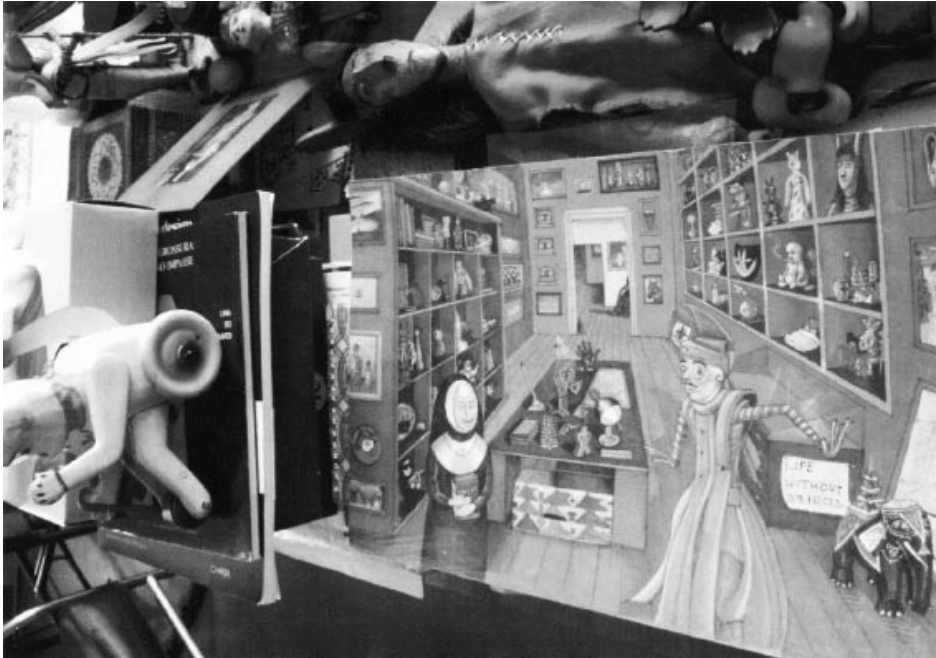


# Playground Surrealism

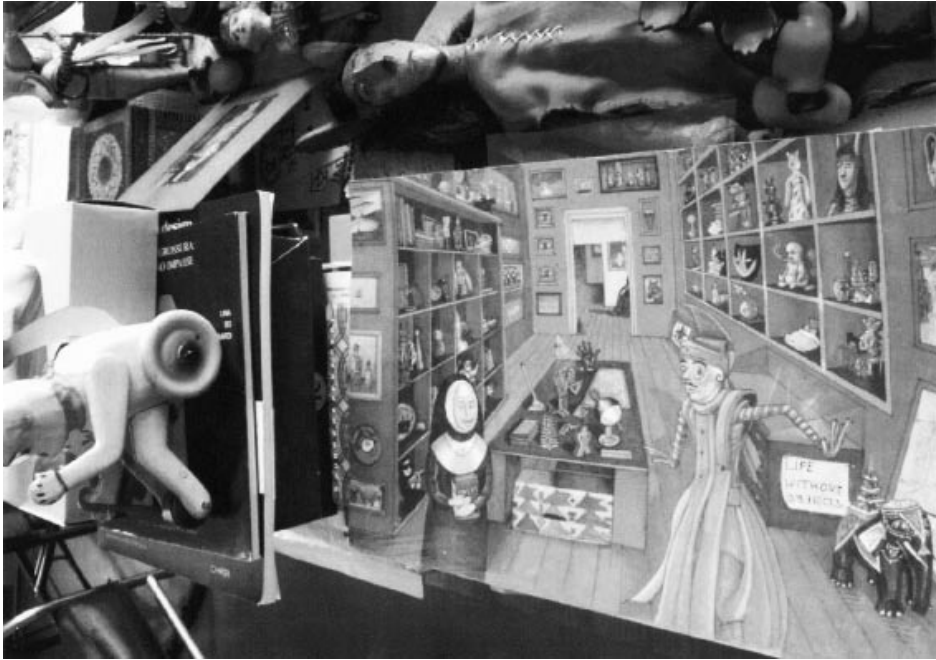


Auf dem Tisch in Madelon Vriesendorps Wohnatelier in London liegt die Vorzeichnung für Superpainting, 2008, ihr jüngstes Gemälde.

