

MacGuffin — No.1, 'The Bed', Spring 2015

Pillow Talk — Interview

Caught in the Act of Collecting

Artist Madelon Vriesendorp has spent a lifetime accumulating objects in the same way that she observes: giving free rein to her imagination and seeing beauty in the bizarre. Ernst van der Hoeven travelled to London to fathom the method behind her way of distorting reality. — Text: Ernst van der Hoeven. Photography: Émile Kirsch.

In November 2014, I visited Madelon Vriesendorp — visual artist, longstanding lecturer at the Architectural Association in London, and co-founder of OMA together with Rem Koolhaas and Elia and Zoe Zenghelis. An exhibition of her work entitled *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp*, first presented in 2008 at the Architectural Association in London, has since travelled to the Aedes gallery in Berlin, the Venice Architecture Biennale and the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel.

The reason for this interview is her work *Flagrant Délit*, a series of surrealistic paintings that Vriesendorp made in 1975 while living with Rem Koolhaas in New York. These have since become iconic images of two skyscrapers, the Empire State building and the Chrysler building, lying in bed as lovers. They are depicted at the moment their bliss is interrupted when they're caught in the act. In 1978, *Flagrant Délit* appeared on the cover of the first edition of Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*. This 'retroactive manifesto for Manhattan' quickly acquired a massive cult status, a success that was thanks in part to the indelible impression left by the image of these skyscrapers in bed. Vriesendorp, like no other, was able to distort reality as if in a fevered dream: beds become cities, buildings become people and people transform into all manner of objects. In short, Vriesendorp's paintings seem like the ideal personification of a magazine whose motto is the things that get the story moving: *MacGuffin — Life of Things*.

When the November storm blows me out of the underground, I still have to search for a while. Her house near Camden in north-west London is completely wrapped by scaffolding. White tarpaulin obscures the view of the entrance, located on the corner of a typically English eclectic block of buildings. Upstairs, a light, joyful world opens up, a cherished environment full of precious memories, an environment with all sorts of references that raise questions and make connections in an associative manner. One thing is immediately clear: this is the private domain of a collector. Here is where Madelon Vriesendorp becomes the Maddie who lives with the special things that surround her. She collects not in an autistic, obsessive way — there are plenty of those collectors in England — but in the same way she observes, as someone who gives her imagination free rein and sees beauty in the incongruous and the bizarre. She has a tremendous passion for tiny things: souvenirs, scale models and miniatures. In her study I admire the full display cases. Lots of humour and sex. As a collector I recognize how all objects

relate to one another. The result is a living installation of unique items, grandeur in the extra small.

Full of enthusiasm, she shows me her spacious, informally furnished house. Everything has a story. In the corner of the living room stands a replica of Lina Bo Bardi's Bowl Chair from the early 50s; on the wall I recognize the characteristic graphic shapes of an African raffia Kuba cloth, in the kitchen a series of American vintage fruit juicers, like a skyline of postmodernist skyscrapers. She reaches for a sewing machine made out of fabric, one of the many playful creations by her Argentinian friend Sylvia Libedinsky, who was very popular in the 1970s with beautiful cushion-soft mechanical utensils she made at her studio, called Marshmallow.

In a cupboard with personal belongings my eye catches a piece of white cardboard with the text in capital letters LIFE WITHOUT OBJECTS — the visionary credo of the Italian architects' group Superstudio from 1966. Looking around me, I suspect it's not exactly her motto. Or perhaps it is precisely that. For someone so generous and warm-hearted, there is always a way out.

EvdH: *Were you already collecting in the early 70s when you lived with Rem Koolhaas in Ithaca in Upstate New York?*

MV: Yes, during that period Rem was working (together with Madelon) on 'The City of the Captive Globe' — a study of the urban fabric of New York, the grid of Manhattan and the metropolitan compacting within it. The globe was a metaphor for the status of Manhattan as incubator of urban development in the world. Like urban archaeologists we went everywhere in search of historical books and postcards. We were interested in the paraphernalia of Manhattan, things that might reveal the history and development of the city, cards with the very first models of the Rockefeller Centre. Those first building proposals still had all kinds of rounded forms, very different to the rectangular slabs eventually built.

