. This is the model that internalises and reproduces the norms and hierarchies whose genesis and structure it displays for the purpose of being replicated and perpetuated in turn.[74] On the other hand, a model can also be something absolute, a counter-image to what exists – even to what can come into existence. It is a draft of what is yet to be, and might never be, because it cannot be realised outside of itself. A model is in this sense a singularity that is realised before anything determinate. Whichever way you look at it, then, a model tends to be subject to the logic of the Platonic Form: in the first sense, it is a self-referential sign for its own realisation in a series of copies. In the second, it can be understood aesthetically, as a unique artwork which can only be reproduced parasitically, as it were.

We have seen how both of these meanings coexist in *The Model* in the more or less symmetrical pull of a double bind. Such a reading may bring *The Model*'s aesthetic and disciplinary contraband to light, but it doesn't do justice to the activist politics that both preceded and succeeded it in other playground actions in Copenhagen and Stockholm.

If the purpose of militant action in the 1960s was to 'create two, three… many Vietnams', as Che Guevara's famous slogan put it, Nielsen's playground actions in the city could be said to work according to the same tenet: to create two, three, many playgrounds. However, the logic that connected

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74. This is the formulation of Steven Shaviro in *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 69.

struggles was their multiplication as singularities, rather than their serialisation based on a model. Che writes:

> In the coming years the contradictions [of capitalism] will assume an explosive character, but the problems of the European countries and their solutions differ from those that our dependent and underdeveloped countries are struggling with.[75]

Thus there existed no single universal model for the political struggle (not even the one that upstaged all the rest of them in the late 1960s, namely the Vietnamese resistance to US imperialism). Instead there was a syntax of action, new languages to be invented and acted out, in order to secure the future and autonomy of specific sites and contexts.

Frantz Fanon wrote that if the construction of a bridge does not raise the consciousness in those who build it, it should not be built. People can continue swimming or rowing across the river.[76] In a similar way, Nielsen was wary of the way the well-designed form can be positioned in the spectrum of social power. In an interview at the end of 1968, he moved the focus further away from the 'play frame' that he had designed for the children at the Moderna Museet:

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75. Che Guevara, *Two, Three, Many Vietnams!* Quoted from Inge Eriksen, 'Om psykologisk neokolonialisme', *På vej mod ekstraparlamentarisme*. Copenhagen, 1970, p. 187.

76. Quoted from Hildur Jackson and Birte Ravn: 'Bo bedre – bestem selv', *Meninger om mennesker og miljø. En debatbog*. Copenhagen: Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut and Teknisk Forlag, 1971, p. 146.

> There is no need for playgrounds. There is a need to change how people behave, to change society and create a socialist world where people can communicate. What the hell are playgrounds for? I have seen children function perfectly well on asphalted yards, when they were allowed to play with whatever they liked. You can't design anything specific, but you can give them opportunities to work with themselves, and that is when you really achieve a change of behaviour.[77]

How do people take possession of a bridge, of a playground? This is the real question. Not which model to follow and replicate, but to find out what kind of communication, what kind of intelligence a playground is.

If the notion of the 'model' is difficult or ambiguous, 'qualitative society' is no less so. It is a term that promises the functional satisfaction of a political *project*. We might instead propose 'community', through Agamben's concept of 'the coming community', for example, in which he articulates forms of being-in-common that don't have a teleology and cannot promise stability or permanence; that are characterised by many identities and desires or by none in particular.[78] Perhaps *The Model* succeeded in articulating

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77. Rydén, op. cit., p. 8. See p. 122 of this book.