Hochhäuser, Sehenswürdigkeiten, Alltagsgegenstände, Insekten, Figuren – im Wohnatelier der Künstlerin Madelon Vriesendorp sind Tausende von Objekten in Form von Miniaturen und Souvenirs ausgebreitet. Die Sammlung trägt einerseits ähnlich einer zeitgenössischen Wunderkammer die urbane Welt im Privaten zusammen und liefert andererseits Motivgrundlage für Vriesendorps Gemälde. Anfang der 1970er-Jahre lebte Vriesendorp in New York, wo sie Mitgründerin des Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) war. Dort entstanden parallel zu einer umfangreichen Postkarten-Sammlung zahlreiche Gouachen wie *Après L'amour* und *Flagrant Délit*, die von der Doppelmoral moderner Architektur berichten. Letztere ist als Cover-Abbildung für Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* (1978) verwendet worden. In einer Mischung aus surrealistischer Darstellung, Illustration und Architektur-Rendering prägen die Bilder die visuelle Sprache der frühen Projekte des Architekturbüros. Dennoch ist Madelon Vriesendorp heute ein 'nahezu unbekanntes Künstlergenie' (Hans-Ulrich Obrist). Ihr künstlerisches Werk, das zugleich wesentlicher Beitrag für eine kritische Architekturgeschichte ist, wird in diesem Jahr erstmals ausführlich in einer Retrospektive an der Architectural Association in London und in der Aedes Galerie Berlin ausgestellt. Die Kuratoren der Ausstellung, Shumon Basar und Stephan Trüby, 'lernten als Architekten von Maddie, dass nur weil etwas klein ist und mimetisch über etwas Anderes in der Welt berichtet, es nicht bloß eine 'Kopie' des originalen Dings ist. Das Souvenir ist mit einer Menschlichkeit ausgestattet, die genauso innig ist wie jene des überdimensionalen Originals, auf die sich das Souvenir bezieht. In dem Moment, wo das Souvenir deinen eigenen Privatraum betritt, wird es eine 1:1 Architektur.'



# Playground Surrealism



On the table of Madelon Vriesendorp's studio-flat in London lies the preparatory drawing for *Superpainting*, 2008, her most recent painting.

High-rises, sights, everyday objects, insects, figures—thousands of these things are spread out as miniatures or souvenirs in artist Madelon Vriesendorp's live-in studio. On the one hand, the collection puts together a contemporary cabinet of curiosities of comparable size and, on the other, provides the motifs for her paintings. In the early 1970s Vriesendorp was living in New York, where she was one of the cofounders of Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). In New York she put together an extensive collection of postcards and painted numerous gouaches, such as **Après L'amour** and **Flagrant Délit**, which address the double morality of modern architecture. The latter work was used to illustrate the cover of Rem Koolhaas's **Delirious New York** (1978). In a mixture of Surrealist depiction, illustration, and architectural rendering, the images shaped the visual idiom of the office's early projects. Nevertheless, Madelon Vriesendorp is still an 'almost unknown artistic genius' (Hans-Ulrich Obrist). Her artistic oeuvre, which is also an essential contribution to a critical history of architecture, will be comprehensively exhibited for the first time in a retrospective at the Architectural Association in London and the Aedes Galerie Berlin. The curators of the exhibition, Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby, 'learnt as architects from Maddie that just because something is small and is mimetically related to something else in the world, it does not make it a 'copy' of that original thing. There is a humanity invested in the souvenir that is just as heartfelt as the huge thing it refers to. The moment this souvenir enters your own private space, it becomes a 1:1 architecture.'

