

A Model for a Quantitative Society



Palle Nielsen
The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society, 1968
Exhibition view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Courtesy MACBA Collection, Barcelona © Palle Nielsen, Bildrecht, Wien 2019

Décor and theatricality have returned with a vengeance after more than a century of being shunned as art's lowbrow cousins. Marcel Broodthaers and Palle Nielsen were among the first artists to register the implications of this shift, anticipating the rise of immersion, affective networking, storytelling, surveillance, and monetisation that came along with it.

By
Antony Hudek

When I wrote an article in these pages six years ago, on Palle Nielsen's 1968 *The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, #MeToo had yet to take public effect, Sackler was still a respectable name in museum philanthropy, Trump had not threatened to dissolve the National Endowment for the Arts, and Penelope Curtis, Clémentine Deliss, Kimberli Meyer, Helen Molesworth, Maria Inès Rodriguez, Beatrix Ruf, Olga Viso, and Catherine de Zegher, among other prominent directors and curators, has not yet been pushed out of their now former institutions. For memory, in 1968 Nielsen had carried out a research project in Moderna Museet, transforming the museum's main space into a playground for children. As these were the subjects of the installation, as well as the objects of study, adults could look in the space from outside via closed-circuit video. Lars Bang Larsen, who wrote a book on *The Model* on which my article relied, perceptively locates the contradictions in Nielsen's project, utopian in its celebration of the child's spontaneity and flaunting of norms, while at the same time firmly ensconced in the institutional framework of the museum as a

research project. In the end, it is this same contradiction that, for Larsen, allows Nielsen's 1968 project to remain a viable model for a qualitative as opposed to quantitative society, because "it allowed for a working through of the idea of the political as something unfinished and becoming, in a space where others are present".

In 2013 I felt that it was "wishful thinking" on the part of museums to cite *The Model* as an early example of their institutional potential, providing a space "dedicated to experiences, experiments and 'grafted' proposals that could not take place anywhere else in the public sphere" – as Bartomen Marí, the then director of MACBA, which acquired the Nielsen archive, stated. Instead, I proposed that *The Model* was "such a timely institutional model, not so much for having challenged institutional norms, or anticipated its own institutionalisation, but for having laid the groundwork for the survival of both the generation of May 1968, and the museum, through the archive".

Now, with the benefit of the time that has passed, I recognise that I too was prone to wishful thinking, seeing in the archival re-presentation of

Nielsen's museological experiment a ghostly persistence of the "real" that the museum can neither completely evacuate nor accommodate. What I had missed in my earlier reading of *The Model* was the fact that, despite its utopian stagecraft, it was intended as a sociological study supported by Scandinavian research funds; and that the key feature of its scenography was both the most obvious and best concealed: the live feed between the playing children and observing adults, via the cameras, which the children could operate themselves.

Larsen invokes Tony Bennett's idea of the "exhibitionary complex" to suggest that *The Model* may have given the exhibition space "over to uncivilised bodies, but it also turned childhood into a spectacle of civics – albeit an emancipatory or utopian one". I would argue, however, that the technological means by which the emancipatory images of *The Model* were conveyed open up a much more quantitative definition of spectacle, synonymous with constant surveillance and data gathering. Archival re-presentations of *The Model* would, therefore, miss the point entirely: it is not so much the specific content of Nielsen's project that has survived as its visionary apparatus converting lived experience into data streams. As we know, this

information – the endlessly distributed and stored flow of images of children or any other compelling object-subject – has since become capitalism's most valuable asset.

This quantitative model was once again alluded to, in passing, in Marcel Broodthaers's 1974 installation *Un Jardin d'Hiver* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. A visitor entering the space would have witnessed, in the far corner behind a makeshift collection of potted palms, a monitor capturing her movements through a closed-circuit TV camera. This work was the first that Broodthaers referred to as a "décor", the series of theatricalised stage sets that he would pursue after the closure of his fictional Museum of Modern Art in 1972.

