ISBN: 155339092X

Keneth Hayes: “Hopscotch” (ex. Catalogue) Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Gallery, 2007.

Frank Lloyd Wright’s Mother

by Kenneth Hayes

Lyla Rye investigates spatial phenomena through architectural forms. Initially, this work took the form of sculptural constructions conceived as a kind of nomadic gallery architecture, but the birth of her child in 1999 caused something of a break in this practice. After this event, Rye adopted a new medium, video installation, and took her child and her relationship to her child as her primary subjects. This change purged her work of its lingering emblematic or allegorical tendency and rendered it more abstract and relational. Her work is now inscribed with an arc of development determined by her daughter’s growth and Rye’s changing relationship with her. Although the reorganization of her practice aligned the artist with the newly dominant mode of contemporary art production, namely digital video projection, her attunement to spatial phenomena persists as a will to defy projection’s rectangular format and engage the gallery and viewer in new spatial configurations.

In a number of recent works, the artist’s focus on her daughter has been mediated by a large dollhouse that stands in apposite relation to both the child and architectural form. The present work, *Hopscotch*, is Rye’s first major video installation in which the image of her daughter does not appear directly. The familiar dollhouse has also been modified to appear more grid-like and less specifically domestic. This seems to signal a return to the artist’s earlier concerns, but if so, it is with a considerable difference. Instead of offering miniaturized ideal types, the artist now brings to her work a stronger tendency to lay bare the power relations embedded in social structures like the home, gender roles, and games. This is even the case when making a work that apparently expresses a powerful yearning for the liberation of pure formal play.

Like many artists who, in the twentieth century, have explored the art of children[1], Rye is fascinated by the imaginative life of the child, but as a mother she is too aware of its complexity to appropriate it as innocent or idyllic creativity. Indeed, some of her videos focus so acutely on mother-child emotional dynamics that they have been received as both provocative and confrontational. The current work concerns games, which play a clearly important but somewhat obscure role in the cognitive and psychological development of children. As does any other “concerned” parent, Rye wonders what that role is and how it shapes her child, but given the current orientation of her artistic practice, she also considers more generally how games relate to art, since they clearly do.

The game of hopscotch seems benign compared to many others; think, for example, of the alarming lesson in social Darwinism taught by the game musical chairs. Hopscotch is predicated on a kind of hidden code that controls the movement of the players. However simple this code (certain squares are not to be stepped on), it is not explicit in the gridded form of the drawing on the ground, and must be learned or agreed upon by the players. Children seem to have transmitted these rules among themselves at least since the Victorian era. The minor conspiracy embedded in the game makes it the antithesis of an axiomatic structure. Rye's allusion to the game's structure and its aimless expenditure of energy (for her video *Hopscotch* surely doesn't *look* anything like the game) is designed to challenge the reductive, isotropic, and universalizing ambitions of minimal and architectonic sculpture. This playful form of contestation may be how the work comes to have a namesake in Julio Cortázar's famous 1963 reader-determined novel, *Rayuela* (published in English as *Hopscotch* in 1966).

The grid – and, by extension, its great proponent, Modernism – is the obvious target of Rye's critique. It is not, however, the legacy of historical Modernism that Rye protests, but its contemporary resurgence, both as a new orthodoxy in home décor, and more fundamentally as a fantasy of unlimited plasticity. The work consists of a video projection of a gridded, miniature domestic space that functions as the stage for a continuously changing abstract composition of forms. Each of ten somewhat similar modular toys is manipulated with a distinct rhythm and pace in what is essentially a stop-action animation.[2] What emerges is not exactly a clear reference to Modern sculpture, nor is it precisely a simulation of any particular formal system. Instead, it is something like a generalized mélange of Constructivist, De Stijl, and Neo-Concrete motifs. These results are determined in part by the limits of the toy system, and in part by the artist's ability to evoke a history of sculpture installation that runs from Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbaus* to the messy production spaces of Jason Rhoades.

The impact of this work is extended by projecting the horizontal floor plates and the vertical walls of the dollhouse as lines of black and red tape following the rays of the projection. Since the projection collides with a corner of the room, these lines override the ordinance of the gallery space, inducing a mild disorientation. Only a few units of this larger grid are actually filled with the changing projected images, but the extension invites the viewer to fill in the blanks by extrapolating the relentless energy of their formal play.