78. I am of course thinking of Agamben's essay 'The Coming Community' (1993). Another thinker we may quote here is Jean-Luc Nancy, who in his 1987 essay 'The Inoperative Society' revisits the betrayed promise of communism. He claims that new modern forms of coexistence – new means of communication, decolonisation, the multiethnic society – haven't renewed the the question of community: 'But if this world, even though it has changed… proposes no new figure of community, perhaps this in itself teaches us something. We stand perhaps to learn from this that it

such an unheard demand through the children's play and through its own self-contradictions that came unexpectedly together to express the force of a desire that could not be reduced to play as such, nor to any specific form or space. The playground in the museum was an ecstatic space that remained open and expectant. It allowed for a working through of the idea of the political as something unfinished and becoming, in a space where others are present. This was perhaps its single biggest achievement. To this day, there are few spaces where we may glimpse an outside to the present, where we may see a future, an uncontrollable *more* that we may share between us.[79]

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can no longer be a matter of figuring or modelling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but that it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard* demand, beyond communitarian models or remodellings.' (Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991 [1987], p. 22.) We may also compare with Derrida, who talks about 'undeconstructible justice' in terms of a 'desert-like messianism' that has no content and no identifiable Messiah: 'the coming of the other, the absolute and the unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*.' (Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge, 2006 [1993], p. 33.)

79. Nielsen also worked with children and notions of community and alternative society as part of a children's programme about the Thy camp that he directed in 1970 for Danish national television. The Thy camp was a festival-like community initiated in the summer of 1970 by the student organisation Det ny Samfund ('New Society'), and was a kind of Danish Woodstock, but focused on living experiments rather than music. Nielsen's children's programme was based on a trip he made to the Thy camp with two school classes from Copenhagen, and contained documentary footage of events in the camp as well as a drama, scripted with the children, within the film.

Minister of Education Olof Palme visiting *The Model* with his sons, 1968

10. *The Balloon* and the Million Programme

The playground in the museum was one event in a series that unfolded in accordance with Palle Nielsen's nomadic activist practice of connecting specific sites in the cities with the smooth spaces of the mass media and the white cube. After it finished at the Moderna at the end of October 1968, Nielsen made it clear in a newspaper interview that *The Model* was for sale to local town or city councils. The offer included all materials and his own services as consultant; the aim was to see how *The Model* would perform in the context of social housing, rather than counter-urbanist activism.

The Model was acquired by the municipality of Västerås, a city to the north-west of Stockholm. 'The anti-authoritarian exhibition moved into living reality,' was the way one

Inside *The Balloon*, Västerås, 1968–69

newspaper summed up *The Model*'s afterlife outside of the art context.[80] For the price of 6,000 kronor (which Nielsen divided up between the volunteers who helped construct and maintain *The Model*), HSB, Sweden's biggest council housing firm, paid to have the playground reconstructed next to some of its newly built dwellings, to help advertise flats to prospective tenants.

Under Nielsen's supervision, the entire 'play frame' was rebuilt in a large tent of the kind used for sports events in the wintertime. The fame of *The Model* meant that local FLN activists volunteered to take part in the reconstruction of the adventure playground, where local children would play with a group of educators employed by the city. It also became the site of a seminar that Nielsen organised for

80. Gudrun Hjelte, 'Ballongen i Västerås', *Aktuellt*, Stockholm, 1968.

The Balloon, Västerås, 1968–69

activists, experts and residents about the housing situation (just as he had initiated discussion in *The Model* by organising a conference there about the condition of children in the city, with the participation of top-level decision makers such as the Stockholm city architect and the then minister of education, Olof Palme). The tent's appearance led eight-year-old Mikael to baptise this new incarnation of the adventure playground *The Balloon*. It lasted until the spring of 1969, when it was closed under protests from residents. Once the empty flats had been rented out, the council housing firm withdrew its funding for *The Balloon*.