## Madelon Vriesendorp/ Shumon Basar/Stephan Trüby

### Playground Surrealism

Madelon Vriesendorp in conversation with the curators of The World of Madelon Vriesendorp.

### Surrealism and Radicality

**SHUMON BASAR/STEPHAN TRÜBY** Madelon, to start out with a harmless question: Could you say something about your roots, your family? Who in your family made a big impression on you in terms of a certain interest in art?

**MADALON VRIESENDORP** My mother was from an artistic family and my paternal grandmother came from a family of horse-painters. My mother went to art school in The Hague. Later, in the Sixties, she became a writer and was part of the feminist movement. She also was a TV personality and did game shows. She had a column in a paper and was well known. Her pseudonym was Harriet Freezer (pronounced 'Frazer'). My sisters are very talented artists. My paternal grandfather was a trained wood buyer and had traveled all over the world: Argentina, Russia, etc. Even though he was an introverted man, who talked in telegram style sentences, I liked to go to his house with the old world furniture, the smell of his cigars, the pictures.

How did you come to art?

I went to the art school in Amsterdam when I was 19. The school was later called Rietveld Academy and I stayed for three years. It was in the Sixties and we were all involved in a massive rebellion.

How did you meet your husband, the architect Rem Koolhaas?

I met him first when I was 17. Rem's aunt was an art school buddy of my mother's. They had a big party and we sat and talked the whole evening and I thought, wow, what a great guy to talk to, so intelligent and interested in everything! Two years later, when I moved

to Amsterdam, there was a very straightforward note in my door, saying 'come tomorrow to my place' and I did.

The whole 1968 thing, did that register in your mind?

Yes, of course. There was a great surge of protests. Rem was a journalist, writing for The Haagse Post. He was in Prague when the tanks were rolling in. Then we went to Paris, out in the streets, we were just right in the middle of the fighting, the barricades, gigantic marches. The whole of Europe seemed to be engaged in a protest against the authorities, America and the Vietnam War.

Which aspects of contemporary art in the Sixties made the biggest impression on you?

In art school everybody was obsessed with sex. Hot-bed for hot sex just about everywhere (laughs). A famous writer was standing on a soapbox in the street and shouting: 'People have to screw more!' There were drugs of course, LSD, weed, etc. A friend of mine came to school once in the morning after an all-night drug-fest, carrying a big red painting and shouted: 'God, the painting was so much better yesterday!'

How did you come in contact with Surrealism?

Well, I was interested in Dalí, but more in the Surrealist's forefathers like Bosch and Bruegel, Piranesi, even Ingres. Also of course: Magritte, Dick Ket, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, etc. So many inspiring contemporary artists like Claes Oldenburg, Kitaj, Hockney. A great discovery was Domenico Gnoli, who did large, fantastic paintings of tiny details like a button and buttonhole, very precisely painted. This extreme focus was very humorous. Sort of opposite to the action painters, like Karel Appel; I couldn't really relate to this alpha-male obsession with picking a fight with your canvas, but I did enjoy the performance.

Would you call yourself a surrealist?

I would prefer not calling myself anything. But my daughter Charlie suggested recently that I should call my work 'Playground Surrealism'. I really like that.

Did you think about architecture during 68 and its aftermath?

**I became interested in architecture through Rem. He was writing about architects like Le Corbusier, Wijdeveld, etc. Then he moved to the UK to study at the AA School of Architecture. In the early London years I was doing etchings and book-covers. There was some architecture in it: very thin-lined drawings. My first show in London was a group exhibition in the Serpentine Gallery, 1969.**

Could you describe the general atmosphere during your first years in London?

**London was a strange place then, very English. We were called 'continentals'. I felt you couldn't buy anything edible. There was no good bread, no coffee, only tea. Now, everybody moves to London, but then, foreigners were in the minority.**

What was, for you, the biggest difference between the English and the foreigners?