The understanding of *Hopscotch* benefits from some comparison with the closely related video installation *Project*, presented in 2004 at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto, Scarborough. This work used the same dollhouse, but with two projectors, filling a corner of the gallery so that the vertex that was patently farthest from the viewer appeared to be closest. In this limited respect, the work resembled the corner projections of James Turrell, but in some more distant way it also recalled the mannered marvels of Renaissance perspective. Both *Project* and *Hopscotch* tackle the problem of the corner, and make it the site of a slip. Again, the precedents for this are Modernist ones. Nancy Troy has identified the "problem of the corner" as fundamental to the plastic spatial conception of the De Stijl interior,[3] although there is possibly an earlier reference in Rye's work to the visual subversion of the interior by perspective in the peep-box, like the one built in the seventeenth century by Samuel van Hoogstraten.[4]

The interior tone of *Project* was muted, as it is in the new work, but in it Rye's daughter was visible in full colour through the window openings. The child's diminutive figure was enlarged, in much the same way that the corner was inverted. She may have been banished to the corner (which we know as a traditional place of punishment for children), but instead of being isolated and spatially deprived, she commanded it as a stronghold and base of operations. Secure in this impossible place, the child hovered over the work as a tutelary spirit. At the same time both present and absent, she was like prisoner and warden bound together in one panoptic structure. All the lineaments of the space converged on her partly concealed figure.

The theoretical position occupied by the child corresponds remarkably closely to that of the *architectus* as described by Northrop Frye.[5] The architectus was one of the standard figures in the repertoire of traditional literary works. Found alongside the hero, the vice, or the *senex*, he was usually depicted in antique theatre in the paradoxical person of the "tricky slave." This figure was distinguished by having the closest association with the author, largely because his actions and deportment betrayed the fact that he knew the outcome of the plot. While the architectus may have been imbricated in the narrative just as much as the others, he had the consolation of knowing his fate, and thus projected a sense of superiority to events.

A striking avatar of the architectus can be seen in the series of photographs Bruce Mau made to promote his role in the exhibition *Massive Change*. By staging himself in relation to the model made to plan the arrangement of graphic displays, Mau presents himself not just as a designer (the exhibition was in fact a large collective effort) but also as the looming, disembodied intellect diffused over and above the work.[6] A friend who worked at Mau's office when these images were circulating described the experience of visiting the exhibition as verging on hallucinatory, since he imagined that through all the doors of the gallery he could see Mau's grotesquely enlarged face. These photographs express perfectly the contemporary obsession with the curator as the one who presumes to know and explain arcane or occult matters to us.

Rye's work, more ironic than self-aggrandizing, presents her child as the architectus who both disrupts the house and remakes it in her own image. Obviously, the miniature scale of the dollhouse aids in the child's assumption of this role, and it is abetted in an important way by the fantasy of visual omniscience that is phenomenally embedded in its form. Bisecting a model of a typical or generic wooden house (what Bachelard would have called the oneiric house), and splaying it so that the two halves lie in the same plane, has the effect of multiplying the interior. Each room is seen from two points without either needing to correspond in detail or décor to the other. As is typically the case with wondrous boxes, the dollhouse is more copious than it appears from the exterior. This structure reproduces the subjective interiority that is characteristic of modern bourgeois culture, including its obsessive concern with power in society and security of the self. This is why dollhouses may be experienced as uncanny. For the dollhouse is not a game; it is an organon by which the child tries to reason out the order of the family, thus to learn the truth of society.[7] Through it, the child plays symbolically with the possession of a command that she lacks in real terms, even as she is the absolute centre around which the family's entire domestic setting and economy is constantly adjusted, and even fundamentally constituted.

Hopscotch responds to a particular stage in the necessary detachment between mother and daughter. That is why it could be described on the one hand as a work of weaning, while in another sense it is a work of mourning. In short, it demonstrates mother and daughter's reciprocity in the extended process of parturition.

To make *Hopscotch*, Rye had first to make the rather charged gesture of removing the furniture that had accumulated in her child's dollhouse over a considerable time. Gone are the traces of occupation, the souvenirs of relations, and the gifts and mementos of particular occasions, all of which served to construe the house as a kind of memory palace.[8] In their place, the house is refurbished with a series of abstract compositions made of modular toys that the artist borrowed from her daughter's daycare. As her daughter was away through the day, Rye played with these toys in the house, even using a hand-held light to suggest the passing of days. Her daughter's absence is both the condition of her ability to make this work and its new subject.