If *The Model* and to a lesser extent *Un Jardin d'Hiver* could be said to have anticipated what is today termed "surveillance capitalism", it would take another few years for it to become not only a scenographic element but arguably the very subject of an exhibition, namely "Les Immatériaux" (1985) at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, curated by Thierry Chapat and Jean-François Lyotard. The exhibition's brooding scenography was intended to simulate the thorough encroachment of technology in all aspects of our lives, from genetic engineering to new modes



"Les Immatériaux", Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985
Exhibition view



"Les Immatériaux", Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985
Exhibition view

of dwelling and writing. Contrary to Tony Bennett's view of the museum as a collective self-regulating space, in "Les Immatériaux" the visitor found herself isolated, equipped with a headset streaming literary and philosophical texts, wandering through "zones" and "sites" towards a concluding "labyrinth of language" full of Minitel terminals – forerunners of the internet. The visitor's pathway through the exhibition was supposed to have been recorded on a personal magnetic card, to be printed out at the end of the trajectory. Although this feature was not implemented, probably for technical reasons, many other interactions in "Les Immatériaux" generated archival traces, from the visitors' typing on the Minitels to the second of the exhibition's two catalogues, which archives online exchanges between philosophers, writers, and artists around key terms related to "Les Immatériaux".

With *The Model* in mind, Chapat's and Lyotard's exhibition now appears as an important milestone in the relation between art and its political economies: not only as an immersive experience of various "posts" (postmodern, post-Fordist, posthuman), but as the next level in the transformation of lived experience into predictive data. Like *The*

Model, "Les Immatériaux" turned the exhibition site into a generator of information produced by its "users". But at the Pompidou the safe distance between spectator and information-generating subject collapsed entirely, each visitor becoming the producer of her or his own tailored experience and distributor of individualised data. It is therefore tempting to see in "Les Immatériaux" the end game of the museological experience as inherited from the nineteenth century, which inspired much of the critical tradition of the twentieth, from Michel Foucault and Brian O'Doherty to the institutional critique of the 70s and 80s. By placing life-style on the same level with life-choices, design and art with technology, and by affording the visitor an experience similar to that of wandering through booths at an art fair, or a shopping mall, "Les Immatériaux" laid bare the condition of spectacle in the age of hyper-visibility and absolutised culture.

One of the few art works in "Les Immatériaux", in a section entitled *négoce peint* ("painted trade"), was *Sujet à Discretion* (Subject to Discretion) (1985) by Philippe Thomas. Each panel of Thomas's photographic triptych represents the same frontal view of the Mediterranean, but with a different

paratextual apparatus: the first is anonymous and unsigned; the second is signed by the artist; while the third bears the signature of the collector who acquired the work. Within “Les Immatériaux”, Thomas’ *Sujet à Discretion* highlighted the linguistic and institutional codes that underpinned the conventional museological encounter. Thomas’s demonstration would have remained exactly that, a demonstration, had he not exported it into a radically different context. In 1987, during a prolonged stay in New York, Thomas officially opened readymades belong to everyone®, a proto-PR agency that would become his main platform of activity, to the intentional detriment of his own name as an artist. With his agency’s inauguration in New York, “the world capital of the art market”, Thomas left museological critique behind, adopting

instead the believable fictional stance of creative director. “If”, as he put it, “it was possible when confronted with the agency’s installation ... to hesitate between the impression of ‘environment’ ... and that of a real production house (where each element was present purely for functional reasons), this was no doubt a reflection of the agency’s desire to insist on ambiguity from which it derives the main principles of its identity.”

The same year as the founding of the ambiguous readymades belong to everyone®, Thomas returned to *Sujet à Discretion*, this time at the gallery American Fine Arts, Co. in New York, where he exhibited the seascape he showed at “Les Immatériaux” but under a different set of signatures: John Dogg, Barbara Gladstone, Joseph Kosuth, Allan



Jay Chiat, *Insight*, 1989
 Colour photograph and title card with text: “Jay Chiat Insight 1989”
 60 x 90cm, title card 4.5 x 11 cm, edition of 3

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McCollum, and his own. By re-assigning the works premiered at “Les Immatériaux”, Thomas signalled the waning power of the museum and that of critique, from “first-generation” conceptual art (Kosuth) and late 70s “Pictures Generation” (McCollum) to a gallerist (Gladstone), and a little-known post-conceptual artist (Thomas), culminating with John Dogg, a fictional character created by the artist Richard Prince and Colin de Land, the founding director of American Fine Arts. The concluding point on this arc marks the total surrender of art to self-promotion, where this “self” is a hybrid entity, embedded within the system yet removed from it on the inside through a stylised and believable semblance of reality.

