

# Architecture makes me dizzy and I want to declare a state of permanent imbalance in the public order. On Pernille With Madsen's work.

An eruption of soap bubbles rises from the maelstrom of a spiral staircase executed in 'the new corporate style' of polished glass and bright wood. Three shiny, black, five-storey cubes on the facade of the Danish Broadcasting Federation's new buildings in the artificial city Ørestad rotate askew around their axes. A stack of white wooden boards whirl white feathers into the air as they fall to the ground one on top of the other in an otherwise empty room. These rather strange scenarios, presented in a hybrid form of models and video footage, are emblematic of Pernille With Madsen's non-conformist take on public spaces, their architecture, logic and order of habitation. In the face of general tendencies towards homogenization and sterilization of public spaces she sets the stage for physical and conceptual activities that generate a different set of energies. As a homegrown tongue-in-cheek activist, she reclaims public spaces of all shapes and sizes in the name of poetic autonomy, sheer fun and subtle absurdity. With a series of fictitious characters, either in the form of people performing or of constructions, processed through the medium of video, she points to other, more explorative and imaginative possibilities in our architectural reality than those sketched out for us by trend-fixated lifestyle living and the one-dimensional rationality of city planning.

Although it does not take public space as its setting, the video and photo work *Collapse* is significant in this context and a relevant point of departure for an excursus on Pernille With Madsen's work. The falling of the white wooden boards ridicules the idea of endurance that traditionally informs architecture, both in material and in ideological terms. The only thing that endures in With Madsen's work is the falling of the boards. The video sequence is repeated again and again thus portraying the lapsing of a system from a state of emergency into an apparently permanent condition. Instead of being a tragic narrative of the failings of architectural engineering the collapse – like an encounter of minimalism and Charlie Chaplin in a do-it-yourself workshop – comes to express an experience of excitement, accompanied by an odd mix of the prosaic rhythms of the real sound and light-hearted waltz music. The work challenges us to reverse our perception of architecture and its formal principles and see the collapse as a liberating and productive process, a possibility to base thinking, sensing and eventually acting in space on fundamentally different premises. It invites us to amusedly reflect on what it would be like to 'live' in 'a space of permanent collapse'. What would that entail? What kind of individuals and public would such a space create?

*Collapse* indicates how in With Madsen's work architecture is a state of mind as much as a stage for physical activity or a material phenomenon that frames our state of mind and physical activity, often in the most conformist way. She has also installed *Collapse* as large photostats on the walls of an office environment. The photostats function as breaches in the wall, through which surprise and danger invade an otherwise completely stable and regulated environment. In the spirit of Gordon Matta-Clark's incisions in buildings, the photostats let new light in and present people in the office with a view of the otherness that lurks behind the familiar backdrop of white walls: an otherness to challenge no-brain working routines and the false certainty that there will always be freshly brewed coffee in the pot. Instead it encourages the office workers to reflect critically as well as playfully on the environment and their place within it, to stimulate informal energies that question established (power) structures and that within the horizon of traditional management philosophy will most likely be perceived as a threat to profits.

In a more recent work *DR-Byen* (2007) Pernille With Madsen works with the façade of a building. As part of a prestigious political attempt to vitalize the Øresund region, the Danish Broadcasting Federation decided to move its entire facilities to new buildings in the so-called Ørestad, an artificial 'business city' at the centre of the region. One of the most prominent buildings is the one that houses the federation's production studios. Three monumental black cubes greet employees and visitors and signal an elegant and auspicious new beginning. However, the realization of the buildings has been anything but that. Delays, budget overruns, administrative scandals and hundreds of redundancies amount to an almost surreal, sad docudrama. *DR-Byen* reflects this failure and loss of authority through a series of visual effects. Footage of the building's façade as well as of the revolving doors at the entrance is projected onto white models of those parts of the building to make the cubes spin like intoxicated figures in a music box; the revolving doors are turned into a human-size kaleidoscope. Instead of putting you in a state of awe, the building looks silly and makes your head spin. Like a psychedelic experience, where the familiar is distorted and the distinctions between reality and fantasy dissolve, you come to wonder what the building symbolizes and what the federation represents. Is this really the public-service institution that receives my licence fee? What if I cannot identify with it but feel alienated? Thus the work points to a discrepancy between the building as material manifestation and as an image, between official cultural

politics and individual perception, that opens a playful, yet critical space in which new beginnings for Danish Broadcasting Federation and its public can take place. Or more probably, collapse. In any case, the work provides no guarantee and harbours few expectations.