If Rye plays at identification with her absent daughter, it is not as mere infantile regression. Instead, the scenario seems to hint significantly at alternatives – a dreamy world of afternoon romance, or a frenetic practice of home-making – faced in the recent past by middle-class women as they approached middle age and their children's departure from the home. Of course, in the middle of the last century, this event would have occurred when the children left for college, while today it likely happens at or before pre-school. On the other hand, the delay in procreation typical in present-day North America often means that women are at roughly the same age now when these events occur as they were in the past, while their children are much younger.

Considered not in terms of class or demographics but as autobiography, the work seems to recall Rye's past as a sculptor, or even to attempt a symbolic recuperation of the artist's early studies in architecture. Thinking about her daughter at this juncture seems to have led Rye to self-reflection and to make a work that captures a point from which it seems possible to see equally the origins of her own ambitions in childhood impulses and the inevitable diminution of those ambitions in life. The personal dimension of this sense of a lost or diminished vocation is countered by the general historical awareness of Modernism's failure to convince the middle-class public of the necessity of precisely the kind of total revision of domestic space enacted here. This is given its particular sense of contemporary urgency by the realization that a kind of market-determined neo-modern plasticism may succeed where the earlier idealist venture failed.[9] Rye's work seems to parallel in strange ways one of the great myths of modern architecture, that of the source of Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural genius in the Froebel blocks that his mother encouraged him to play with while he was a child.[10] Wright's mother claimed to have resolved that he would be an architect even before his birth and urged him in this vocation at every turn. The story of Frank Lloyd Wright's mother can be described as mythic in the full-fledged sense that it answers (in the affirmative, of course) one of the great unanswerable questions posed by Modernism: whether it is environment and experience that determine character. This idea, which can be called Environmental Positivism, haunts the modern imagination and gives a special charge to how we see our children, and especially to the games we urge on them.

In her imitation of child's play, and by evoking the unseen hand of the architectus hovering over the work, Rye reveals that an architectural/archaeological fantasy lurks in the project of developmental psychology. In *Hopscotch*, the architectus is present in a more deeply sublimated form than ever before in Rye's work. It is a weird synthesis of the artist (at a variety of subjective moments), her daughter, and the designers of the toys that fill the screen. In the most objective sense, *Hopscotch* comprises a veritable encyclopedia of contemporary modular children's toys, and functions to commemorate their proliferation at a particular historical moment. It also records the point in life when Rye became acutely aware of them. The work is a meditation on these toys, and not just because it seeks to express their formal possibilities, but because it tries to exhaust them and their mythic power. Over and over again, this class of the toys presents the limits of a modular system as the very condition of an unlimited creativity.[11] They promote the fantasy of a universal fungibility, an infinitely repeatable change without loss or expenditure.

"You can be anything you want" is the ontological message these toys impart. Even as she plays the game, Rye lets us in on her melancholy suspicion that it's just not true. Life is variable but not infinitely plastic; like hopscotch, it takes its fixed and awkward course.

Notes

1. See Jonathan Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
2. Rye's new work reflects the interest in low-tech animation developing among Toronto artists, as evidenced in such work as Peter Bowyer's *Cartoon* (2001-2003) or Kirsten Horton's *Cig2Coke2Tin2Coff2Milk* (2006).
3. Nancy J. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983), p. 46-71

4. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 62. It is worth mentioning the resemblance of Rye's work the Alain Paiement's early installation *Beyond Polders*, as it too had something distinctly Dutch about it.
5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.174.
6. These portrait photographs were made by Kevin van Passen for the *National Post*, which does not preclude seeing them as a construction on Mau's part.
7. Or, as Friedrich Engels put it in the title of his book, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State.*
8. For an analysis of domestic clutter, see Paulette Singley, "Living in a Glass Prism: The Female Figure in Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Architecture," *Critical Matrix: Princeton Journal of Women, Gender and Culture*. 6/2 (1992)
9. One need only watch an evening of television to witness a barrage of images promoting a total plastic revision of life that would have made Mondrian blush at its temerity.
10. See Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).
11. For comparison with Modern design theory, see Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003).