

**Conversation between Malin Pettersson Öberg and Malin Zimm
Index, Stockholm, 23 augusti 2017**

...

(Axel Wieder's recording. Malin Zimm's first statement/question – not recorded)

MP

For me, the theme of this exhibition was really interesting and enticing. Both the title, *The Promise*, and the fact that it dealt with public space and the city – for me that has been a theme through several works. I'm interested in looking at what a city is, or how the built environment is shaped by us, but also how it shapes us back in return and constrains our lives and habits. So for me, the chance to make a work about Stockholm – my hometown since twenty years – was really an interesting opportunity.

The way I came across the archive was that I had made this previous film about glass, in another archive. I was tipped about the model archive by a friend who works at the city's building office, or at the Urban Planning Department. The title of the show – *The Promise* – made me think of the promise made by modernism maybe, and by social engineering, to improve people's lives through the built environment.

Then I thought about this place, the model archive, as a kind of potential place where new ideas or critiques of the existing city could take place. It could function as a starting point for new versions of the city. because it is like a "mini-version" of Stockholm, with movable parts (you could move around these models around). It is like a chamber or container of different visions of Stockholm: both ones that are not existing anymore, and those who are still there in the city. Basically it gives a potential that we can try out new versions of the city and be critical, but also dream, which is something I refer to in my film; the possibility of dreaming or visions, when you have models in front of you.

MZ

A model is precisely a sort of structural dreaming – it holds the potential of being realized. It just will stay in that state of holding potentials. Also, in preparation of this talk, I always do one thing when there is a very particular issue. I always look at the etymology of words – I'm such a nerd. One of my most visited websites is Etymology Online. Visiting the word *archive* and looking further down the line and roots of the word, I found some surprising and yet also contradictory meanings. If you look for "arche", in a greek traditional sense, it means "beginning", "origin" and "first place". Somehow, in another depth of the etymology, it also means "last place". It equally has elements of "governance" or "government" to it, "arche" being one of the nine pillars of the roman or antique government of a city. Could you in your work relate to any or all of these meanings? How would you relate to the question of a first or last place – the archive being either or?

MP

For me maybe the archive as a "first place" is connected to this idea of potentiality. That it could be a beginning or a starting point for new visions or ideas about the city, or a criticality. As these models are small and moveable, they give me the impression of a tool box to create new versions – that there are possibilities. That is what I first thought about when you asked me the question, but I didn't really know about these contradictory meanings of the word, coming back to the origin.

ML

Speaking of form and also about method – we have, or there are, explanations for most of your works, or films. I think you call them essay films – "essäfilmer"? I also love the idea of the the essay, it means "försök" actually, and in terms of trying out things or searching the tool box, you have consistently worked on the "panning" – do you have any thoughts to share about your methods and forms, in terms of the visual language of your work?

MZ

Yes. Hopefully some of you, or perhaps all of you, have now had the chance to see the film. I chose to do these slow panning along the shelves of the archive, in order to reveal the space bit by bit, slowly. To keep it intriguing in that sense, that we don't really know – also because of the confusion of scale - that we don't know if we are looking at a real city or a model. So the idea with these close-ups basically, are to confuse the viewer of whether it is a real city or model. Also, as you mention, I have worked a lot with the essay as a format and with

weaving together fragments; image fragments and text fragments. In this film, for instance, it is the takes along the shelves, through the corridors and workshops, and the black gaps in between which are the visual fragments. And then the voice fragments or written fragments are references or chapters you can say, referring to different sources or writers who wrote about the city, the model, and different other aspects that comes into the film.

MZ

I understand that this production is made during a quite focused or short time – only a few months perhaps – and yet it is a very meditative and slow experience for the viewer. You are sort of carried or guided by the voice... In all production you deal with time, but do you deal with time here on a double scale? The pace and time of your work and the pace and time of your narrative production? I mean, the panning in this film are so meditative – you almost pan through the archives of your mind, if you allow yourself to sink into it. And yet the reality behind filmmaking could be quite hectic – am I right?

MP

Yeah, sure. It was made in a short period of time. I started working on it in November and it was finished for the opening at the beginning of June. Which is quite a short time to produce a film, I think. Depending on how you work of course – because I like to do a lot of research. But in this case I decided to portray the archive as it is, in its existing state. Instead of looking too much into specific models, I decided to use the space as it was and make a portrait of the space itself. And the slowness for me is a way to create a focus, or a meditative state for the viewer to perceive the work. Also because the text is quite dense – the voice-over contains quite a lot of information and references. So it gives itself naturally I think, that the image material is quite simple or repetitive, while the story is dense and you need to listen to it. But maybe that is not how you perceive it.

