



The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Games

Lilian Chee

To cite this article: Lilian Chee (2009) The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Games, The Journal of Architecture, 14:1, 149-155, DOI: [10.1080/13602360802705247](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360802705247)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360802705247>



Published online: 17 Mar 2009.



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Book reviews

Life with meaningful objects

The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Games

Edited by Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby

AA Publications, 2008

ISBN 978-1-902902-63-0

£26.50, hardback, 278pp., with illustrations

Everything can be taken seriously, especially the non-serious.¹

Madelon Vriesendorp

In the basement vaults of Blythe House in Hammer-smith, West London, intriguing objects of ostensibly varied persuasions, all linked to the history of the human body, are sequestered. Forming Henry Wellcome's collection of medical curiosities, the eclectic collection includes the scientific (surgical instruments, skeletons, anatomical models), the magical (votive offerings, masks, amulets) and the (extra)-ordinary (snuffboxes, a *memento mori* brooch and a piece of tattooed human skin). In a more modest setting of a North London flat described as being unusually flexible because of its 'six rooms and a corridor' (p. 269), another kind of archive, different in spirit but comparable to Wellcome's eccentric one is in the making.² Madelon Vriesendorp's 'Object Archive' (ongoing since 1972) is a treasure trove of miniature, mostly plastic souvenirs ranging from skeletons, nuns and aliens, to tacky skyscrapers, pagodas, Russian dolls and sexually suggestive body parts. Neatly arranged on top of an old drawing cabinet, these plastic faces and façades continuously watch over the room.

Comparisons between the Wellcome and the Vriesendorp archives may be made with regards to their wide variety of objects, bizarre categories and the collectors' obsession to amass *ad infinitum*. However, this is where the comparison ends. The Wellcome collection was ambitiously aligned with the prowess of the British Empire and its ability to reach the ends of the earth to procure an unusual artefact which could enlighten humankind. Despite its chaotic diversity, its aspirations were immense and unyielding. Conversely, the Vriesendorp collection is more ad hoc, more domesticated, and more distracted. It is structured on misunderstanding, flaws and mistakes, and altogether more interested in the fickle vicissitudes which accompany pop culture. In addition, it may be distinguished precisely for the absence of ambition, at least in the modes that we are well acquainted with.

The World of Madelon Vriesendorp, is a companion volume to the artist's exhibition held at the Architectural Association in London in early 2008. As much as it opens up Vriesendorp's amazing world to the reader, this publication aims, as the AA Chairman Brett Steele writes, to act as 'a long-overdue corrective', thus also bringing the world's attention to this 'misappropriated' artist (p.6). Looking at the lucid colour photographs of the artist's studio, which are sympathetically rendered by her daughter and sometime collaborator, Charlie Koolhaas's sharp photographic eye, the reader may be tempted to wonder if s/he could also achieve a similar mass with persistence and



time. The collection enthuses us because of its accessibility. Our fascination with such a collection is also telling. It betrays our shared allure for figurative oddities, a fascination often subdued since it is also emblematic of questionable taste. But bad taste and anti-ambition are not taboo here. They are sometimes valorised in Madelon's world. It is

this fault line, one defined by a fascination for flaws, which gives this volume its *raison d'être*.

The book is organised with the aim of experiencing the complexity and contradictions of Vriesendorp's universe. Besides documenting the artist's work and her unique position, it collects conversations, statements, manifestos and opinions

from individuals who know, have worked with, and/or are intrigued by her work and philosophy. The referrals are glowing. This reader found herself irresistibly drawn *into* the book and the person, sometimes emerging with a confused sense that she had indeed met the artist firsthand. The text is indulgent in that it seems to give us unparalleled access to the private life of this artist. One will finish the book and remember many things, most of which would appear like interesting trivia. For example that Vriesendorp was born on 12th March, 1945, at 6am (making her birthday '123456'!), that she has a washing machine which is 25 years old, that she turns out fantastic cakes and outlandish costumes at top speed, that she has intriguing theories such as 'if you are lazy enough, you'll become inventive' (p. 11), that she once 'spidermanned' her way into her neighbour's flat through a small side-window to turn off a cooker while he was out and thus saved the day. But are these facts mere trivia, or do they carefully construct a precise mode of self-presentation? It is an interesting question to think about even for this reader who finds herself rather taken in by Vriesendorp's politics.