In the late 1960s, Stockholm was a city that until recently had had some of the worst housing conditions in Europe. Accordingly, extraordinarily high building targets had been adopted, most prominently in the form of the so-called Million Programme, a state-directed building scheme that – with a name that sounds more like a programme of mass activism from Mao's China – produced more than one million

dwellings between 1965 and 1974.[81] But around 1970 the new world of the Swedish Social Democrats began to fracture. The economy, the welfare state, the housing and the planning programmes simultaneously began to show signs of systemic failure. Peter Hall explains:

> One crucial part was a housing and a planning crisis: the system, geared to maximum production, suddenly found itself overproducing in quantity and massively underproducing in quality; there was a complete unpredicted surplus of unlettable dwellings and, worse, a problem of unlettable problem estates. In the newest satellites, built mainly on land acquired by the city outside its boundaries, the housing was completed at top speed, with little attention to the quality of the surrounding environment; much of it was industrialized, highly monotonous, and built at too high a density; services like transport were not ready; rents were high; residents had no choice.[82]

Surplus flats went to anybody who would take them – including problem families and drug addicts. When immigrants arrived many native Swedes moved out, thereby stigmatising the new housing areas as ghettos.

The Balloon reintegrated *The Model* into everyday life, and in this version the adventure playground also occasionally had unbounded social fantasies projected onto it. The newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* arranged a competition for children:

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81. Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002 (1988), p. 334.

82. Ibid., pp. 340–41.

> How would your Balloon look? If a Balloon were built where you live. What would it look like? What would you want to have in it? Write and tell us. Wish for everything you feel like. Everything you want. Everything you can imagine.[83]

Seen against the backdrop of massive urban planning that increasingly looked like a failed social experiment, such wish fulfilments had an ironic flavour, as if *The Balloon* were a ghost that had returned from the city of tomorrow to haunt the rising ruins of the Million Programme.

11. Between the houses

In the late 1960s Denmark had, statistically speaking, only recently become an industrialised nation. Its economy and population were growing, and people were moving to the cities at an unparalleled pace. Urban space was rapidly changed by the far-reaching effects of decisions concerning the living space of many people.[84]

In these years, the housing debate revolved critically around mainly two things. One was the issue of the old housing that was being rased and redeveloped within the cities. The other was the new suburban mass housing that was in the process of being built. The latter was often not a result of city planning so much as of the lack of it, where stated objectives weren't met and known constraints weren't taken

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83. 'Här har dom en mysig ballong!', *Dagens Nyheter*, Stockholm, 1968 (unknown author).

84. Marius Kjeldsen, 'Boligkvalitet, et spørgsmål om viden, talent og penge', *Meninger om mennesker og miljø. En debatbog*. Copenhagen: Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut, 1971, p. 119.

into account. Left-wing criticism characteristically opposed the authoritarian centralism of planning with soft or small moves such as proposals for playgrounds and communal areas, or with putting environmental issues and family politics on the agenda. Opposition to social experiments like Sweden's Million Programme aimed between the houses, so to speak; the critique was based on a point of view that sought to make the agendas of cultural production and social change coincide. More specific architectural criticism was advanced along these lines, for example Nielsen's proposal that housing should consist in dense and low buildings with many spatial formations on a 'human scale'.

To commentators such as Nielsen, the experience of living in the new dormitory towns amounted to a veritable catalogue of alienation. He found that the solidarity that existed between people in the old neighbourhoods was deracinated, and crime, isolation, mindless consumerism and a widening generation gap followed. The result was social marginalisation. In 'Anklage – og forsvar' (Accusation – and Defence), an essay from 1971, Nielsen generously estimates the proportion of 'deviants' in society to be as high as fifty per cent:

> We know them: The children who aren't old enough, the old who aren't productive any more, the women who can't work effectively, longhairs who aren't willing to do anything. The paranoid, the drug addicts, the abused, the thin, the fat.[85]

City planners are not among them, Nielsen argues, as they are recruited from the moneyed and cultured classes who

85. Palle Nielsen, 'Anklage – og forsvar', *Meninger om mennesker og miljø*, op. cit., p. 103.

don't live in the housing they design (this claim was based on fact: he had checked their addresses!). Thus Nielsen's story of decline is divided into those who plan and those who are planned for, into manipulators and manipulated, the latter sinking ever deeper into anomie. The group identities Nielsen constructs – deviants and 'normal' people – is a discourse that doesn't contain *The Model*'s open-endedness and acceptance of uncertainty, where the child was given a chance to produce its space and discourse (or at the very least, was represented as somebody who should be given that chance). At this stage it no longer seems relevant to Nielsen to operate at a micro-level of artistic critique. In indignation over the moral bankruptcy of the city planning, Nielsen personifies the class struggle and speaks on behalf of the subaltern:

> Which of us are normal – you or us? As it is, we feel like deviants because we cannot do what you do. Maybe you also have a reason to feel like deviants.[86]

Nielsen drives his dialectic of 'us' and 'them' into a social pathology that is not too far from J. G. Ballard's 1975 novel *High-Rise*, about a luxury tower block where life descends into a civil war amongst its denizens. 'The high-rise offered more than enough opportunities for violence and confrontation,' Ballard writes, 'a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation.' [87] But where Ballard dissects society's

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86. Ibid., p. 116.

87. J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise*. London: Harper Perennial, 2006 (1975), pp. 7 and 10.

drift towards self-destruction, Nielsen wants to see people behind the 'deviants' who are capable of coexisting and even revolting together when an imposed order becomes unbearable.

A small-scale uprising took place in the context of a playground that Nielsen designed for the new Copenhagen suburb Høje Gladsaxe. Planned in the late 1950s to house 7,000 residents, the Le Corbusier-inspired high-rise complex was the largest of its kind in Denmark. The pre-cast construction had the size of a city but lacked a city's complexity and details – nor did it offer any play facilities whatsoever. In spite of many complaints and the establishment of several committees, neither the city nor the housing authority had come up with any solutions to this. Høje Gladsaxe was described by one critic as a place built by fathers, for fathers: life there for house-bound mothers, the elderly and children was limited because they didn't drive to work in the morning. In the end it was the mothers who, with nowhere to take their children to play during the day, eventually had enough.

