True Rulers of Their Own Realm – Political
Subjectivisation in Modellen – En modell för ett
kvalitativt samhälle

Lars Bang Larsen

Abstract

The Model (1968) was an example of an activist politics of space and of the ludic formulated at the limit of the art institution, where it elaborated a critique of art, childhood and urban space that pointed towards institutional critique as well as artistic research.

Modellen – En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle (The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society) was an adventure playground for children that the Danish artist Palle Nielsen and activists from the Swedish network Aktion Samtal (Action Dialogue) set up inside the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in October 1968. The playground offered free access for children to a wide range of play functions and activities, and during the three weeks it was open it attracted more than 33,500 visitors, 20,000 of whom were children. By providing a framework for children's play, it aimed at introducing an anti-elitist concept of art and creating a new human being with a great need for group relations.

The Model cannot be categorised as the institutional service we know today as children's outreach programmes. It was, rather, an art-activist mass utopia that superseded the era's concerns with the conquest of space and the open art work through the uncontrollable and unexpected presence of playing children in the white cube. What in many ways was an exceptional event had a precarious reception, and curatorial and art-historical interest in The Model was largely non-existent until the late 1990s. Today the project is relevant to revisit as a striking period example of an activist politics of space and of the ludic formulated at the limit of the art institution, where it elaborated a critique of childhood, authorship and urban space.

Having graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in the summer of 1967, Palle Nielsen became involved in playground activism in the old

---

1 This article has appeared in an earlier version in Larsen 2007. See also Larsen 2010 and Larsen 2014.
working-class neighbourhoods and satellite cities of Copenhagen. The building of children’s playgrounds was the initiative of anarchists, students and residents, many of whom were involved in the squatters’ movement, and was an alternative to common forms of protest with a view to including children in urban space. Nielsen considered political demonstrations unimaginative because they subsume the individual in an anonymous mass identification. Instead he promoted an empowerment based on the individual’s relations to his or her environment, aimed at the activist possibility of “attacking concrete issues” (Rydén 1968). One result of this extra-parliamentary constructivism is described in The Village Voice, reporting from the Copenhagen suburb of Høje Gladsaxe, where one of Nielsen’s adventure playground designs was built in April 1969:

The playground is a series of multi-level structures, all interconnected by wooden ladders, rope ladders and aluminium slides, with a safe jump into 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 fate of a playground built on a slum site during Copenhagen week. The playground’s popularity finally forced the Gladsaxe administrative bureaucracy to accept it.

GURIN 1969

One main objective of the playground actions was media recognition of the need for sensitive urban planning on a human scale. In June 1968 Nielsen travelled to Stockholm to participate in the organisation of Action Dialogue, a few months of actions in the urban space carried out by fnl activists, architects, pedagogues, parents, Social Democratic youth and other left-wing groups. The activists found a common cause against “the building of motorways, back- yard slums, schoolyard tristesse, commercialisation of environments” and were united by “the desire to conjure up a feeling of identity in society” (Lunddahl 1968). Nielsen’s strategy proposal for the city-wide actions focused on mass communication as much as on direct action. At a big meeting with fellow

---

2 In Denmark, Nielsen’s playground activism has a specific historical context in the way post-World War II art, philosophy and architecture focused on childhood: in 1947 the English author Lady Allen of Hurtwood coined the term “adventure playground” after she visited the first skrammellegeplads (rubbish playground) that was built in 1943 in Copenhagen.

3 fnl is an abbreviation of Front National de Liberté, the national front for the liberation of South Vietnam.