EvdH: *You made these archaeological expeditions together?*

MV: Yes, sometimes with Rem. But I also went out a lot with my friend, Teri Damisch, who had a grant to study for six months in Ithaca, and we met her by chance in the street when our friend Charles Jencks came to visit us. I was very happy we became friends because at first I found Ithaca a nightmare, a village where I knew nobody, very oppressive, like Wassenaar with its sentimental houses with gardens. She'd only just arrived, but knew the area much better than I did. She knew all the markets and second-hand shops and took me with her all over the place. She collected antique quilts that were too expensive for us, but still affordable. I think they cost no more than 35 dollars at the time. Her best discovery was very exceptional: a quilt from 1776, made by women and based on the Declaration of Independence, really worth a lot of money. She later lost it at a dry-cleaners. Very stupid. It was funny that of all places, there in Ithaca and in all the small suburbs of Upstate New York, the Fingerlakes district, we actually made a lot of wonderful finds for Rem's book.

EvdH: *And you left for New York shortly afterwards?*

MV: We moved to New York in 1972. We stayed in a typical Brownstone, at 23 W 70 Street, close to Columbus Avenue. We had a small apartment with a loft bed that Rem often hit his head on because of his height. He spent a lot of time at the institute (Institute for Architectural and Urban Studies), which was run by architect Peter Eisenman as a sort of breeding ground for young architects who worked on projects and conducted research together.

EvdH: *How did you experience New York?*

MV: We lived in a very dynamic district. A lot of weirdoes used to hang out on the streets. Real eccentric birds of paradise. There was one man, of Spanish or Italian blood, balding with a receding hairline, that painted a ridiculous kind of Mickey Mouse haircut on his bald head. It was crazy. And there was always a woman with a wonderful dress. She was like a magpie. When you looked up close you saw that it was made of old bottle tops. She'd sewn anything that was shiny to her dress. She looked fantastic. Rem did research into these tramps (the 'bams') for the Institute. He discovered that these street people gathered at a certain time and in a particular place. Precisely in that spot and always at the same time. So these homeless people really had a very clear regime. A fascinating social phenomenon. So he said to Peter Eisenman: 'We are now studying the bams of New York', at which Eisenman looked up surprised and said: 'We don't have any bams in New York' (laughing loudly). He thought that Rem was going to study the bams of New York. He couldn't understand it at all.

EvdH: *Was this also the time of the Velvet Underground, Andy Warhol and his Factory?*

MV: Rem went to the Factory later, when he'd just finished writing *Delirious New York* and he also appeared in Warhol's *Interview*. There was always a question and answer with the photos in the magazine. With Rem's photo the question was asked: 'What do you think of Loft Living?' And Rem said: 'I think it's corny and passé'. So he immediately made a lot of architect enemies. They hated him after that. They all lived in lofts at the time.

EvdH: *And what were you doing at the time?*

MV: The apartment was also my studio. I was painting below the bed next to a window. I made precisely drawn gouaches. I always began with a small pencil sketch and often worked from small to large, until I produced a definitive drawing on board. I went over this with non-waterproof ink. Then I made the drawing less sharp with a brush. If I didn't like a colour, I washed it out with water. I literally held the drawing of *Flagrant Délit* under the shower, because I found it too hard. Later I went over it with white gouache to get rid of all the ugly spots. That's why the surface of the painting became so bluish.

MV: I always worked with the TV on — as all Americans have the TV on constantly. I watched a channel with old films, and saw movies I'd seen as a child at the village cinema, Concordia, in Bilthoven, such as the western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, starring John Wayne (John Ford, 1962, EvdH), the plot of which I happened to miss in my childhood, whereby I had the feeling that I was in a super-long cliff-hanger. When I saw the film again on TV in New York, someone

called me from Holland just before the end. So I still don't know: WHO the hell KILLED Liberty Valance!!! But I saw a lot of good movies in America. In the old cinema in Ithaca I watched Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, from the late forties, and together with Rem I saw *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a silent horror movie from Germany (Robert Wiene, 1920, EvdH). That made a huge impression on us. All the film sets were crooked, crooked windows, crooked walls. The entire architectural reality was completely distorted. When we emerged from the film we felt almost brainwashed. We'd got so used to everything being crooked that we experienced all the straight floors, doors and walls as strange.

[A caption in the original notes the address of the apartment — 23 W 70 St — beside a hand-drawn plan of the loft, marking 'our loft bed' and 'Elia & Zoe's bed'.]

I search for the image of *The Ecstasy of Mrs Caligari* (1974) in the beautifully designed book *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp*, which was published to accompany the exhibition of the same name at the Architectural Association in London. Painted as though seen through the window of an airplane, the scene shows the Statue of Liberty sprawled out over Manhattan like a giant matron. Or rather: how the statue has fainted, ecstatic, more dead than alive, with arms spread wide and a contorted head, deathly pale with black lips. The crown has fallen from her head and the flames of the torch that fell from her hand are broken. A blue gown has slipped down her body to far below her navel and now covers large parts of the grid of Manhattan. In all respects, this is a contorted image, uncomfortable, as if she's smothering the entire city with her gown.