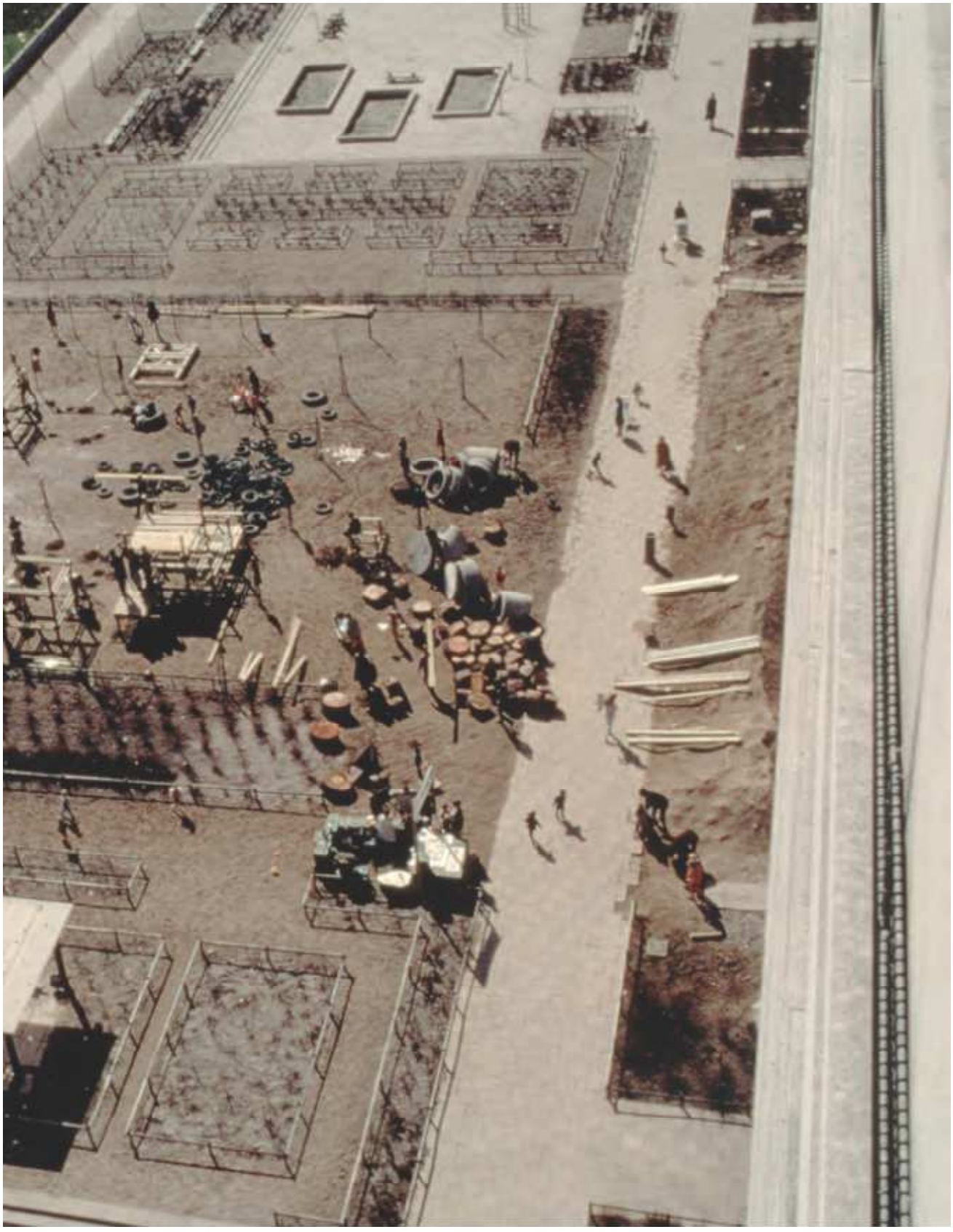
A group of about forty of these disenchanted residents, along with Nielsen and a group of psychologists, sociologists and architects who had been doing research in the area, decided to confront the 'recreational injustice' of Høje Gladsaxe. Using elements they had constructed in advance, Nielsen's design for a 400 square-metre adventure playground was erected by residents and activists over one day in April 1969. The location of Høje Gladsaxe was ideal, placed next to a large moor – which, however, was shielded off from the high rise complex by a 2.5 metre-high wall, that extended along the entire length of the tower blocks. Nielsen had devised the playground to be built adjacent

Høje Gladsaxe, 1969

to the wall, which now was symbolically and practically surmounted with a slide that connected one side with the other. Under the operatic headline 'Bursting the Gates of Welfare Utopia', *The Village Voice* reported from Høje Gladsaxe:

> The playground is a series of multi-levelled structures, all interconnected by wooden ladders, rope ladders and aluminium slides, with a safe jump to sand at the bottom. It was put together in parts over a period of several days, then assembled from 3 a.m. to noon one day and guarded by residents so it wouldn't be destroyed by the authorities... The playground's popularity finally forced the Gladsaxe administrative bureaucracy to accept it.[88]

88. David Gurin, 'Bursting the Gates of a Welfare Utopia', *The Village Voice*, New York, 27 November 1969. The playground



The Høje Gladsaxe adventure playground, 1969

Copenhagen dailies wrote about 'the housewife-architect construction' carried out by 'pioneers' whose 'million hammer blows' augured political climate change:

> It all happened when spring came – but without spring it would have happened anyway. The revolution came, the adventure arose and with it the belief in better housing construction in all of Denmark. And it all happened in Høje Gladsaxe yesterday. But it was (of course) illegal. The children of Høje Gladsaxe got a new playground worth 50,000 kroner. Starting in the early morning, it was erected in the space of fourteen to sixteen hours by parents, architects and students. It was simply built on a carpet beating site – without permission.[89]

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is also mentioned in a stream of consciousness in a novel by Camilla Christensen's, even if here it is erected a couple of years earlier: '…and the playground is for the little ones, there is nothing for the big children until one early morning in 1967, when the avant-garde of the youth revolt arrived in a rattling truck with weather-proofed poles, boards, paint, rope, old car tyres, green Tuborg for the adults and soft drinks for the kids, and then there is a playground (between blocks one and ten) for the big children, and the mayor splutters "they are taking the law into their own hands…"' (Camilla Christensen: *Jorden under Høje Gladsaxe* [The Earth Under Høje Gladsaxe]. Copenhagen: Samleren, 2002, pp. 169 and 171. The translation is mine.)