MZ

Time as being the essence of both motion and change, all film making brings time to the forefront of the work – you need to relate to it. You have also, with the panning and the meditative state, taken things even further that that in your previous works, in the form of the "tableau" where everything almost comes to a complete stillness. Is that right?

MP

Experimenting I guess, in different works, with idea of motion and stillness. The differences between still images and photography (I'm coming from painting, and then from photography). So, for instance, in the work filmed in Japan, in the Fukushima region, that Axel mentioned earlier, I also portray built environments: struck by the tsunami and radiation from the nuclear accident. There, I filmed more like "tableaux" or still images, also to illustrate how this invisible radiation sort of made time stop in these abandoned places. In another earlier film, Everyday Archives, you see paper documents moved over a table. It is a bit like a manual slide-show, or a very simple form of movement or of displaying images or material to a viewer. I am kind of interested in film as a medium, or the basics of it, of movement. Also maybe to illustrate time passing, or change, through these very slow continuous movements going on throughout this film, and also throughout the glass film.

MZ

Could we also explore the model as a mode of representation, and also as an aspect of time. The model as an artifact could either be a vision of something that is to be, or that for some reason will never be, or it could be a representation of something that is already there. We see examples of both. It also holds the potential of repetition; how certain scale models can be repeated and sold, reproduced as a particular part of the city. So the model is an artifact that illustrates time, in a sort of present and future tense. All those time-aspects are embedded in that artifact. How have you been thinking in relationship between time and the model?

MP

One thing I came to think about now when we were discussing this, was this aspect of what we choose to save and not. We talked about it on the phone the other day. The ones of you who were not there during the archive visit might need to know a bit more, for instance that they made a big cleaning six years ago when they emptied and threw away one entire space of models. About twenty tons of models.

MZ

Two thirds of the archive.

MP

Yes. It was mainly models of buildings – like proposals for competitions, things that don't exist anymore. So it is also interesting maybe to think about why we keep certain things. Why keep the city that is already there, and not the city that could have been? The proposals that were actually not built. That is maybe one interesting aspect, out of many, that we could talk about. I'm someone really interested in history, and kind of in preserving everything – I have this very emotional relationship to archives and objects, collecting. And I think it is much more of a political act, of resistance against void and oblivion. The archive represents an important function of bringing knowledge about our past, about ourselves. Archiving and collecting is something that I think about a lot, and have worked on in many of my works, almost all of them. There are many interesting aspects of archiving: celebrating what is shortlived and disappears, etc. I mean, there are many examples.

MZ

You mentioned the responsibility, and of course it is scary that we are exposed to the whims and ideas of a handfull of people currently working in this office, to decide whether to keep this past or not. Thirty containers of past! Stadsmuseet (The Stockholm City Museum) had the chance to make their selection from the material, but still it is a breathtaking feeling of loss. Even if I don't have a clue what has been lost, but if not, it is a lot of work. It is one loss in a long line of craftsmanships in making plaster models. Here we go – twenty tons later, but not a lot wiser. So there is of course a responsibility connected to the archive as an idea. And here is a nice connection to the name of the exhibition at Index – The Promise – a promise is also a sort of binding contract. I was wondering – how, as we're sitting here in this room, and your work is placed in the short side of this room – have you had a chance to think about the ensemble of works, of how your work is relating to other works or is being a part of The Promise?

MP

Yes, a little bit – I have been very focused on producing my own piece for the exhibition, of course. But I think it is interesting to bring in different aspects on the city like this. To try out bringing together these archive materials and protest documents, these sculptures that we see over here, some films – to open up different ways of how to relate to, and comment, on the city in different shape and forms. I don't think we need to see them as colliding – it is different practices, and angles. There has been many programmes taking place, that have seemed very interesting. Unfortunately I could not take part in many of them.

I would like to say something more about the previous question, when we talked about the archive. Harri Anttila, who showed us the archive, has been working there for nearly thirty years, longer than anyone else (at present). He said he thought that this cleaning or "throwing out", relates a lot to single people, or who is the chief at a certain moment (as you also mentioned). There was the chief architect of Stockholm earlier, for two periods, who was really interested in history, writing, literature, filmmaking, etc. and under him everything was kept. Then when they at one point changed chief, this decision to throw out all of these models was taken. So, as you mentioned, it is very fragile what we keep, what we look upon as knowledge, etc.