EvdH: *How did you take the next step — with the skyscrapers literally lying in bed? The animation of buildings?*

MV: I don't know exactly. Of course Rem was already occupied with the skyscrapers for his book, and his brother Thomas had previously drawn a cartoon in which he'd placed an aircraft in bed.

EvdH: *Were you also aware of the elegant drawings by the New York illustrator and cartoonist Saul Steinberg?*

MV: Yes, I love his work. And particularly his subtle sense of humour. He drew as if he were writing. I'd already seen his fantastic image of a question mark and an exclamation mark lying in bed entwined. Punctuation making love. Ingenious. Incidentally, in his own home he had chairs and a bathtub painted with naked women. My friend Teri knew him and knew that he also appreciated my work. And Claes Oldenburg also felt an affinity with my work. He too animated objects. I just mean to say that the whole idea of objects and animated things on a bed already existed.

EvdH: *And in bed?*

MV: Everyone was sleeping with each other in the 70s anyway, right? It was the time when the Dutch poet Simon Vinkenoog shouted in the Vondelpark that 'people had to screw more'. So why shouldn't the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building share a bed together? Rem said I ought to put the

skyscrapers in bed. I thought that's so 'corny and passé' (volley of laughter); I'm certainly not doing that. Eventually I said: 'OK, I'll make a drawing of it'. But I did decide immediately that the skyscrapers would have to have very bad taste. I found that so typical of New York at that time. So I made a very 'ugly' painting, and virtually everything in the interior was deliberately hideous. The painting above the bed, the mainstream floor mat — all American hotels used to have a stupid mat beside the bed — and next to it that ugly white nightstand with the reading light and the telephone. Everything was ugly in a brutal postmodern way. Simply horrible.

We continue thumbing through the book and pause at the painting *Après l'Amour* (1975), a later precursor to the *Flagrant Délit* series. Glancing through the book with her, I spot details I wouldn't immediately have noticed before this interview. How behind the bedroom window — an American 1930s bay window, with rounded edges and steel divisions — formally dressed human figures stand solitarily arranged between the skyscrapers. Elegant ladies in strapless evening dress and men in suits with wide lapels. They resemble pieces of scenery in a play about a self-aware and modern America. A full moon hangs in a clear starry sky. The figures look (or are they peeping?) inside and see what we see: how Lady Chrysler (in very Deco makeup) and Mister Empire State (more austere) lie side by side, their naked bodies leaning toward each other lovingly and relaxed, in the afterglow of the act. The bed is uncovered down to the footboard. In between them lies what looks like a deflated balloon.

EvdH: *Is this supposed to be a used condom?*

MV: Well, the painting is called *Après l'Amour*, so I guess it's obvious what the consequences of that are. But the used condom is actually a deflated zeppelin. It refers to a period when the top of the Chrysler Building was still used as a moorage for zeppelins. They were connected to each other. A dangerous and unhandy situation because there's always a strong wind up there. After the Hindenburg disaster in 1937 it was prohibited to dock on the Chrysler Building — although that still occurred occasionally. Rem described all that in *Delirious New York*.

EvdH: *Flagrant Délit, of which you painted a first version in 1975, has a similar setting. Chrysler and Empire State lie in bed in the afterglow and are spied on through the open window. The big difference is that now the door opens and in steps nobody but Mister Rockefeller. It's obvious that the couple are caught in the act here. A searchlight shines straight in their eyes, the used condom is the undeniable evidence. How should I interpret this scene? As a crime scene? Is this about the secret double life of the skyscrapers?*

MV: Yes, in a way. And about how this double life of engineering progress and architectural frivolity could continue to exist for so long, and is exposed here as it were. The modern age thrusts forward, literally entering their space. The idyll is unmasked.

EvdH: *Speaking of living things: in an earlier version we see that many more objects are given a new life: the Statue of Liberty is transformed into the Venus de Milo due to her severed arm. Her forearm with the flaming torch functions*

as a bedside lamp. The grid of Manhattan is a carpet with a green strip in the middle as Central Park. The painting above the bed — a typical Edward Hopper-style landscape with a beach, the ocean and a lighthouse by night — almost seems like a window in itself that offers a view of a full moon, which is reflected in the ocean. From the beach, a pale searchlight shines into the room. The surrealist realities merge together. A highly cinematic image.