89. The long quotation about spring and revolution: 'Tog naboerne på sengen med helt ny legeplads', *Aktuelt*, 27 April. Previous quotations: 'Mandag på legepladsen', *Politiken*, 3 October and leading article: 'Det gælder trivslen', *Aktuelt*, 27 April. Quoted from Dahl, Gehl, Harder, et al., *SPAS 4*. Copenhagen, 1969, pp. 38–39. The translation is mine.

While the local authorities suggested that this was a case of taking the law into one's own hands – a slippery slope, a bypassing of tenants' democracy, etc. – the media's exalted response interpreted the intervention as an example of how residents could influence their living environment and collaborate directly with architects.

As part of his Ph.D. research into architecture, Nielsen recorded the outdoor activities available for children and adults in the area. Before the playground action, he drew up a questionnaire together with a group of psychology and sociology students, and visited one in ten of the residents of Høje Gladsaxe. Six months later, the same residents were interviewed and asked whether their views on the quality of life and outdoor facilities had changed. Among the families who had taken part in organising the adventure playground a relatively high percentage of divorces was found, as well as a wish for further education. Other findings showed that about 60% of those asked were unaffected by the intervention; but only 30% of these had children. Forty per cent were affected, negatively and positively, by the action, and 80% of these did have children. About 75% of both groups reported they would move out if offered somewhere else to live.

12. Celestial playgrounds of the suburbs

A quote by Robert Smithson can help us look back:

> I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past; it is in yesterday's newspapers, in the jejune advertisements of science-fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams.

> Time turns metaphors into *things*, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs. [90]

As Smithson would say, we have several kinds of future ruins on our hands here, scattered as they are on the non-historical sites that we have travelled through above: the derelict housing of the inner cities of 1960s Copenhagen and Stockholm; the satellite towns that still stand and perpetuate the effects of yesterday's official reason; the adventure playgrounds that Palle Nielsen designed, and that are gone. The Høje Gladsaxe playground was razed by the city in 1970. It hadn't been maintained, either by residents or the city, and was deemed a public safety risk. The spontaneous collectivism that in the 1960s could mobilize residents and different groups of people beyond the limits of profession and privacy also seems at the very least dormant today.

It is through the eye of cultural memory – the museum – that Nielsen's playground activism now passes. Time, however, has also turned play into a thing. As a result, it is no longer a figure for the transgression of existing society, but a norm in an economy based on commodified experience. Art and play are reconnected in the growing culture industries and in new imperatives of socialisation. If forty years ago free play was believed to be an *Erziehung zum Ungehörsam*, as a German book title proclaimed back then: an 'education in disobedience'; then the encouragement of creativity has today been turned into one of the means by

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90. Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Passaic, New Jersey', in Flam (ed.): *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 74.

which the commercial spheres of circulation adjust and control social processes.[91]

Foucault writes of the heterotopia that it always has a function in relation to all the space that remains. What happens, then, when society outside the children's playground starts 'playing'? As a subject in the process of becoming, the child is the locus for receiving and passing on meaning to the future. In the experience economy, on the other hand, the playing subject has been placed outside of any necessary relation to history, since what matters is the consumption of her own experience. Under such a regime, this subject's way back to history must be long, because play has already been assigned a function that revolves around individual experience, its intensities and perceived essences. In a society where play is capitalised, time stops.

