

## The Instant model of a qualitative society

by Rakett

"(...)in a developed society needs are not only quantitative (...) 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."<sup>1</sup>

In 1968 The moderna Museet in Stockholm hosted Palle Niensens: *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* in the main gallery, a grand installation of boxes, wooden constructions, paint and tools, free for the visiting kids to use. In the course of the exhibition, the installation questioned the very foundations of our society, how we understand and organize work, play and coming together. When looking at images from this event one can hardly imagine that this is from inside of the main public museum in Stockholm. Kids are playing without any structure or organization, and the same can be said to describe the construction which is built in every direction, seemingly without any overall plan, and far from complying with the countless safety measures that public institutions are subject to today. The exhibition was only for kids to enter (up to the age of 18), adults could watch from outside through monitors. Inside, the kids were the roaming masters. With a massive pile of materials, paint and tools at hand they could continue to build on the structure and make it their own. Later this event has been viewed in several ways: both as institutional critique, as a part of the museum's childrens outreach program and as a political testing ground which would infer an activist critique of the everyday. The latter dimension is along the lines of where the artist Palle Nielson wanted to go.

In its execution *The Model* has several parallels to the work of Instant Coffee. But as they are born out of completely different time frames there are totally other words that surrounds their work. Even though, several similarities are worth diving into, like the critical investigation of the everyday, the projects as political testing grounds, how play is enacted as a productive force and the collective spirit that usurps the untouchable and mystified artist persona and opens up for an anti-elitist concept of art.

### Collective spirit

The all-encompassing collectiveness in building and defining *The Model*, both by the children that were visiting by the hundreds every day and also by the collective decision making processes that Palle Nielsen had with his fellow builders, the event (Nielsen hesitated from

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<sup>1</sup> Lars Bang Larsen: "The Mass Utopia of Art Activism: Palle Nielsen's *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society*", 2010

using the word "art" about the Model<sup>2</sup>) subverted authorship and "it still appears as a radical critique of the way institutions and markets fetishise the artistic persona and signature"<sup>3</sup>. The Model was inclusive and the very incarnation of a process-oriented concept of art.

Working collectively was not only a strategy when working within the art institutions, but something applied in all the work and activities of Palle Nielsen. He was deeply embedded in the political movements of the late 60's, engaged in both thinking around new world orders and in political action with central ingredients such as squatting and demonstrations. One squatting took the form of engaging a whole neighborhood in constructing their own playing ground for kids, which both demonstrated the failures of urban planning and the possibility of the residents to take the matter into their own hands.

Instant Coffees projects is certainly about taking matter into their own hands, their five, six or seven many pairs of hands. With a varied number of participants in the group, they always appear as one group in the Instant Coffee projects, sharing authorship, but at the same time making use of their individual skills. In *Polyphonous Language and construction of identity: its dynamic and its crux* (the title really says its all), Katharina Schlieben asks: "Is there something like an implicit, and explicit language, or a polyphony, within a collective structure?"<sup>4</sup>. Stressing the importance of the context in which one uses terms like collective, network, teamwork, collaboration and cooperation she points out that the term "collective process" is a term used both for activist action and for neo-liberal work situation, thus the importance to "differentiate and reposition (these terms) with regard to their contextual usage in everyday language"<sup>5</sup>. Art collectives can find its shape or language in many ways, often applying working methods enabling them to critically relate to how power is executed over the representation, distribution, mediation and not least the execution of the art work.

In 2005 the Copenhagen Free University<sup>6</sup> did a narrowcast from their flat, which is also the premises for the University, to Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. In the text *Utopia Live: Let's Dismantle the Artist Genius and Replace it with an Open-ended, Self-organised Multitude*<sup>7</sup> (again the title really says it all) they give an account of this project,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Schlieben, Katharina, "Polyphonous Language and Construction of Identity: its Dynamic and its Crux" in "Taking the Matter into Common Hands", editors: Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson, 2007, p.32

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.33

<sup>6</sup> An artist-run anarcho-collective by Henriette Heise and Jacob Jabosen.  
[www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk](http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p80-86

problematizing how they could represent the everyday situation at Copenhagen Free University. "In the planning process we had to decide whether we should try to choreograph normality and insist on doing normal things during the day, or surrender to the spectacle and plan a programme of successive events and happenings."<sup>8</sup> The result was that they decided that they wanted to "integrate the production of the images and sound as an integral part of the transmission and make the decision-making, regarding the production, a collective process". During the transmission they had a telephone conversation with John E Mc Grath dicussion issues raised in his book "Loving Big Brother: Surveillance Culture and Performance Space" where he sets up a parallel between the controlling tv-show and the fetishised theatre director (the artist genius), leaving the Copenhagen Free University with the agenda of : "Dismantle the artist genius and replace it with an open ended, self-organized multitude". Rather than the controlling director they chose to make the decision making a collective task, focusing on the interaction and discussion that appeared.