**Around 1970 I thought, what is this here? No black and white, everything just grey. We thought the problem was words like 'rather' and 'quite'. For the English, Rem and I were these horrendously painful and confrontational people. We asked 'yes or no?' We were perceived as radical because of our 'European' behaviour; our harsh judgments, our outspokenness. I'm only just starting to fully understand the English and their sensitivities.**

But despite this you stayed in London. What attracted you? Non-radical English people allowed you radicality? **Yes, that's it. A great capacity for tolerance, or is it indifference?**

### **Filling the gaps**

How did OMA come together?

**The collaboration started with our entry for Casabella's 1972 competition, The City as a Meaningful Environment. Rem and Elia [Zenghelis] called it Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture. For Rem it was his final project at the AA, and for Elia, Rem's tutor, it was**

**a way back into architecture. That's how his wife Zoe [Zenghelis] and I got involved.**

What was the first OMA drawing you did?

**First, I helped with doing collages and watercolours. I think the first piece I ever did for OMA was the collage for Exodus, with idyllic LA villas with swimming pools on one side separated by this huge wall from the fuming industrial horror on the other side.**

Please tell us more about your working relationship during the early OMA years, between you, Rem, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis.

**The early OMA years we were collectively hectic, always deadlines, never enough time to do it all in. Everybody who came through the door had to give a helping hand. Zaha [Hadid] collaborated on the Dutch parliament competition. Rem was definitely an instigator of ideas, while Elia had his own thing going, quietly doing his genius scheme, the drawing to end all drawings. Often he would start a new one just before we had to send the whole thing off, singing away. We couldn't work without singing along to the latest songs; Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Roberta Flack, etc.**

Was there anything like a theoretical or ideological common ground during the first OMA years?

**The most important common ground for us was the admiration for the Russian constructivists, especially Leonidov and Malevich. Leonidov was an eye-opener for Rem. He was visionary and at the same time very surreal; if you look at his Narkomtjzhprom skyscraper project with these strange mushrooms stuck to the façade, outrageous scale; a combination of exquisite beauty and extreme vision.**

What role did OMA play within the early Seventies AA context?

**I think, the early work of OMA can only be understood as a reaction against provincial hippydom, sentimental humanism; 'human' scale and Archigram's have-fun-style with masses of cute happy people in their collages. To us then: sickening loveliness.**

How does Superstudio fit in that picture?

**Superstudio was a great antidote to all that!** The Continuous Monument took Modernism to its limits. Rem invited Adolfo [Natalini] to give a lecture at the AA in 1971. There was a lot of grumbling: 'Why does this Dutch-man bring over these Italian fascists?' The lecture was very funny, nobody understood his accent; he had written it down and read everything very slowly. For us the important question was: What is inside the Continuous Monument? What is happening there? It was something exciting and surreal, with infinite possibilities!

Around 1968 you were involved in protests against America; a few years later, around 1972 you went to the States. Why did you, after the Russian constructivists, decide to 'go west'?

**New York was such unpopular terrain then! The whole Sixties thing ran against big business and the 'inhumane' skyscrapers of New York. The reason that we went there was because of Rem's early obsession with New York, his plan to write about it and his wish to study with Oswald Mathias Ungers at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.**

Rem Koolhaas published *Delirious New York* in 1978. Could you describe your involvement in that book?

**I did some drawings for it, and I was involved in the research. The research was the most exciting thing. We found a couple who lived in a caravan in Geneva, New York, and who owned almost nothing else except postcards. They worked in the night, but you could meet them at five o'clock in the afternoon, that's when they got up. Every cupboard in that caravan was stacked with boxes of postcards. We found the most amazing cards.**

Was it clear from the beginning that your paintings would be part of *Delirious New York*?

**No, not at all. This became clear just at the very last moment. *Flagrant Délit*, the painting that later became the cover of *Delirious New York*, was first used, without permission, on the cover of an Italian book on sky-**

**scrapers. The editor from Oxford University Press saw this book at the book fair in Frankfurt and suggested to put this painting on the cover. Originally, it was planned to put a photograph of the Edison Pavilion from the New York World's Fair of 1939 on the front cover.**

Could you describe the relationship between *Delirious New York* and your paintings?