If indeed the future is lost in the prosaic dumps of the past, as Smithson wistfully phrases it, it may be worth trying to recover history from 'the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs'. The very first play space that Nielsen designed in 1967 when he worked for the city of Gladsaxe is still in use after more than forty years. A play wall made of coloured concrete elements was recently restored and reopened in the summer of 2009. At a time when the widespread fears for children's safety have today made sixties-style playground activism almost impossible to practice, and when the meaning of play is changing as a result of its commodification, it should also be recalled that initiatives such as Nielsen's,

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91. Gerhard Bott (ed.), *Erziehung zum Ungehörsam. Kinderläden berichten aus der Praxis der antiautoritären Erziehung.* Frankfurt: März Verlag, 1970.

and the way they were initiated at many cultural levels and sites, have been influential in changing attitudes to children's needs both inside and outside institutions. These attitudes are now, however, under pressure due to increasing governmental focus on education as a political tool.

Nielsen continues to reflect existing society through his institutionally-sited playgrounds. For a 2009 biennial exhibition for children in Utrecht, he produced an outdoor playground – or model – entitled *The Children's Peace Corner*. Featuring many of the same installations as *The Model*, the *Peace Corner* made a point of integrating the parents. In *The Model*, the children typically squeezed those who didn't play to the sides of the exhibition space, as play functions were concentrated in the middle. In the Utrecht installation, there was space around the play functions for adults to be around the playing children.[92]

Of course, *The Children's Peace Corner* is a work signed by the artist Palle Nielsen, now acting on his own outside of activist networks or research contexts. When he shared his authorial signature with a crowd of children at the Moderna Museet it was a radical, egalitarian gesture with which he intended to reconstitute the concept of art by stripping it

92. During the 1970s Palle Nielsen continued to work with art and playgrounds, but now as two separate activities. On the art side he returned to painting and produced, among other works, a socialist world history told in abstract colour codes. He also ran the non-profit gallery space at Huset, a self-organised culture house in Copenhagen, taught at the training college for infant school teachers for a few years, guest lectured at colleges of education about children, space and playgrounds, and ran an office for playground architecture.

Palle Nielsen's *The Children's Peace Corner*, Utrecht, 2009

of elitism and mystification. But since the event's artistic critique was only indirectly or secretly articulated, it veered towards anti-art.

The fact that *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* was for many years afforded no place in art history is, in a wider sense, inscribed in the workings of an art that focuses on the world of acts – as a 'social art', or art activism. Inasmuch as they address forms of social exchange in the present, such art forms cannot only be understood wholly in terms of the art history that precedes them, nor through institutional or political anticipation. But nor can an art work ever wholly take place in an authentic present. If ordinary acts can never be socially transparent, how could artistic acts be anything other than opaque and 'unclean'? In this sense, one could even argue that *The Model* was an event that occurred in a space that either preceded or transcended the social, in that it teetered between offering a utopian prototype and a micro-critique of subjectivity.

As an event, *The Model* may have failed to rebuild the immediacy of social space and make artistic form transparent – if that is indeed a failure. But what is more important is that it had the potential to become a narrative of how we might turn ourselves over to the other and to the future, to what time makes possible after the event.

A model for a qualitative society

Text written by Palle Nielsen for the catalogue *Modellen. En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968.

We often find ourselves standing and watching children play. And we have a strong interest in their play. At the same time, we have a feeling that they are also watching us – watching *our* play. We notice that they try to play at things they have learned from us. When we see them playing it is as though we recognise something of ourselves. It is as though we see how they use their play to try to comprehend the world around them. They imitate our actions in play, because we have given them a picture of the world around them. And that frightens us, because we would prefer it if they could comprehend the world around them by themselves. But that would require that we ourselves understand them.

We are frightened because we ourselves perceive society as something above ourselves, outside ourselves.

So we go up to our apartment, up to our world. We know that it is too cramped. Sometimes, at certain moments, we don't feel content with it, with our world. But this discontent is so difficult, so incomprehensible. So we console ourselves with the thought of how hard it was to get the apartment, and that we ought to be grateful that we got it.

