

# OVERGADEN.

In two installations Thorbjørn Bechmann and Sofie Thorsen put focus on the aesthetic and social potential of the historical play sculpture.

ESSAY

## Secrets of the Play Sculpture

By Christine Buhl Andersen

Like journalists without headlines or news triangles, detectives without crimes, or perhaps like scientific sociologists without hypotheses or footnotes. This is how one might tentatively begin to construct an image of the *modus operandi* of the artists Sofie Thorsen and Thorbjørn Bechmann – investigative and documentary, but within the genre of art, which both permits and demands a freer form and method, in both its research and its output, than the genre conventions of science or journalism would dictate. In their field of research, they share an interest in modernity: its history, logic and values. On the basis of aesthetic phenomena and objects, typically drawn from architecture and art, they both make enquiries into more abstract entities, such as ‘utopia’. In this exhibition at Overgaden, their paths cross through a common interest in an aesthetic phenomenon from the 20th century public space: the public play sculpture.

The playground, as form and social arena, has been explored by artists in many different contexts in the 20th century. An example was Tivoli’s now demolished artist playground *Tivolaj*, which was created in 1958 by Henry Heerup, Gunnar Westmann and the Swedish sculptor Thorsten Johansson, among others, as a haven for children. “The world’s most wondrous playground”, as the newspapers wrote. In 1968, Moderna Museet in Stockholm provided the institutional backdrop for Danish artist Palle Nielsen to transform the museum into a large adventure playground in which everything from record players, saws, paint and planks could be freely used – a picture of a social utopia which was given the name *Modellen*. At Overgaden, both Sofie Thorsen and Thorbjørn Bechmann are showing installations which, each in their own way, explore the content of related art projects from postwar Europe.

Sofie Thorsen’s installation *Figurer* is based on historical play sculptures, originally designed in a programme for art in public spaces in Vienna in the 1950s as part of the postwar focus on rebuilding the city. While the remainder of the programme of public art in Vienna at that time was somewhat reserved in its attitude towards modern abstract art, it was obviously an acceptable idiom for play sculptures; perhaps because the play sculptures, being both sculptures and functional objects of use, were perceived as being less important art, for children. The artist behind these sculptures was Josef



Thorbjørn Bechmann: *IG 383* (video still), 2011

Seebacher, but his name was concealed behind the reference to the industrial playground manufacturer responsible for the production, and the existing documentation is limited. It consists primarily of black and white photographs, which Thorsen uses and refines in several variations in the work series *Spielplastiken* (2010- ), of which the installation at Overgaden is a part.

In this latest version, Seebacher has been placed in an international context, alongside the play sculptures and playgrounds of other avant-garde artists. These include Egon Møller Nielsen’s playground sculptures from the early fifties, Aldo van Eyck’s playgrounds for Amsterdam from the same period, and Isamu Noguchi’s proposed playground for the UN building in New York, from 1952. Photographs of the sculpture projects have been printed out on paper and cut out in the same scale, then placed on a number of poles, so that the two-dimensional archive images acquire new three-dimensional life as they wind around the poles. The poles themselves are quotations from the original playground sculptures, and their colours are determined by a system appropriated from Isamu Noguchi’s playground colour gamut. Overall, the installation has the appearance of a fragile, sculptural picture archive that mimics and transforms the history, nature and function of the sculptures and their interplay with the human body, by which means they point to fascinating but obsolete utopias from postwar Europe.

In parallel with this, Thorbjørn

were located in Høje Gladsaxe, and others in Skodsborg on a lawn beside Strandvejen at the City of Copenhagen Observation Children’s Home, where Bechmann found it many years later. It stood alone beneath some trees, full of dirty water and completely unused, quite unlike a model picture in which you see children climb in and out of it – a photograph that Geertsen himself staged with a group of children and a photographer. Now, many years later, Bechmann raises questions about the potential of *IG 383* for stimulating children’s development, and, with a lattice, he points to the concept of ‘self-development’ or ‘self-teaching’. The lattice was designed by inmates of Vridsløselille State Prison, where Bechmann held an art workshop in 2011. For Bechmann, it is an expression of an artistic learning process which the prisoners themselves have created. As though wandering around Bechmann’s mind-mapping chart, we are on the trail of contexts here which the artist merely implies or suggests to us. Through a sampled video clip from the Internet, showing a schoolgirl who makes her grammar teacher furious by refusing to respond to his hard form of address, Bechmann presents a rebellion against the authority-based learning principle. Other references point to the cradle of modern democracy, including via an allusion to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile*, a novel about free and natural upbringing which constituted an important contribution to the philosophy of enlightenment that inspired the French Revolution.