**Well, obviously these paintings aren't just an illustration of the text. It is funny that Rem used all three paintings because he could have just used *Flagrant Délit*. Then he found something in every one of them. The production of my paintings was interacting with the changing arguments of the book. Rem asked me to put Rockefeller Center in, so I did a new painting with the RCA Building. Even though the decision to include the paintings in the book was made in the final stage of its production, the paintings were in a way a confirmation of his theories. A planned version of the *Paranoid-Critical Method*: creating evidence.**

Your paintings seem to be something like the sentence 'quod erat demonstratum' in mathematical formulas...

**Maybe. He wrote the book on New York with this method, everything he found entirely proved his point; of course it tells you something about where and what you are looking for. He discovered the *Paranoid-Critical Method* when he read *My Secret Life* after coming back from a trip to Russia with the flu. Dalí and a high fever was a lethal but totally inspiring combination. Hallucinating at a fever pitch. Then he realized how the *Paranoid-Critical Method* was used in every field of science and speculation. One can prove just about anything as one can always find enough evidence for one's preconceived ideas, with mathematical precision. Everything falls neatly into place. Contradiction becomes confirmation. There starts a lifelong 'contradiction addiction'.**

Your reservations against hippies are surprising because some of the 'hippie artists', Marti Klarwein for example, were also influenced by surrealism...

**We weren't too much interested in hippies, nor in their**

art. I did not want to do airbrush, because everything looked so similar. My only concession to airbrush was this pencil rubbing technique, as in the drawing with the naked boxers in the oyster bar from *Delirious New York*.

Oh, you did that drawing?

**Yes. Basically, Rem asked me to do it. I said, well, I do it for you, but never tell anybody I did it. It was not my style. The drawing represented the ultimate gay possibility, and it was a concept that existed in the New York Thirties: standing there in the Downtown Athletic Club, naked, and eating oysters. If this was one possibility, there were so many! The drawing stands for the exciting accumulation of possibilities.**

What is your last OMA drawing?

**Stefano, who is a great artist, had already started to take over, with the most daring and beautiful renderings, taking this pencil rubbing technique to a whole different level. I had my second child. But as my last OMA drawing I would consider my watercolor, *Captive Globe Revisited*, from 1994. I put the skeleton of OMA's Grand Bibliothèque project in one corner to date it properly.**

### **Souvenirs and Misunderstandings**

Since 1976 you live, together with Rem—and until recently also together with your two children Charlie and Tomas—in a flat in North London. Between 1976 and 1980 this flat was also the workplace of OMA. For everyone who knows it, it is a very special place. It is a space in which not only some of your paintings are hanging, but it is also the place of an amazing collection of stuff—of miniature buildings, strange figures etc. How did all that start?

**It all started in the Seventies. I consider finding things that are inspiring to me to be part of my work. I started collecting skyscraper models in America. But, also, the things that I found on my first trip in Russia in 1984 were extremely inspiring to me. I remember everybody saying to me all the time: 'Maddie, where did you buy THAT?'**

It is quite difficult to describe what you are actually

collecting...

**I am not so affected by really beautiful or successful things. I always like to see what people aspire to and how they failed. The higher the aspiration, the 'better' the failure. That can be just heartbreaking. Same goes for an ugly building, it can be so much more interesting, because it's so painful to see what they tried to achieve.**

Some people, for example Jack Smith in *The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of María Montez*, define 'camp' like that... **Maybe there are some camp elements in my interest, but the word is too dogmatic to describe it. With 'kitsch' it is the same. In kitsch there isn't enough failure. Kitsch is just over the top. There is an aspiration and those who want to produce kitsch manage it. I think my collection is about finding the object that is mostly a clash of cultures. For me the ultimate object is the Father Christmas with wings or a Minnie Mouse in Indian regional dress.**

Culture clashes are mainly based on misunderstandings... **Yes, misunderstanding can be incredibly instrumental in finding your own direction. All through the ages people have creatively and deliberately misunderstood. Of course, this relates again to the Paranoid-Critical Method, because you have made up your mind and you find proof.**

Misunderstandings create power from powerlessness... **Right, understanding has nothing to do with you, but misunderstanding is particularly yours. Even though you might be powerless, at least YOU are the one who is misunderstanding something.**

Did you ever exclude objects from your collections, gifts that you didn't like etc...