If in the late-60s Nielsen could stage a mediated connection in a museum between the adults peering into *The Model* via monitors and the child users, it is because the institution could still countenance a form of qualitative aspiration. By 1985, with “Les Immatériaux”, an artist like Thomas could try out a new quantitative model for its own sake, no longer centred on the museum per se but on the relations between cultural consumers and the creative agent, who capitalises on affective networks and techniques of promotional storytelling at the cost of authorial self-positioning. In a way that recalls the activities of the data leakers of the past several years, such artistic projects remain difficult to locate on traditional moral scales, since they identify neither clear beneficiary nor hostile target.

Among the distant relatives of *The Model*, with strong echoes to readymades belong to everyone®, is the ongoing investigation into art’s immaterial value by Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans. Since 2013 the Belgian duo have been investing

in Art House Index, a financial index they created to track the fluctuating value of their Brussels loft/studio – a measure of their own creative capital as well as of their role in gentrification. In one of their latest projects, *A Modest Proposal* (2018), the duo formulate a financial model that proposes to leverage the fixed assets of museums and other art institutions worldwide – collections, but also buildings and branding – to allow “streams of economic and social wealth, produced by exchange, [to] flow back to its origins – the artists and the art workers”. Similarly, when in 2014 the New York based group Shanzhai Biennial attempted to sell an actual piece of real estate (the prestigious London address 100 Hamilton Terrace) at Frieze Art Fair, it wasn’t simply to turn a financial profit – although they presumably wouldn’t be averse to it – but rather to consummate the union of art, promotion, and value creation.

When Marcel Broodthaers announced the bankruptcy in 1971 of his Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, he chose the Cologne Art Fair to make his point. A year later, he closed the museum with a final iteration – the sections “Modern Art” and “Advertising” – at Documenta 5 (1972). Broodthaers was clear about his museum’s fictional quality, since for him it “plays a role of, on the one hand, a political parody of art shows, and on the other hand an artistic parody of political events. Which is in fact what official museums and bodies like Documenta do. With the difference, however, that a work of fiction allows you to capture reality and at the same time what it conceals.”

That, one could say, was then. In our post-truth era, the positioning of fiction in relation to reality seems like an innocent modernist parlour game.



Still from Vermeir & Heiremans, *A Modest Proposal (in a Black Box)*, 2018
Video, HD, 28 minutes

Courtesy Vermeir & Heiremans



Shanzhai Biennial No. 3: 100 Hamilton Terrace
Installation view, Frieze London, 2014

Courtesy of the artists and Project Native Informant, London

For what has changed since the turn of the 70s is the nature of fiction itself – from one that holds onto the separation between inside and outside, and thus to criticality and the possibility of revelation, to a kind of made-for-reality fiction that, mediated by technology, becomes so engrossing that it absorbs the identities of its commodified subjects. This model of a quantitative society was glimpsed in Nielsen's intervention at Moderna Museet, and pursued by readymades belong to everyone®, Art House Index and Shanzhai Biennial. Behind their fictional realities lie only more fictional realities, no less illusory than any

uptick or downturn in the stock market. If these projects betray any utopianism, it is that of capitalism itself – a surveillance capitalism in which every one of our transactions, cultural or otherwise, can be turned into data and monetised.

Nobody bothers to ask what the opposite of “fake news” would be, perhaps because the question is itself absurd. Truthiness? Factual nonsense? The literary fictions that still animated Broodthaers and the soundtrack of “Les Immatériaux” belonged to the melancholic spirit of the disabused Western subject. At the same time, from within

bona fide museums came *The Model* and later readymades belong to everyone®, providing a new model for a quantitative society that spelt the dead end of qualitative aesthetics. It's hard not to view today's art museum as anything other than a zombie institution, its ideological and economic significance overtaken by biennials, art fairs, and private foundations, its relevance now mostly touristic. Politically neutered, bankrolled by the likes of BP and Sackler, it fulfils in a sense the voided projection of its historically colonial and nationalist self: to allow citizens to commune in the phantasm of

a unified, pacified, paternalistic space open to all. Meanwhile, practices like Art House Index and Shanzhai Biennial happily mine this illusion, turning their décors into plausible media-saturated stories whose success can be measured by every second of our attention, every click of the mouse.

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