The most recurrent of With Madsen's fictitious characters is that of the single person, usually played by the artist herself, carrying out a simple, if unusual task in public space. The theme of failure and falling is prominent. *The Fall* (2005) shows a female person in camouflage clothing, who eats a banana, casually throws the peel on the sidewalk and walks on only to return to the same spot and slip on the peel. The scenario is accompanied by the festive military march "For God, King and Country", but turns out to be rather pathetic and boring. Like in *Collapse*, the falling continues ad infinitum and as the person slips again and again the slapstick element disappears, not least because the person is quite poor at creating the illusion of not slipping deliberately. In the tradition of absurd theatre the work discounts any idea of progress and purpose. Rather it sets the stage for a repetitive, ridiculous, pointless activity that would ordinarily be excluded from being witnessed in the increasingly rationalized public space. It is sad and dumb, sure, but also an insistent expression of the freedom to be odd and enjoy failure as an escape from conventional perception of things.

*A Celebration* (2005) takes a more poetic, more quotidian approach to the issue of movement in public space. The work consists of footage of a person walking along, swinging her wide trouser legs, running a stick along a fence and kicking an empty can. The footage is superimposed with graphic effects illustrating the swinging of the trouser legs and subtitles explaining why wide trouser legs are so fantastic ("...they keep you company as you walk, like a stick or a stone you find on your way or other things that can change your sense of distance..."). Kindred psychogeographical musings and activities also characterize Ex. 1, 2 & 3 for *Pedestrian Crossing* (2004), footage of three alternative ways for two people to cross a pedestrian crossing and meet halfway. One is to run along each of the stripes from opposite sides, another is to throw synchronous cartwheels and the third is simply to roll over as you pass each other. With basic, low-key video aesthetics both works exhibit ways of using the structures of the city that do not follow notions of 'orderly behaviour' but break free from the conventional restrictions imposed by those structures. It is not exactly civil disobedience or activism proper. That would be too self-explanatory for With Madsen and leave no space for the wonder, humour and poetry that is essential to her work. Instead of explicit political statements she prefers her own personal mix of a situationistic derivé (without the ideological dogmatism) and street theatre (without the large-scale spectacle) that moves on the micro-level along more subtle counter-currents. She speaks of creating (rather than finding) your own space within the structures of the city, conceptually as well as practically, with the simplest and most economical of means. As such both works are examples to follow for self-experimentation, a kind of open-source urban software.

Creating your own 'territory' within a public space is also the subject of *One Square Metre* (2004), in an actually rather literal way. In four separate scenarios, joined and projected onto the floor, she marks one square meter by respectively digging, placing sticks, laying wooden boards, blow-drying and painting with chalk. Then after finishing the different markings she occupies the little self-invented territories by placing herself in the middle of them. However, the occupation does not last long. In one scenario she gets bored and walks off after trying to do a headstand and in another she starts walking in circles until she cannot keep within the territory and eventually walks off as well. The work ends with a clip from the musical movie *West Side Story* where the two rival gangs are fighting for the square metres of neighbourhood. The square metre is of course the standard measure for homes and the subject of much media and public attention, to the degree that public space is reduced to a mere question of square metres. In *One Square Metre* the issue is not the number of square metres individuals might claim for themselves but the principle of private space as a non-quantifiable space. Private space can be anywhere. In fact it is not really territory or privacy at all that is up for grabs, but the possibilities to continuously reopen space as a conceptual playground for simple physical activity. Maybe that is why she leaves the 'territories' and returns them to the public space. Another reason could be that she decides against the increasing privatisation of public space, the egoism and social antagonisms that it fosters. The answer remains unclear and points to the profound ambiguity and irony with which her work explores being a private person in a public space.

Without any romantic hopes Pernille With Madsen reintroduces a human aspect into public space. A human aspect that represents a different conceptual and practical language than that of politicians, architects, corporations and 'urban designers'. Instead of talking about profit, prestige and pretty façades, the human aspect in her work expresses the confusions, frustrations, anxieties, paradoxes and likely failures that a person will experience in public space; in short, what cannot be accounted for, what cannot be completely planned, what does not fit neatly with notions of the good and right way of living or other such stereotypes. At the same time, it expresses a creative, comic and unruly force that outsmarts the ruling order. If there is a moral to her work, it is that we need not adapt to the suprahuman rationales of

architecture and public space, but adapt both to our own personal ideas, impulses and idiosyncrasies. Only then can we begin to hope for truly alternative orders.

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