We are repeatedly told through a series of independent essays and conversations, that Vriesendorp's seemingly random clash of colours, cultures and forms is entirely ideological. Her work is presented as an inversion of norms. Her particular aesthetics are cast as a form of resistance against a hegemonic value system where 'good taste' is a precursor for professional or personal credibility. As Shumon Basar expresses it, despite its outward casualness, the Vriesendorp archive resonates with a latent poetic sense. It articulates our unconscious

desire and teases out what embarrasses us by presenting a world which does not seem to judge, at least in the ways we are normally conditioned to:

Lighthouses. Peru. Disasters. Babies. Glass Bricks. Like some drunken but exquisite *haiku*, Madelon's postcard categories chime with the hidden randomness that is also the latent logic of the world we live in (p. 81).

Echoing such resistance, this book too is, by all counts, unusual. To begin with, it is unusual that an architectural press and a cast of stellar architects and writers connected to the architectural world would congregate around an artist, whose work may be described as more figurative than abstract (thus, going against the grain of architecture's love affair with abstraction), and whose profile has been relatively low key. Adding to this, the book's genre is problematic. It straddles art and architecture. It reads equally as biography and monography. It is organised in relation to serious stuff and frivolous matter. It is informed by an accommodating vision, and unrelenting feminist politics. It is an archival document but it also laughs, doubts and questions what it has accumulated. Through these snugly partnered contradictions, the reader enters the marvellous, non-serious and colourful world of Madelon Vriesendorp.

Functioning as an expanded catalogue, an illustrated inventory of the artist's works spanning four decades (1967–2007) occupies almost half the book's content. The works, which include paintings and texts, are well documented. The layout benefits from a good balance of relatively empty pages, consistently located between pairs of images.

These spacious intervals, punctuated discreetly with captions to the images, enable Vriesendorp's intense compositions to be slowly deliberated and absorbed. The book is also generously endowed with a series of beautiful, candid and personal photographs of Vriesendorp's workspace, her objects, postcards, habits and home. Taken by her daughter Charlie, these brilliant photographs articulate a parallel narrative to the artist's intriguing portfolio.

However, what would really interest the architecture pundit is the artist's illustrious pedigree, which is not understated in this volume. Vriesendorp is something of an architectural secret and superstar herself. The reader quickly learns that while living in New York in 1972, she co-founded the Office for Metropolitan Architecture with her husband Rem Koolhaas, and another architect-artist couple, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis. Her anthropomorphic, pop surrealist painting, *Flagrant Délit* (1975; illustration above), which shows the Chrysler Building and the Empire State caught together in bed by a spying Rockefeller Centre, catapulted to fame in 1978 when it graced the cover of Koolhaas's now iconic book *Delirious New York*. If Koolhaas' arguments were too radical, Vriesendorp's paintings gave his voice a concrete, and therefore plausible, existence. Or as Koolhaas puts it, these paintings were paramount to his process:

