SOCKS (Microcities)
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Madelon Vriesendorp's Manhattan Project

«These works weren't created to commission!», Vriesendorp comments, smiling, almost hesitantly, in Basel. They «were created as the result of an in-depth analysis of the possibilities provided by architecture» and accordingly mark the moment when the rigid corset of modernism seemed to be entirely exhausted.

Madelon Vriesendorp, born in 1945 in Holland, was, together with her husband Rem Koolhaas, Zoe and Elia Zenghelis, a founding member of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). Although her work was vastly used for book and magazine covers (notably on the cover of Delirious New York in 1978 by Rem Koolhaas), the growing fame of her husband belittled the importance of Vriesendorp's — and Zoe Zenghelis's, as well — artistic contribution within the group: both artists had to wait many years to get the recognition they deserved.

After moving to Ithaca in 1972 together with Koolhaas, Vriesendorp began working on a number of sketches, drawings and paintings under the name “Manhattan”, inhabited by anthropomorphic architectures and infused by oniric imagination and surreal themes.

“Flagrant Délit”, arguably the most iconic of these, is a representation of post-coital Empire State and Chrysler Buildings caught in bed by the Rockefeller Building, representing “one of the most beguiling attempts to depict the unconscious double-life of modern architecture”.

The animation “Flagrant Délit — (Caught in the Act)” (long-lost and unfortunately not available online in its entirety) that Vriesendorp worked on with Teri Wehn-Damisch for French television once back in London in 1976, is a development of the events before, during and after the sexual intercourse between the anthropomorphized buildings, in the form of a torrid melodrama. The video iconography follows Freudian dream mechanisms operating through displacement and condensation. Notable elements present in the video are a Jean Cocteau-inspired bedside light in the shape of an arm, that is later revealed to belong to the Statue of Liberty (looking forlornly on from outside, and armless à la “Venus de Milo”); a Goodyear Blimp depicted as a used rubber on the edge of the bed, as well as Manhattan buildings looking through the window.

M.V.'s body of work has been recently reevaluated and collected in a retrospective exhibition at the Architectural Association School of Architecture and, later, at the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel by Stefan Trüby, Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist. A book edited by the same curators under the title “The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Objects/Games” “brings together the Dutch artist's wildly diverse practices from the past thirty-five years, including painting, drawing, collecting, recycling, sculpture and psychological game-devising as well as the serious business of collecting what Walter Benjamin once called ‘the trash of history'”.

According to the Financial Times, “for urban architecture they [Vriesendorp's paintings] are more significant than Piranesi or the film Metropolis”.

KOOLHAAS AND VRIESENDORP — BY NICHOLAS PARR (2014)

The following is an excerpt from the dissertation “The Fabrication of Evidence in Rem Koolhaas's Delirious New York” by Nicholas Parr.

The image of the naked boxers was not the only work of Vriesendorp's to be used in Delirious New York. The original cover of the book was her iconic painting Flagrant Délit (1975), which shows two skyscrapers, the Empire State and the Chrysler buildings, post coitus. Flagrant Délit was part of a series of paintings under the name Manhattan. Vriesendorp began work on these paintings around the same time that Koolhaas had discovered the paranoid critical method while studying at the Architectural Association in London. And it is clear that Koolhaas's fondness of the PCM has influenced Vriesendorp too. Charles Jencks writes, referring to Vriesendorp's early collections, ordered according to a “new logic”: “…the world can always be reordered according to heterogeneous classes, and Vriesendorp following Koolhaas following Dali is interested in heterodoxies, not orthodoxies.” Brayer finds more links to the PCM and Surrealist movement, stating the painting “borrowed its dreamlike imagination from the Surrealist legacy… ‘peeping-tom' skyscrapers conjure up Salvador Dali's ‘paranoid-critical conquest'”. Like much of Koolhaas's writing in Delirious, Brayer also identifies Vriesendorp using “fantastic narratives coexisted with fragments of reality”; however, where Koolhaas uses text, Vriesendorp uses visual imagery.