But then, sometimes, when we get home from work, we feel deep down inside that we can't understand what we are doing there. It's so small, the children are screaming and running around between our legs. And at work we were discussing politics and got into a bloody row. We couldn't understand why we had to work at such a fast pace. We get paid more – but when we get home, what happens? Well, she's in a bad mood: it's the kids, there's nowhere for them to play outside.

It’s no fun any more, they say. And then it’s evening. We have the TV, but it was actually nicer when friends used to come by. But they stopped doing that when we had the kids. There’s simply no room now; it would wake them up. And anyway the friends live further away now. And we haven’t made any new friends here in the neighbourhood.

Sometimes we feel restless, annoyed, about having become isolated. And sometimes we dream of how it could have been, if only we hadn’t got in a rut. But there are always too many ‘if onlys’. We can’t even remember when we gave up trying, wanting to realise our long-cherished dreams. It was all so hard. When we applied for a job we had to bow and scrape, when we had to make ends meet we had to say thank you. Always having to stand in line, bow and scrape and be thankful – perhaps that’s why we gave up. It was hard to keep fighting, because we were always too insignificant. But we can dream about all the things that might have been. If only we had been more together. Maybe we would not have felt as lonely, if our friends had come over more often. When we see the kids playing down in the yard, we dream. We know they are playing at being us. That they play at what we do every day. Their contact with reality is the account we give them of it. They play at being cars, at being mummy and daddy and children. They play at cops and robbers. They talk to each other the way we talk to each other. And they play at what they see on TV. They try to make contact with each other – to communicate.

But we no longer talk to one another. There’s nothing happening any more that we can give one another. And we notice one day that the children have also stopped talking to other people. Because they do what we do. But what if they were allowed to do all the things that we didn’t have the opportunity to do? Because that’s what we’ve been working for. Then they could play and express themselves as human beings together with other kids. What if they were allowed to play with all kinds of things, to build, to play with water and fire, to paint? Then they could become themselves. And do what we never managed to do.

Yes, but their words are our words. They try to comprehend the new world they see, and their information comes from us. After all, the only people they know are us. How could they comprehend their reality if we don't comprehend ours? Perhaps we did everything wrong. We worked to give them a better life. But they express themselves in our images. Now, if we had given ourselves the opportunities we want to give the children, then they would also have expressed our reality. In other words, we have not given our children better opportunities than those we had ourselves. That means that we have given them the same conditions in which to understand other people and society that we have, and are incapable of using. And if they feel isolated now, it is because we are.

But how can we change ourselves now? We lack the necessary means to prevent what we don't want from happening.

Meanwhile, we hide inside our own little world, and feel that there is nothing we can do. And that's the picture we convey to our children. But the dreams we once had about how things would be for us – we hope our young people will have those dreams as well. And not only dream them but actually make them come true. We could make those dreams come true now, to show the kids that we are not afraid of society. After all, those dreams were about creating something, experiencing what we did as something meaningful. Being able to change things that we knew were wrong. Having the right to decide. And we talked about this with all our friends. About what we would be able to do. When we were together, we could do something. Because we felt solidarity for one another. We wanted the right to make decisions about our own work, about the production of which we ourselves were a crucial part. In those days, we didn't want anyone to have a worse life than we had. Because that was the logic of society. And we agreed that we would live close to one another – and that we ourselves would always decide where and how we would live. So we could learn from one another. And play with our children – tell them about

everything we had been through together. Tell them about other countries and other children, so that they would understand that other people have the same right to play as they did. And if anyone tried to stop us, we would change our conditions. In those days, we wanted ourselves.

And now, when we see children playing, we want to offer them the chance to play like children, and we experience that same feeling we had then. In those days, we wanted to experience this, having a life, one day; a qualitative life. But now we know that we need to change ourselves, our own approach to society and to the people we encounter and know, while giving children the opportunities they need as human beings.

Then they will also play at what we do.

And that is a model for a qualitative society.