Paranoid critical activity is the fabrication of evidence for unprovable speculations and the subsequent grafting of this evidence on the world so that a 'false' fact takes its unlawful place among the 'real' facts. These false facts relate to the real world as spies to a given society: the more conventional and *unnoted* their existence,

the better they can devote themselves to that society's destruction.³

From Koolhaas' account above, it seems like the actual sequence of production is his text followed by Vriesendorp's 'fabricated' representations. Yet, unknown to many and as this volume is at pains to emphasise, Vriesendorp's drawings were not commissioned by Koolhaas. Although several were included in *Delirious New York* – including *Freud Unlimited* (1975) and *Eating Oysters with Boxing Gloves, Naked* (1977) – and these are now widely seen as completely integral to, or even evidential of, the book's central thesis on 'delirium', Vriesendorp initiated the series of paintings independently, even prior to Koolhaas's publication. Thus, it is also interesting to consider who influenced whom in this partnership. In a conversation between the editors of the present volume and Koolhaas, the latter reiterates that Vriesendorp's 'free floating imagination' and uncanny talent for representation generated enough income for the couple to survive in Manhattan: 'She sold one painting for \$10,000, which was as much as I had earned in two years' (pp. 262, 265).⁴ These paintings are surreal but without the usual seriousness:

Her paintings show trysts between people and things that should never really encounter each other, and yet, when they do, they generate an emotive effect that pulls between beauty, absurdity and hilarity. They are, in her daughter Charlie's words, 'playground surrealism' – that is, surreal without being serious (pp. 62–3).

Nevertheless, one issue is persistently revisited in the conversations, interviews and essays featured in this catalogue. It is why the hugely talented artist has not

won the degree of adulation she deserves. There are postulations, for example, of her economy of generosity, her disdain for ambition and her worrying selflessness, which as Basar observes, could 'at some point become dangerous' for her practice (p. 268).

This book is supposed to counteract this condition of self-erasure. Although working and living amongst architects (she also tutored at the AA in the 1980s) who are known to be a ruthlessly ambitious group of people, it emerges that Vriesendorp's personal value system revolves conversely around close relationships. Her output is tied to, and remains committed to friends, family and long-term collaborators such as the architect Charles Jencks. Working against the logic of capital gain, 'her career and output is almost impossible to quantify and value outside this personal system', amounting almost to 'self-erasure' (p. 267). Vriesendorp's generous collaborative impulse goes against the cult of the individual genius, a status quo which has long governed architectural practice. Her strategy is counter-modernist, even post-postmodernist. And though never categorised as such, it may be accurately described as proto-feminist in that the personal remains stubbornly political.

Confined strategically by the artist's preference for art produced through a principle of generosity, a passion for humour, a penchant for the miniature, a belief in the intimate, and a working manifesto of 'the seriousness of unserious things', Vriesendorp's artistic economy stands awkwardly in an age where Big Ambition is not a dirty phrase. Her collection of objects and postcards, a widely discussed subject in the book reviewed here, is distinguished by ordinariness, smallness and proliferation, which

are transformed into the marvellous and the surreal through their juxtaposition with the artist's domestic environment and her everyday existence. The home, often considered outside the realm of art, becomes a radical installation site with its own complex economy and ideology:

... I live with my collection. When I get new stuff I put it in the reception area in the kitchen, next to the fruit bowl. There the figures and objects have to wait for a while. I need to get used to them as personae until they find their final position amongst the other stuff (p. 238).

Unlike Douglas Coupland's pristine and precisely curated home museum, which Vriesendorp admires and later visits, the latter's secret museum is endearing precisely because it feels familiar. Every souvenir seems to have a memory, a past and a story, which at the same time, stands for the history of its owner. In this domestic setting, they become personalities. They acquire personal value. Here, it is clear that there is a conscious resistance towards commodity fetishism. As much as things are acquired they are also given away freely, or made casually at breakneck speed from household 'detritus' such as 'beautiful tropical fish slippers' crafted from kitchen pads, a necklace fashioned out of anti-perspirant roll-on balls, children's hats from old Paul Smith socks, and a crocodile with toothpick teeth carved from a cucumber. Productivity without gain, making without permanence, or as her architect-niece Fenna Haakma Wagenaar observes, making without leaving a legacy:

Artists aren't supposed to be so generous with their time and so careless about their work. It's as though you don't care about your legacy.