At the exhibition, the two artists, from their separate standpoints, take us back in time along interwoven pathways of art, architecture and social history to the utopian social space in which these play objects were created, when the ideals

that surrounded them were still intact and stood proudly like avant-garde historical highlights. Forgotten material is brought up to the surface, dissected, presented and retold in new form. This is done with both the artistic subjectivity and the historical experience that overlays it – including a simultaneously critical and fond awareness of the later failure of the embedded dreams and utopias.

By highlighting historical projects, however, Thorsen and Bechmann lead us not only back to what is lost, but also right into our own time, when an interest in the public space and a renewed faith in the potential of art to contribute to improving human life in the common social sphere have become dominant; perhaps no longer driven as an artistic avant-garde project, one might argue, but clearly still an attractive field for investors, politicians and architects, for example, in connection with city development: urban renewal, urban spaces for playing and relaxation, oases for cyclists, skateboarders and pedestrians, for people of all social groups and ages. The ideals seem sensible and humane – surely art must have a role to play! But what did we really bring here with us from the 20th century, and what did we throw away? This is also a question that Bechmann and Thorsen raise, with their focus on the historical and now often forgotten play sculptures – not just from a rational perspective on art as social saviour, but also on the basis of art’s own logic, in which some discarded aesthetic remnants of a bygone era seem to possess potential and to have something they wish to say to us.

Christine Buhl Andersen is director of the KØS Museum of art in public spaces.



Sofie Thorsen: *Spielplastiken*, 2012. Photo: Viktor Kolibál. Courtesy Krobath Wien | Berlin

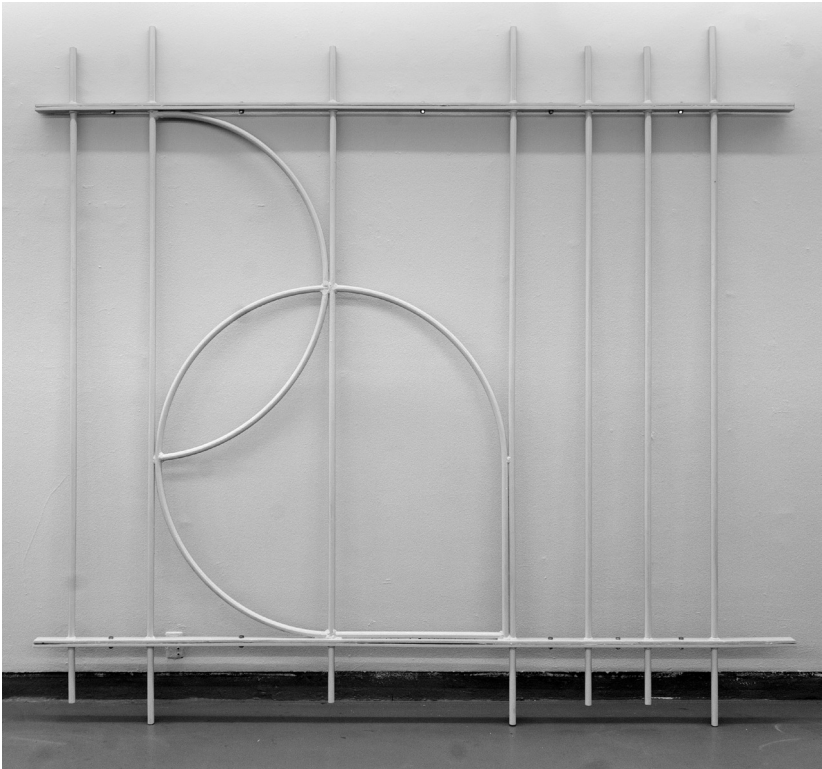


By Merete Jankowski, Overgaden

**Merete Jankowski** In your description of the thematic foundation of your exhibition, *IG 383 and the Play Sculptures*, you have said that “The 20th century began with futuristic utopias and dreams of endless progress, and ended with nostalgia and simulations. The 21st century cannot take refuge in any of these” – can you expand on what you meant by that?