MZ

The natural reading of your work is perhaps that there is a sort of critique against modernism and contemporary architecture. And I think that your work is, at the same time, very healthily void of nostalgia, at the same time. Am I right in that – that there is no real polemic, no ambition at stirring a debate on modernism in this work?

MP

No, not really. I'm not really for or against anything in the film, as I see it. I am more using my experience of living in Stockholm – I mean, it has always been a problematic feeling or experience of how the city is planned and built. I use this reference in the film to Ola Andersson and his book *Vykort från Utopia* (Postcards from Utopia), for instance, where he criticises the modernist city planning and reconstruction of Stockholm. Maybe I'm also polarizing and speculating sometimes in the film, because it is part of how to make a point or tell a story. But I'm neither for nor against modernism. Actually I'm really fascinated with modernism, and have been looking at many buildings by for instance Le Corbusier. I'm really fascinated with the social and collective visions, the utopian and nearly romantic aspects of that movement – even though it is often claimed to be falling

back on rational thinking, there are also many other, contradictory, aspects. In the film I refer to Yvonne Hirdman, who lifts these utopian and almost romantic aspects of this project, of building the Swedish welfare state and the People's home. Where they also were going down to the deepest levels of people's lives, trying to regulate them, organise their lives and habits. She is criticising this, but she is also – as I interpret her – fascinated with it. And I can relate to that.

MZ

I think of it as a purely essaist form as well. It is not a debate article, it is an essay. You bring in other voices, there is a presence of many voices, quite long quotes at certain times. There is the voice-over which adds another layer to this presence of voices. With this wonderful voice of Helena Lopac, that I fondly listen to every Sunday night, often in "Elektroniskt" in P2. One of my favourite voices! It is rather touching you know, I imagine your work as a form of resistance against oblivion, and of course this text and voices forms this choir, that tries to keep oblivion at bay.

MP

Yeah, for me it has been important in many works to refer to other people's writing, occupation, and ideas, because I think we are all the time relating to what is already there; what others already wrote or did. That it is more like showing, in a generous way, that we are part of a collective mind or knowledge. Instead of trying to profit on other people's work. I never looked upon it like that, I think it is more of a statement that we are dependent on each other and to give credit to what others have done before. Then I work a lot on weaving these works together in a new way: writing scripts myself is a really important part. Bringing in these different associations, both visual and textual, in a new way or order that makes sense to me, at least.

MZ

I think, in your answer just now, I found an answer to a previous question of how your work relates to the rest of the exhibition *The Promise*. These are all nice examples of strategies of how to take care of each other, how to look out for each other. Manifestations of this sort of collective [...]. It sort of brings this together nicely. Also being fond of the order of things, and how things fall into patterns – having taken part of your generous sharing of your work in Vimeo, in preparation I asked if there was a possibility to see your previous film *Reading Glass*, which is very similar to this – it has meditative, slow panning in an archive that seems chaotic but still holds an order among the shelves – maybe it is chronological, or makes sense in another way.

In Vimeo, there is also material that are out-takes, sequences or sketches, that did not make it to the final cut – is that right? I have been snooping around...

MP

Oh, that was maybe a mistake? I mean, sometimes I put up versions that are not ready, for applications and collaborations. But I didn't think they were accessible... (laughters).

MZ

I thought it was a sort of "archive" that I was let into, things that didn't make it through to the real thing – I'm sorry!

MP

No no no, don't worry. It is probably true – a bit off the track: there are maybe some working versions still up, that I should remove.

MZ

All this snooping around of mine, will lead me to my final question. As it would be nice to have time to open up for questions from the audience. Having seen *Reading Glass*, and now *Modellarkivet*, do you have plans to complete this as a kind of series in your future projects?

MP

Mmm, that is a nice question. It could be a possibility, of course. But I have more been thinking of – actually, all my works deal with lists, archives, or inventories in different ways. It is a bit of a coincidence that both of these two films portray archive spaces – I don't think I will make a third film portraying an archive space... It might be a bit silly (laughters).

MZ

But what if something like that comes your way?!