That's a strange thing, too, for someone married to an architect. Architects like legacies (p. 14). In a series of candid interviews with Beatriz Colomina, Vriesendorp speaks of her own work as being entangled with her life and home. She argues that her disposition as a woman, whom, by necessity, needs to be 'practical' because 'women have traditionally always had to make something out of nothing' influences her artistic production (p. 216). This wildly diverse output thrives on a certain attraction to what is flawed, 'Women are always drawn to things which are flawed. They are drawn to men that are flawed' (p. 46). It is also structured on humour and a politics of 'no respect', which Vriesendorp suggests is a 'feminine attitude' (p. 46). Humour is key to understanding Vriesendorp. Her humour is not deadpan. It makes us laugh out loud but it also tickles our unconscious, making us think at the same time about what we already know but have not said or dare not say out loud. This subversive humour is pervasive in Vriesendorp's paintings and objects. It also has a significant influence on the voices in this book. Serious issues are seldom broached with heavy-handed moralising. Yet the amicable consensus on Vriesendorp's output seems to paper over several controversial questions, which may trouble the reader. Despite her immense talent which Koolhaas himself has openly acknowledged, saying that he owes her 'a special debt of inspiration and reinforcement', one may still question whether or not the artist is receiving this attention from the architectural community because of her relationship with the latter.⁵

The reader gets a sense that while the book is about Vriesendorp, Koolhaas is never really

ever out of the picture. In some ways, the reviews of her work may have taken a different, perhaps more productive, trajectory if these were cast from a non-architectural viewpoint. This is because even while Vriesendorp's iconic paintings have been influential in giving a kind of evidentiary 'proof' to Koolhaas's 'paranoid critical' speculations, in themselves, the paintings have not been adequately nor critically analysed as a particular drawing genre. There is little debate about how these paintings may have significantly transformed architectural drawing and thinking. In this volume, such discussions, if any, remain superficial, and are inevitably tied back to the content of Koolhaas's book.

For this reader, who was slightly irritated with the occasionally too small monochrome images and the unnecessarily complex layout of the interview segments (where it became difficult to work out who was saying what), what really stood out in this book was Vriesendorp's uncanny talent for bringing out the personal in others. In a way, reading this book is like eavesdropping on a private conversation or peering into another's head. There are biographical insights for those interested not only in Vriesendorp but also in her collaborators for this volume, who include Koolhaas (who is rarely so candid), Jencks, Wagenaar, Colomina, Charlie Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Zoe Zenghelis, Hubert Damisch, Douglas Coupland and the editors Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby. In talking about or capturing 'Maddie's' or 'Madelon's' work, these contributors reciprocally operate (whether consciously or not), within Vriesendorp's intimate economy of relationships. They are generous in

confiding their frustrations and hopes. The excellent essay by Jencks is one such example. At a time when architects are worrying about falling profit margins and interested only in the 'big picture', reading this book may prove a distraction. On the other hand, it may also reinforce the point that creative activity is meaningful only when it is embedded in life, enriched by humour and above all, reflective of human frailty.

... it's not that I don't think my work is important. I think these things are most important of all. The jokes, the fun, the memories, it's all in the details. The detail is all that really matters. I am the detail (p. 14).

Lilian Chee
National University of Singapore
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Notes and references

1. In an interview with Beatriz Colomina; *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Games*, p. 223.
2. A comparison with the Wellcome archive was also made by Charles Jencks in his essay, 'Madelon Seeing Through Objects', p. 21.
3. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York, The Monacelli Press, 1994; c.1978), p. 241. (*Emphasis mine.*)
4. Vriesendorp's paintings are collected by major museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Centre Canadien d'Architecture (CCA), Montreal; and the Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt Am Main. In 2008, apart from the AA, there was a retrospective of her work at the Aedes Gallery, Berlin. Vriesendorp was also invited by the curator Aaron Betsky to show her work amongst other architecture luminaries at the 11th Architecture Biennale in Venice.
5. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, *op. cit.*, p. 317.