The influence of the PCM is clear from looking at Manhattan Angelus, 1975, the painting used on the front cover of The World of Madelon Vriesendorp, and indeed Vriesendorp's other paintings which involve anthropomorphised buildings that were later used by Koolhaas in Delirious. These humanised skyscrapers are similar to the structures Dali creates in some of his paranoid-critical fantasies, for example The Architectonic Angelus of Millet (1933) where the two peasants have been transformed into vast structures dominating the landscape. Looking at Vriesendorp's Manhattan Angelus, the two skyscrapers are bowed in prayer, mimicking the couple used in Millet's original painting. Neil Leach observes the influence of Dali on Vriesendorp: “The corollary to reading the self as a building is the potential to read buildings as the self. In the context of New York, Salvador Dali's famous ‘paranoid' interpretation of the skyscrapers as representations of Jean-François Millet's Angelus, as animated creatures coming alive at sunset ‘ready to perform the sexual act' speaks of this opposite moment. It is this image, surely, that inspired the highly anthropomorphized illustration… Flagrant Délit.” Vriesendorp, like Koolhaas, is using the PCM and applying fantasy to make her paintings more absorbing, effective, poetic.

In an interview with Vriesendorp, Beatriz Colomina asks, “There are paintings of yours in Delirious New York…” [Vriesendorp responds] “Yes. Flagrant Délit was part of a whole series of paintings (Manhattan). Just a few of them were published in Delirious New York.” [Colomina] “You mean that once Flagrant Délit was put on the cover, other paintings went in too, though there were no plans to include

any of them before that?” [Vriesendorp] “The paintings originally had nothing to do with Rem's book.” It is clear that Koolhaas and Vriesendorp were influenced by similar interests, theories, each other, or all of the above. Certainly, the PCM is a central theme both in Koolhaas's synopsis of the book and in Vriesendorp's paintings.

In The World of Madelon Vriesendorp, Charles Jencks believes Vriesendorp “played a significant role in forming the image of his early work, and continues to bring architecture the fresh perspective of an outsider”. He also emphasises that “Madelon was instrumental in giving iconic power to the narrative” of the book.

Après l'amour and Freud Unlimited (both 1975) were also used from Vriesendorp's Manhattan project. Après l'amour was Vriesendorp's first entry from the series, and features a painting of a mysterious skyscraper above the bed, created by Vriesendorp, inspired by her research and travels across Manhattan with Koolhaas. Freud Unlimited is an attempt to show the “subconscious of Manhattan”, and it could be argued that throughout Delirious, Koolhaas is also exploring Manhattan's subconscious, through his narrations of fantasy. Many critics praised the inclusion of the paintings, and believe that Delirious would not have been the same without them. Both Koolhaas and Vriesendorp are using two different mediums, narration and illustration, to reinforce the credibility of the ‘retroactive manifesto', and were both heavily channelling the paranoid-critical method in their works.

It is important to remember that Vriesendorp's paintings were made before Delirious New York as a stand-alone project. Briony Fer talks on their value without the distraction of Delirious: “To see Vriesendorp's work in this larger context is to see it in a different light — to see that whilst her images are central to the genesis of the OMA project, and Delirious New York in particular, they also have a life outside it. Her paintings are crystal-clear visions of desire and destruction.”

Koolhaas explains the Paranoic and the Critical roles in the PCM in Delirious, suggesting it “is a sequence of two consecutive but discrete operations.” In an interview towards the end of The World of Madelon Vriesendorp, Shumon Basar muses to Rem Koolhaas: “Delirious New York seems to have been written with the help of Salvador Dali's paranoid-critical method (PCM). Proofs are important for his method, even if they are wrong or fake. I've sometimes thought that in Delirious New York the proofs are missing, and this is where Madelon's paintings come into play. You described the critical part of PCM as being to fabricate artificial proofs for an idea. In your collaboration, Maddie seems to be the critical part, and you the paranoiac one.”

[To which Koolhaas replies:] “You're right. Her ability was totally crucial.” Here we see that Basar has identified the two roles needed for the PCM to be successful, with Koolhaas as the paranoiac — with his irrational, poetic, fantastical analysis of Manhattan — and Vriesendorp as the ‘critique', developing

these stories, compressing them and fabricating these paintings which give life to Koolhaas's ideas, allowing the manifesto to be credible and compelling.

Works illustrated (in the original): Flagrant Délit (1975); Manhattan Angelus (1975); Freud Unlimited (1975); A Casa (1975); Après l'amour (1975); Self Immolation (1975); Dream of Liberty (1974); 10 ans après l'amour (1984); animation sketches for Flagrant Délit (1979). All images © Madelon Vriesendorp; courtesy Architectural Association. — SOCKS is a project by Fosco Lucarelli and Mariabruna Fabrizi (Microcities); content licensed CC BY-SA 3.0. Embedded excerpt from Nicholas Parr, “The Fabrication of Evidence in Rem Koolhaas's Delirious New York” (2014).