### The everyday<sup>9</sup>

Instant Coffee makes use of everyday materials and often materials or imagery that comes from other spheres of life than what one usually sees in the art institutions. In year XXX they first presented *The Nook*. This was a built replica of the kitchen nook from the home of one Instant Coffee member, as such it was well tested and Instant Coffee was well assured that the nook was functioning as the perfect social kitchen setting: "This nook has a magic that seems to come from its incidental, but near perfect, dimensions. It is the perfect place for conversation. Time seems to slow down when inside it, attention spans more focused and social engagement natural."<sup>10</sup> *Instant Coffee Nooks* was presented at Mercer Union in Toronto in 2007 and in Bumbershot Festival in Seattle the same year. The nooks served as sites to engage audiences in event-based activities such as slide lectures and readings, video screenings, meetings, magazine launch and dinners.

What materials that are used in an art work and what type of setting is established is never arbitrary, but rather sets the frames for this particular type of public space that the art gallery is, thus setting the stage for what type of engagement is made possible. In her work the artist establishes the power relations between the art work and the viewer, also the strategies of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid p80

<sup>9</sup> The everyday is a problematic concept that ideally should be treated more in depth than what is room for in this setting. Henri Lefebvre writes in his seminal "Critique of Everyday Life" "So to reach reality we must tear down the veil, the veil that is forever being born and reborn of everyday life, and which masks everyday life along with its deepest and loftiest ambitions", Lefebvre "Critique of Everyday Life" p 57.

<sup>10</sup> Project description, Instant Coffee

artist relates in different ways to the power relations already at play within the particular art space. By consciously using non-authoritative materials and colors, and by undermining or turning around the frames for engagement in the art institution, *Instant Coffee* establishes a different set of power relations within the art space.

In his focus on making art with everyday and non-excluding materials, Thomas Hirschorn calls this to make art politically: "To make art politically means to choose materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn't dominate, a device that does not seduce. To make art politically is not to submit to an ideology or to denounce the system, in opposition to so-called "political art."<sup>11</sup>

*Instant Coffee Nooks* was built of everyday materials and engaged the audience-as-participants in an everyday setting, thus undermining the rather authoritative patterns that are so often established within art spaces. Modernist thinkers thought of the art work as the subject with its "Stage presence<sup>12</sup>" thus establishing an authoritative relationship between the art object and the viewer. Also, there are unwritten, but strictly sanctioned modes of behaviour within the art spaces (no running, no touching, no loitering).

## Play

The rather opposite could be said about Palle Nielsens *The Model* that precisely because of its structure and materials, invited to running, touching, loitering, and, could be added, building, destruction and play. It offered a completely new way of behaving in the museum.

The director of Moderna Museet at the time that the Model was presented, was the pioneering Pontus Hultén who was interested in just these ideas of challenging what a museum could be. Later he was part of creating Palais de Tokyo in Paris where he was the first director from 1974-1981. One can clearly see the legacy of later practices that was to be presented in this institution.

"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 human being. The result, as one reviewer put it, was 'almost frightening for adults'."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bishop op.cit, p.75

<sup>12</sup> Michael Fried

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

The children were the creating subjects rather than the hushed child complying to the authority of the established culture. But as the quote states, the child's play was not an autonomous activity of preoccupying the child with harmless chores, completely unrelated to the rest of society. Rather play was viewed as something that instigated change, a social change within society, and the result was "almost frightening for adults". Thus play and conviviality can have a much more power overthrowing potential than what is usually perceived.