**At first I did, but now I'm getting more and more accepting of other's taste and interventions.**

You got interested in smallness, and Rem in bigness. Has S,M,L,XL anything to do with your collection? **I don't think these two things have too much to do with each other, other than being each other's opposite, and**

**in that sense they're very close [laughs]. Of course we influence each other, but S,M,L,XL is entirely a product of the OMA office. I thought about making a book called XS, but then I saw that somebody else did it.**

You have two big tables, full of figures and architectures—almost like the Manhattan skyline outside the window in **Flagrant Délit**. They all look in the same direction. One gets the impression that all the figures are watching you. The word 'paranoia' comes into the mind...

**Of course there has to be a certain madness to do this. Everybody nurtures his own madness, in a way. I like the idea of objects and things that particularly say something to you.**

The last home of Sigmund Freud, 20 Maresfield Gardens, is just a few hundred meters away from your flat. Inside one can find something comparable to your flat: a completely crammed desk, surrounded by archeological figures which formed a silent audience for Freud...

**Yes, but I am collecting the trash version of Freud's collection. He had the things that really spoke in symbols—Egyptian, Roman, and Greek stuff... I'm sure if Freud were alive, he would be very interested in popular culture.**

Following Freud, many surrealists crammed their flats and studios with interesting objects, André Breton, for example, in the Rue Fontaine in Paris...

**Yes, all artists collect. You always look for things that inspire you. Every artist is looking for an alternative reality...**

What is this other reality you are talking about? Is your space a representation of something bigger, maybe the domestic version of Manhattan's culture of congestion?

**This description might be too literal. It is mainly about having those things around that I find interesting or inspiring.**

Did you get in touch with the anti-psychoanalysis movement of—let's say—Deleuze and Guattari? They literally wanted to open the window of the closed room of psychoanalysis, of father—mother—child...

**With these movements I agree insofar as Freud's method does not seem to work anymore. He has been succeeded. Of course he was very important, but mainly against a 19th century background of repression. People are like mushrooms. Mushrooms pop up in places where they are necessary. Nowadays mushroom Freud may have become obsolete. But his writing has to be read and reread as it is still one of the most stimulating sources of information and speculation.**

The interview is based on a conversation in North-London, August, 2007.

Shumon Basar, Stephan Trüby (Hg.): *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp. Paintings/Postcards/Objects/Games*, London 2008.

Shumon Basar, Hans-Jürgen Commerell, Kristin Feireiss, Stephan Trüby (Hg.): *Madelon Vriesendorp: Flagrant Délit Or Dream of Liberty*, Berlin 2008.

Jean-Pierre Jacquet, Madelon Vriesendorp, Teri Wehn-Damisch: *Flagrant Délit. The Dream of Liberty*, Animation, 35mm, Farbe, 10 Minuten, FR 1979–80.

Rem Koolhaas: *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, New York, Paris 1978.