**Thorbjørn Bechmann** For me, the sentences you quote point to something fundamental in the way we act, and the thoughts we have about our own time. I think it was Jean Cocteau who said: “The young people visiting our ruins see nothing but a style”. In the same way, I believe that at the end of the last century, people had a tendency to look at the modern through the filter of nostalgia and simulation. And let’s face it: nostalgia and simulation are about the appearance of things, not their meaning. When I focus on Ib Geertsen, it is in an attempt to understand not only his motives, but also the functions and dreams that are embedded in his works to this day, such as in the climbing sculpture *IG 383*. It is not a dream about reproducing what is cool and modern, but an attempt to create new frameworks for understanding a particular type of practice.

**Sofie Thorsen** I think my interest in play sculptures began in a slightly different and in a way more modest place, in a very local situation in postwar Vienna: a period which was extremely dystopian and dark, and in which the utopias of the early 20th century certainly held little significance. In this period of rebuilding, characterised by pragmatism, the city’s biggest building contractor, namely the municipality itself, instituted a comprehensive programme to create art in public spaces. This was partly done out of a desire to create the possibility of identification for residents of public housing, and partly in order to support the artists. Today, the city is still full of these works, which are of very variable quality, and have in many ways been unloved and neglected until relatively recent-



Thorbjørn Bechmann, *Untitled*, 2011

ly. While working on a number of these works, I encountered some play sculptures which today have largely vanished. And in this niche between free sculpture and design for children there seem to have been some other possibilities for the artists. If you compare the Austrian sculptures with international examples, you find striking similarities. I assume that the Austrian sculptures were based on the same ideas about new types of play, and about an art that can be useful, that also underlie well-known examples such as Egon Møller Nielsen’s highly-publicised play sculptures *Ågget* and *Tuffsen*. This is however difficult to prove, as there is virtually nothing other than pictures left of these Viennese sculptures, so it’s not easy to figure out how internationally-oriented the artists were in the very closed-off Viennese art scene of the postwar period. One of my aims with the installation in this exhibition has been to place the local sculptures in the international context of which they are a part.

**MJ** As you mentioned, you both explore artistic practices that have been part of an overall political-ideological project – whether in connection with, as you said, Sofie, postwar reconstruction needs and the need to build social cohesion in the German-speaking countries, or in the art of Ib Geertsen, which one might say was closely associat-

ed with the building up of the social democratic welfare state in Denmark, with his many commissions for schools, hospitals and other public buildings. In your exhibition, you bring the study of these artistic practices into Overgaden’s quite conventional white cube. What happens when art that was created for public spaces, as part of a particular political and ideological project, is examined in the artistic space? As you mentioned, Sofie, there has been a major focus on creating an international context in this field in recent years, with many exhibitions of artist playgrounds, such as at KØS in Køge and Frankfurter Kunstverein, and recently at MoMA in New York.

**TB** It is hard to imagine that anyone today can take a position that is not sceptical or uncritical in relationship to the optimistic, more or less naive, utopias of the last century. But when I draw aspects of the physical manifestations of past ideological positions into the artistic space, it nonetheless becomes possible to articulate some ideas about other ways of being together. So it is not just a critique of certain positions, but also a way of creating a platform to articulate dreams of something different. In this way, Overgaden’s white cube becomes a space in which something can hopefully happen which lies in extension of the ideas embedded in *IG 383*.



Sofie Thorsen: *Spielplastiken*, 2012. Photo: Nikolas Lackner. Courtesy Krobath Wien | Berlin

Not a critique, but something new, something else.

**ST** Moving the consideration of a phenomenon as playground art into an exhibition space creates a distance, which is important for my project, because I’m not so interested in reconstructing the original intention. This is historical material. It is important that my installations have a built-in fragility, which produces a distance to the viewer that is quite different to the very direct contact with the body that the original sculptures inherently possessed, while the material underlying the work is presented and is directly accessible. I am convinced that this material is relevant to look at, and that what it originally meant reverberates even in our own time.

**MJ** To what extent is the current exhibition an extension of your individual practice? And how did you get onto the trail of the works that you are presenting here?