MV: For a while we seriously considered marketing all the objects in the painting — the Venus lamp, the Manhattan carpet etc. — but that never materialized.

EvdH: *In Flagrant Délit I sense a psycho-sexual connotation, as in a dream. I also recognize certain unmistakable surrealist stylistic features. The crazy surrealist genius Salvador Dali was still alive at that time. Didn't he live in New York during the same period? Were you influenced by him?*

MV: Perhaps indirectly. In London, Rem had discovered Dali's Paranoid-Critical Method, a technique that Dali developed in the 1930s in order to reinforce his subconscious and in which paranoid irrational thoughts were formative. In any case, I have a great admiration for Dali's sense of delirium. He had a rather dubious reputation in that period and was indeed staying in New York with his wife Gala. While Gala, until her old age, devoured ever-younger men in her hotel suite, Dali held audience in the hotel restaurant of The Plaza, where he always had his own regular table in a corner where everyone came and stood around. Dali then used to shout: 'Dollarrssch! Just give me dollarrssch...!!' (imitates a thick Mediterranean accent). Rem had the idea to ask Dali to speak at a symposium he was organizing at the institute. He'd made an invitation and asked me to paint a postage stamp on it with the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building leaning their pointed towers towards each other in curiosity. When Rem handed him the invitation, Dali looked at it in surprise, said 'Nice Stamp!' in his heavy accent and immediately promised to come and speak. His managers, who were sitting nearby, later came by to say that, unfortunately, it couldn't have been his intention after all.

EvdH: *I guess Rem probably also wanted to ask Dali about his adamant 'War against Modernity'?*

MV: Yes, Dali proclaimed everywhere how delighted he was that Corbusier had sunk like a concrete block, because he had such an absolute loathing for the cast-in-concrete modern age. Of course it would have been great if Rem could have debated this with Dali and the students.

EvdH: *Was the Flagrant Délit series an immediate success?*

MV: No. The widespread recognition and the public only came when Rem used it for the cover of *Delirious New York* in 1978 and after the Sparkling Metropolis show at the Guggenheim that same year.

EvdH: *But you told me earlier that Rem initially had a very different cover in mind for his book?*

MV: That's right. At first he had a beautiful panoramic photo of a round model of Manhattan. Very strange, that roundness doesn't fit with Manhattan at all. But in 1977, just before the book was published, Rem's editor visited the book fair in Frankfurt where he saw a dummy of an Italian book on skyscrapers with my

Flagrant Délit painting on the cover. The book attracted enormous attention, purely because of the cover image. When he returned, he told Rem he had to veto this at once and try to use the image himself. And the strange thing was that it immediately made perfect sense, and actually all the other drawings I made could also be included, as cement between the different chapters. It perfectly describes the feeling of delirium.

EvdH: *And then they suddenly became the drawings from Delirious New York instead of the drawings of Madelon Vriesendorp?*

MV: Yes, and the funny thing is that now the work is often accompanied by the caption 'Work commissioned by OMA', even though OMA was only founded in 1975 and I had already made the precursors to the paintings in 1973 and 1974.

[A page of the original interview (p. 64) was not among the photographed pages and is not included here; the transcription resumes on p. 65.]

EvdH: *In your book The World of Madelon Vriesendorp you include a storyboard of what I imagine is a very different kind of animation. All kinds of positions, a sort of Kamasutra for skyscrapers?*

MV: Yes, that's the beginning of the segment in which they're making love before being caught. We'd made a very strange pornographic script for it in which the numbers 69, 17, 12, 0, and 11 visualized the respective positions and resulted in a close-up of the climax of the used condom. We called it The Goodyear Blimp Deflated. We included the O position as a joke, so I was very curious how the makers were going to solve that, the Zero position. How do you express that?

What I also came up with — but which was omitted — was that the Statue of Liberty took her torch and went on a stroll around the city, just like a tourist. Back then, in Times Square they still had a huge Lucky Strike advertisement with a man blowing smoke rings. In my version the cigarette had gone out and he leaned out of the advertisement to get a light from the Statue of Liberty's torch. I would have liked to have things like these included.

[The segment continues with a caption to a New York edition of the storyboard: — commissioned by the Paris–New York edition. In one scene you see how the lovers are caught and Venus de Milo's arm breaks out of the nightstand and walks to the mirror to put on lipstick. She was very sexy. And in a following scene, from the doorway you see water streaming in and how she walks away, wading through the water. A New York nightmare.]

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