MP

That is possible. I am often very amazed by archive environments – I'm sure many of us are, today. The chaotic, a bit disorganized, behind the scenes-environments, that we are not supposed to see, are always, of different reasons, alluring. But what I want to do next – I'm digging into the "archive theme" in different ways. For example, I am part of a project organized by a curator called Sara Rossling, who is here tonight. It is also about an archive, in Dalarna, collected by Otilia Adelborg around the turn of the last century... Shortly, I want to look more into what an archive is and could be, what the act of collecting or archiving is, which is not new of course, but where I want to interrogate how artists are dealing with archives. So that is my next "dream project".

MZ

So it is kind of a meta-theme of other artists looking at archives?

MP

And my self (laughters).

MZ

And yourself looking at archives. Thank you Malin for sharing your thoughts and showing all of this.

MP

You're welcome, thank you. I wanted to add one thing as I'm afraid I forgot to say many things. For me, the title and idea of a promise – I mean, what kind of promise? – and the idea of dreaming and visions that I think exist in modernism and modernist city planning, and that I think that this place – the archive – really has, I mean this possibility of dreaming and envisioning new scenarios, alternative scenarios, this potential is what I find most interesting both with modernism, the model archive, and the theme of this exhibition. But now the questions!

MZ

It does not have to be questions, it can be relations, to share personal favourites of an archive... For me, a podcast that I found and listen to, is about the seed archive, in some kind of architec (?) location. That to me would be amazing! But maybe it is better in my head actually, than in real. The real archive would just be containers with liquid ice, and you would not see the actual seeds. But that archive in my head is an amazing film, I tell you!

Question from the audience:

I think it is in Norway, the seed archive? I don't have the reference in mind, but I was in Tallin and there was an exhibition of photographs from the underground of the archive. And it is probably as you imagined it.

MZ

There is an apocalyptic quality to that as well, as if you are preparing yourself for a demise... Archives do have that effect, you know. I don't know why they are so popular among architects? Architects are crazy for archives.

MP

Artists too (laughters). It is not only me.

Question from the audience (Peter Lang):

It was a really nice talk. You are really articulating this whole problem really nicely. This is not my question, but something at the back of my head. My older brother lives in the U.S., and when he had to move house, between New Jersey and North Carolina, he had to hire a specialist to throw out a good quantity of his stuff. There are specialists that you can hire, who will throw things out of your house. He and his wife could not do it – they were unable to clear out their "junk" or however you refer to it. It is really a serious problem, and it is a profession now, that you can have a career clearing out people's junk.

Anyway. Some of your work reminds me of aforisms. I have recently been re-referring back to Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, and there is something really beautiful about a philosophy made – a material philosophy made – without really having to relate, concretely, one idea to the next. That "randomness" I get out of your work, especially in this one, where it is arbitrary how one model fits to the next, there is no rhyme or reason...

MP

True – he is also one of my references in the film. I really love *The Arcades' Project*, among many of Benjamin's works. It is a great work of fragments, and an unfinished work. This idea of the moldability of what is not finished – of what opens up to interpretations from the audience, from the viewer. I really like that way of not being didactic, not trying to illustrate a message, a political message. Or maybe it does on some level anyway, I don't know, but I find this interesting. Malin, perhaps you can answer this in another way?

MZ

Yeah, I like it of course – I feel so related. For every quote I read in Malin's work – Gaston Bachelard, for example, – I feel so at home in that realm of thinking. It is all this idea of obviously something that is truly layered. That things are enchanted and make us talk in different ways. It came up during the visit to the actual archive; an architect friend of mine, a colleague, said that models are actually made to make us talk with each other. And it works, right? Even if we are numb or lacking of words in front of something that is presented – it might be a drawing – architects need to get things through to other people, to the city and the decision making, and it has to start somewhere, in a sort of representation. Somehow when things leave the paper and stand up as volumes, they make us talk – how is that? It is amazing. Speaking with Benjamin – if anyone could make things talk, it was through his *Passagen-werk*.

MP

The three-dimensional experience maybe, or environment. I mean it is because we have bodies and we experience these environments through our bodies. That we can walk around in a city – for example in the *passages* in Paris. In the *Arcades Project*, that experience – of having a body and move around in a city – is really described.

MZ

It is also a question of scale, through the model. How you relate to the model depends on what scale it has. It is quite a big deal actually, to put your body at a certain angle and look through the streets and landscape of the model. You see how things stand out, how streets disappear, or trees are tall in relation to buildings – it is a physical experience. Whereas it is just in scale 1:200. Then you can lose that sense, that physical relationship, again when it becomes too abstract. When a model becomes too large, it almost turns back to a two-dimensional sensation, sort of loses its volume magic.