**TB** Much of my practice stems from an educational environment. I am interested in the learning that takes place in artistic communities of practice, and in the objects and situations that drive it. It is an interest that has grown over the years, while at the same time it has shifted focus from the concrete and didactic to the question of how a teaching space can be set free, so that learning becomes self-teaching without authorities. And with this shift in interest, some experiences and works of art that I have

encountered earlier have suddenly acquired a new meaning. I have had to reassess my encounter with Ib Geertsen and his climbing sculpture, and rethink its importance. This exhibition is the result of my thoughts in this connection. It is the synthesis of a long series of meetings with texts, objects and situations, all of which have had some connection with learning and self-teaching. Not that it is a concluded process. My art is not an autonomous zone. It does not create structures that are exceptional or which need to be perceived outside of their own context, but I try to establish a sequence of issues that relate to a specific field.

**ST** In earlier works, I have worked with historical photographs of now vanished urban phenomena. My installation for this exhibition represents the continuation of a number of other projects that were originally based on postwar art in the public space, but the photographs have also greatly interested me in this context. I am interested in this material for its pictorial content, but also, and to an equal extent, as material that can be processed. In the documentation of these play sculptures, what I am curious about is the transformation from one form of sculpture to a photograph to another form of sculpture. So I see the installation as a art work, but perhaps also as an archive or a means of accessing documentary material.

CV

**Thorbjørn Bechmann** (b. 1966) graduated from the Royal Danish Art Academy of Fine Arts in 1994. He has had a number of solo exhibitions, most recently *Kuomiko projektet* at DAMP Gallery, Copenhagen, 2012, and *IG 383 og Vridsløselille Sessionerne* at Gallery Tom Christoffersen, Copenhagen, 2011. Furthermore his work has been included in several group exhibitions in Denmark and abroad, among these *Tasted Shapes* at Budapest Galleria, 2012, and *A need for Reason* at Rohde Contemporary, Copenhagen, 2011. In 2013 he is participating in Moscow Outreach and in a group exhibition at 25cpw in New York. Thorbjørn Bechmann lives in Copenhagen.

**Sofie Thorsen** (b. 1971) is educated at the Royal Danish Art Academy of Fine Arts and Akademie der bildende Künste in Vienna in the period 1995-2001. She has had several solo exhibitions, among others *Schnitt A-A'* at Kunsthaus Graz and Kunsthaus Baselland, 2012, *Habitat* at Kunstverein Düsseldorf, 2011, and *The Colourless Island* at The Aarhus Art Building, 2009. Additionally she has participated in numerous group exhibitions, for instance at 21er Haus, Wien, 2011; Kunsthallen Brandts, Odense, 2011; Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 2010/2012, and at Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, 2010. At Overgaden she has previously participated in the group exhibitions *Models of Resistance*, 2000, *Ude og hjemme*, 2005, and *Overdragelser*, 2008. Thorsen has published several catalogues, most recently *Schnitt A-A'* from 2012, and in 2011 she was the recipient of the Danish Art Council’s 3-year grant. Sofie Thorsen lives in Vienna.

GUIDED TOURS

**Sunday 17 February and Sunday 17 March at 3pm** Overgaden invites you to a guided tour of the current exhibitions. Afterwards we will serve coffee and cake. The events will be in Danish.

CONVERSATION

**Thursday 14 March at 6.30pm** Thorbjørn Bechmann and Sofie Thorsen hold a conversation about artist playgrounds in the public space. In the company of artist Palle Nielsen and art historian Louise Banke Kristensen they will discuss what role art plays today in the development of urban space with reference to the social utopias of Modernism. The event will be in Danish.

LECTURE

**Thursday 4 April at 6.30pm** Lars Bang Larsen will, based on his book *The Model* from 2010, talk about Palle Nielsen’s art work *Modellen. En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle*, which was shown at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1968. The event will be in Danish.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

**Friday 19 April 2013** Overgaden presents the exhibition *Menneskejagt* by the French filmmakers Nicolas Klotz and Elizabeth Perceval. The project is realised in collaboration with CPH PIX and the day of the exhibition is 9 June 2013. Concurrently, Overgaden has dedicated the top storey to a number of brief projects and longer events that under the title *First Floor* presents aspects of contemporary art that are rarely offered space in the more established institutional contexts.

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Translation: Billy O’Shea

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from [www.overgaden.org](http://www.overgaden.org)



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