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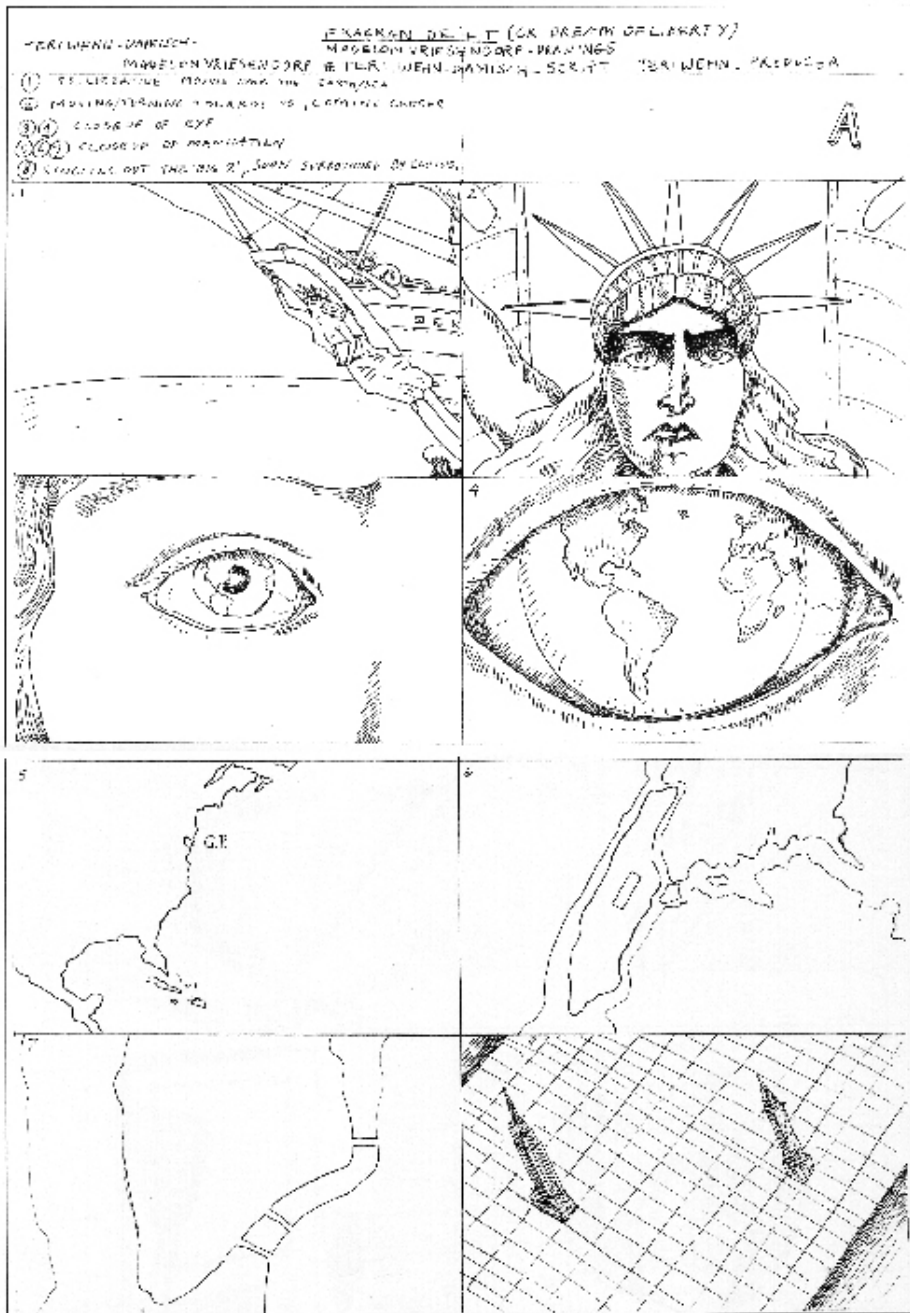


04

01 Eine von zwei nach Größen geordnete Zusammenstellung der Miniatur-Architekturen und Figuren.

02 Detail aus der Sammlung von Objekten im Wohnatelier von Madelon Vriesendorp.

03-04 Präsentation der Sammlung von Madelon Vriesendorp in der Ausstellung *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp. Paintings/Postcards/Objects/Games* in der Architekturgalerie Aedes am Pfefferberg, Berlin, 14.03. – 17.04.2008.



05 Ausschnitt aus dem Storyboard des Animationsfilms *Flagrant Délit or the Dream of Liberty* für das französische Fernsehen, 1979-80.

