

Madelon Vriesendorp — Kenneth Frampton Lecture, Columbia GSAPP, April 8 2024

By Mark Wigley

For two delirious hours, a packed auditorium at Columbia University's School of Architecture laughed more-or-less continuously. The artist Madelon Vriesendorp took us on a ride from her very active role in her mother's belly during the German occupation of the Netherlands to her latest work forming menageries of animals out of plastic milk cartons in the kitchen of her London flat. The laughter was spawned by a stream of crisp observations about people, cultures, architects, and objects. Just as comedians are our only reliable source for news today and a comedian is even leading the bloody resistance against Russian imperialism, Vriesendorp gets to the heart of architecture by simply pointing to its quirky, absurd, yet systematic symptoms — magnifying them just a little.

Despite all the brilliant cartoons, paintings, etchings, sculptures, murals, costumes, and installations produced over more than half a century in which buildings, people, and animals interpenetrate with untiring promiscuity, there is no attempt to aggrandize the work. This artist artfully dodges anything that sounds like praise, dodging already as compliments are being formed, even turning these feints into new work. Not out of modesty. On the contrary. It's a polemical celebration of pathology. Self-diagnosed ADHD was the central theme of the evening, from the opening reading of two autobiographical texts — revealing a gifted, precisely lyrical writer — through the improvised conversation accompanying the roughly chronological images of the work. Vriesendorp relentlessly pays attention to the daily workings of people and objects. Or is it that the work pays attention, with the artist as one of its many effects?

More shrink than patient, Vriesendorp offers architecture a mirror. Freud argued that jokes are the efficient path to the truths of the unconscious that bubble away beneath the surface and organize everything. Vriesendorp's mirror allows architects to see themselves and their work, as if for the first time. And repeatedly as if for the first time, with the uncanny sense that the strangest behaviors, the most incongruous combinations, amputations, or objects morphing into other things, are somehow deeply familiar in their almost embarrassing liquidity. It is as if the queerest thing about architecture is its desperate failed attempt to seem straight.

After all, architects don't have to attend a lecture to learn from this artist. The artworks have already transformed the way we see or make buildings and cities. At the back of the mind of any architect thinking about or making so-called tall buildings is Vriesendorp's canonic 1975 painting of the Empire State Building and Chrysler Building in bed after sex. The more masculine Empire State and

feminine Chrysler are both phallic yet flaccid in their exhaustion and ruthlessly exposed on all sides. The stern, straight-laced and clearly jealous Rockefeller Center enters the room from the left and shines modern architecture's disapproving police lamp on the lovers. The grid of more anonymous skyscrapers of Manhattan are voyeurs in the dark, grimly staring at the scene through the window, as do we from the opposite side. A whole series of works then explored what might have happened before and after in a kind of cinematic narrative that became an animated cartoon shown on French TV. The tall couple flirt on the grid, kiss, go for a walk, tango, then retreat to the hotel room. Lady Liberty eventually emerges from the bedside cabinet, does her makeup and leaves as a biblical torrent floods in on the floppy lovers who cling to the bed as it turns into Manhattan. Of course.

It is as if the title of the less-than-straight architect Louis Sullivan's 1896 essay "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," which prepared the skyscraper's migration from Chicago to New York, is taken all too literally, and the results cannot be contained. After all, the rubber of the Goodyear condom in the primal scene didn't work. Vriesendorp's 1982 cover for Design Quarterly shows the birthday party of all the post-modern babies of our couple. Countless subsequent works keep this architectural inter-breeding going to form an ever denser kaleidoscopic zoo, asylum, or hyper-domestic urbanism of misfits.

To say the obvious, this work is surrealist in its celebration of the strangely familiar intimacy of the incongruous. Surrealism is exactly that, an intensified realism. Vriesendorp is a documentary artist who doesn't imagine other lives for architecture. The work simply tunes into what is not straightforward about buildings, refusing to draw any line between stable and liquid, body and building, fact and fiction, observation and proposal. This is exactly the kind of compliment the artist tries to dodge but cannot escape.

Mark Wigley

Madelon Vriesendorp's exhibition Cosmic Housework is at the Cosmic House, London, until September 13 2024. jencksfoundation.org — Illustration captions: Flagrant Délit, 1975, from the New York series by Madelon Vriesendorp; The City of the Captive Globe, 1972, design by Rem Koolhaas, watercolor by Vriesendorp. [Transcribed from the Vriesendorp/Frampton-lecture review only; the other book and conference reviews on the same magazine spread are not included.]