MP

Now we started talking again – perhaps we should open up for questions. What time is it, Axel?

Axel Wieder:

No worries, we can speak for another few minutes. We spoke now about the archive and purposes: I am not sure if you during the tour also went by this little exhibition and presentation space? It is one of the larger purposes of models that are built nowadays, by the city, for public building projects. Like a public discourse, really binding or required in a process of participation. In a way I really agree with this fascination of models as something where people meet and discuss about either visions or possibilities of space. I have actually made some of my research in the past about models, or these kind of situations with exhibitions where models become important points of a public negotiation about space and architecture. There was a very important

exhibition in Milano where they built an arena, one of the triennals I think in 1964, there was a scale model of a newly built part of Milano exhibited. In Berlin, the Stalin Allée, there was an exhibition space where people could participate in the construction and envisioning of Stalin Allée (of all places), and so on.

There a sort of legacy of these kind of representations, where for me, maybe also being engaged with exhibitions and temporary representations of objects in a space, and an active, forward looking, productive process of envisioning the future together. Exhibitions that really have a purpose. But now what often happens with participation is that it turns into a more forced process of inclusion, which could be useful but becomes just a tool to legitimize planning in a more efficient way, really. So there is also a kind of ambivalence to participation, as something that has an important tradition of democratizing decision-making in the public realm, that now becomes more of a technocratic tool in a way, which is still helping or reinforcing the top-to-down decisions. Did you discuss the purposes for the models just now [during the tour], or was it something you thought about while making the film? The contemporary purposes of the models as we see them in the archive?

MP

We didn't talk about it that much now, during the visit. But it is something that I have thought a lot about, and agree with. I think it is a lot instrumentalized today. This process of involving people and letting them see and be part of decision-making, is often more "made" – that is not really where the decisions happen or take place, anyway.

MZ

I was thinking of an anecdote. Architects sometimes submit models that are not accurate to scale. So when they get the models from the architects, they sort of measure them as a "second assessment". They must reveal where the architect has been a bit too dreamy concerning their own modeling and scale... Then they put out a second model, in the accurate scale, so they don't let that come out. I thought that was kind of sweet... as an anecdote.

MP

I also thought of the act of responsibility when it comes to city planning. To looking at models and using models to envision the *real* city, or how an environment will be to live in. That is something that modernist city planning had problems with – this possibility to look at things from above, zoom out and make patterns... and then it is a horrible environment maybe to live in, sometimes. Because it is planned on another scale. Or, to try envision how it will be to live in these beautifully shaped patterns of large apartment blocks... this is also an interesting aspect of models.

MZ

Being an architect though, I think it is slightly harder to lie in the shape of a model. Of course you can make a model appetizing – you can smash on materials, make the trees greener and more majestic, and so on. You can do the set design and achieve something very appetizing. As opposed maybe to visualization, where there is a larger potential for lies: of scale shifts etc. You can put more lies into twodimensional visualizations than you could into a model, I think. The model guarantees a more objective representation than what you can get otherwise.

MP

Yeah, and we also talked during the visit about how we still need threedimensional models, to look at and discuss together. When I started visiting the archive I thought that digital versions will take over, or 3D environments will take over so quickly – maybe they already did. But actually, to experience built environments in 3D – in virtual reality for example – is still not a technique where you can share experiences and discuss them as a group. Or maybe I'm lying now, is there any expert on this here?

Question from the audience (Hiroko Tsuchimoto):

Maybe they are using 3D printers now, and it brings another aesthetics and experience? Too perfect?

MP

Yes, it is different.

MZ

But it was reassuring to hear how they told us about it. He was pretty proud I guess, to deliver the message that models are not outdated. Look around, I mean – there is 3D technique and has been for a long time, but models are still around.

MP

Yeah, the model unit just hired a new model maker. It is not every day that they do it, of course, but still...

Axel Wieder:

Anybody with an urgent question? Otherwise I just wanted to mention this folding display by the Slussen Research Group, where there is a selection of quite hilarious fake renderings of future scenarios of Slussen. They deconstructed in a way to make visible where the lies are, what is actually possible, and how these images are made to represent private images for building projects that are very realistic. They kind of prove this kind of "lying" that images produce... (laughters).

Thank you very much for this enlightning conversation, and thank you everyone for coming!