In the critique in *October Magazine* of the practices that were subsumed under what Nicholas Bourriaud called relational aesthetics<sup>14</sup>, Claire Bishop criticizes some of these practices for covering up conflicts in their conviviality, ushering for art that in more problematic ways engaged the viewers in "rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other."<sup>15</sup>

Instant Coffees projects along with that of Palle Nielsens can certainly be found guilty in conviviality, but how this is activated can be viewed in a more complex way than the dichotomy that Bishop prescribes when describing these practices.

The French philosopher Charles Fourier focused on the work of children, and studied what he called the characteristic features of how children behaved and their tastes. What he found was that children tended to like the following activities: Rummaging or inclination to handle everything, examine everything, look through everything, to constantly change occupations, industrial commotion and taste for noisy occupations<sup>16</sup>. Rather an entrepreneurial spirit, one could say.

In his thoughts around how to organize an ideal society Fourier employs the constructive energies that children put into play. Walter Benjamin writes on Fourier: "To have instituted play as the canon of a labor no longer rooted in exploitation is one of the great merits of Fourier"<sup>17</sup>. In Nielsens *The Model* it is too simple to state that play was seen as something that could inspire work or make one think of work in another way, rather play was regarded as something productive, as labor in itself, and also an activity that created a public sphere.

In Nielsens work and also in that of Instant Coffee, their work does not only set the stage for the audience to play, but play is also important in the very making of the project. Anyone who has been to an Instant Coffee project or having the pleasure of working with them, knows that the resulting installations comes to life with an almost magical ease (at least it seems this way

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud: *Relational Aesthetics*, 1998

<sup>15</sup> Claire Bishop: "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", (*October* 110 [Fall 2004], p. 79).

<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>17</sup> Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Fourier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Fourier)

looking from the outside). Improvisation, a sensibility for materials mixed with a practical sense and the ability to use whatever materials at hand, makes the installations come together in a way that invites usage, sociability and comfort.

In several of Instant Coffees projects play are instigated in different ways for example in the *Light Bar* which has been presented in different versions. In Bergen, Norway it was formed as an igloo inside one of the main art spaces at Landmark, Bergen Kunsthall and containing talks, slide shows and a home made online karaoke. In Vancouver 2010, the *Light Bar* was once again set up presenting its karaoke with this nice quote: “Malcolm McLaren recently wrote, "Today there are two words that sum up the culture: 'authenticity' is one, and the other ... 'karaoke!' ”<sup>18</sup> The Vancouver edition also launched a magazine, presented Djs, performances and lectures and was part of a collaborative project *Bright Days* by fourteen arts organizations in Vancouver, during the Olympics.

In the *Instant Coffee Blanket Sculpture*<sup>19</sup> the everyday, play and collective action comes together. It consists of triangular substrate panels where three separate photographs of Afghan blankets have been mounted. The aesthetic of the photographed blankets is associated with folk art from a purely domesticated situation, the kind of blankets your grand parents have. The panel is mimicking common advertising boards, but rather than turning automatically every once in a while to reveal a new image, the panels are hand operated and can be turned individually, making all kinds of combinations possible.

These projects uses free play as an instigating force to create a temporary community, either that of coming together for a presentation, talk or simply for dancing. As such the projects are created by a collective spirit, where the starting point is created by Instant Coffee, but where it goes from there is rather open.

An instant qualitative society

Instant Coffee operates very far from the politized jargon and agency of Palle Nielsen and their collective work is playful rather than manifest critique of notions of artistic identity and the art world’s tendency to fetishize and capitalize on this mythological role. Rather Instant Coffee have this particular sense of a serious irony, an irony that you can’t dismiss, that is really meant seriously. Using an naively authentic language that has lost all its authenticity to commercialization, like “Feeling so much, yet doing so little“<sup>20</sup>, they still hold on to that sentiment, leaving the statements with a somewhat melancholic touch, that should not be

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.instantcoffee.org/>

<sup>19</sup> commissioned for the City of Edmonton Commonwealth recreation centre

<sup>20</sup> Exhibition at Western Front 2012

misunderstood as light heartedness.

The social in the social projects of Instant Coffee, should also not be misunderstood as light heartedness. The *Instant Coffee Nooks* and other Instant Coffee projects serves both as sculptural installation and social settings for what one could call qualitative engagement with other people. They create for a somewhat short time a model for a temporary public sphere, or an instant qualitative society, if you like.