

Hilary Knutson at Contrary Projects

Rachelle Viader Knowles, March 2011

"Remembering Youth" is an interactive sculptural installation comprised of a collection of homemade furniture and soft furnishings, double-scaled to shrink adults back to memories of play-dates and free time. Presented as a reconfigurable assemblage of four wooden IKEA-copied chairs, an afghan blanket and three up-scaled sofa cushions, it is a living room pulled apart, dragged in from the domestic spaces of our collective pasts. The objects present an open invitation for participatory play, a ludic interfaceⁱ offering the potential of cooperative activity, invention, imagination and the possibility that if we work together, good things can be built and fun can be had. The youthful activity of building forts permits the anarchic thrill of taking the (domestic) world apart, the engineering of new structures and the play of living within. In "Remembering Youth", scale acts as the time machine that transports us back in size.

I was introduced to "Remembering Youth" as *the fort*, installed in Hilary Knutson's apartment while still under construction, in a room containing nothing but the artwork. It is fitting that an artwork referencing domestic realms should be first showcased at Contrary Projects, a gallery/soiree, hosted at the Ziemann/Garneau family home. As equally apt as the setting is the time-scale of the Contrary Projects concept: a social one-night event. "Remembering Youth" is a situation waiting to happen, a set of possibilities to be activated, a play to be invented and performed. Like the works of Austrian sculptor Erwin Wurmⁱⁱ, whose everyday objects require a human body to be transformed and performed into readymade artworks, (a twist more physical and haptic than the addition of an R. Mutt signature), so the objects in "Remembering Youth" cry out for playmates. As with all participatory activities, some will join the team and play along and some will lurk, watching the events unfold. One imagines tentative first engagements, some light construction, a leg sticking out or a hint of movement and sound within, or, if particularly fortunate, all may experience the full exuberant theatrics of a complete re-build in progress. Play, after all, is a space for acting out. Hilary Knutson sets the stage for an inter-play between contexts: the play-world of the fort installation, the art-world of Contrary Projects, and the everyday home-world of the Ziemann/Garneau living room.

As an art practice, Knutson's work draws on the sculptural traditions of craft, assemblage, DIY, material engagements with wood and fiber and furniture making, and histories of 'participation' within art. Originating in Dadaist activities in the 1920s, the 'happenings' and myriad experimental practices of the 1960s, through to the proliferation of social practice since the 1990s, 'participation' is now a fully-fledged *ism* in the canon of contemporary art.ⁱⁱⁱ Through her works, Knutson seeks to participate in larger conversations about the role, function and potential for art in the contemporary world. She engages in art about art and brings not just her technical skills as a sculptor and conceptual skills as an artist, but her experience as a curator and director of alternative and artist-run exhibition spaces. Deeply embedded in her work is an interrogation of exhibition practices: a desire to engage multiple publics, a mandate to 'animate' art, a questioning of singular authorship and cultural hierarchy, and a direct challenge to the 'don't touch' norms of traditional display culture. The flat-pack IKEA practicality evident in her work is both critical content and savvy management - if works can't ship with ease in this big country of Canada, opportunities to participate are lost.

Alternative and artist-run exhibition spaces, like play-forts, are inherently shoestring productions, built with a more-with-less, make-do, DIY spirit. Grassroots cultures, like play-forts, are built on an economy of means.

The material and object choices, homey/folksy aesthetic and participatory approach utilized in the work suggest a position resistant to dominant cultures of commodification and consumption. A Google search of ‘play forts’ leads swiftly to an array of fort-building ‘kits’ of considerable expense, clean modern structures that imply a rescue from the humiliating dereliction of the shanty-fort. Inherent within “Remembering Youth” are the fundamental questions of what humans need and what we might dream to build: the ethics and politics of dwelling. The urge to construct a place of safety, a space to defend, starts young and the condition of homelessness is rarely a choice. For most, losing/keeping ones job and losing/keeping ones home are inextricably linked, realities that render the walls between public and private innately paper-thin. In *The New Décor*, a recent exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, curator Ralph Rugoff presents an array of contemporary sculptural works that paint a picture of domestic life and its material culture as “*shaped and influenced by what is happening in the outside world, whether that is civil violence, national politics, or struggles for economic survival*”.^{iv} Sharing a similar sensibility to Knutson, the artists in the exhibition reconfigure and reinvent the domestic sphere to disrupt the status quo of the high/low order of things. Hilary Knutson’s work reminds us that objects have social histories and contain within them a tight grain of social relations and power dynamics. The IKEA chairs presented in Knutson’s installation are themselves indicative of intense contradictions: designer objects for the masses, quality in a flat-pack, pre-built handmade, cheap expensive. The chair itself is a liminal object that sits in a curious midway between the everyday seating of stool and bench, and the regal throne of Kings. What we now see as the most basic stick of furniture was for centuries out of reach, symbolic of wealth, privilege and ultimate power.^v

If viewed as things from the future and not from the past, Knutson’s out of proportion objects become metaphors for the growing, super-sized, extra plump, over stuffed excess-culture that dominates in North America. If bigger is better, can we ever have too much? Hilary Knutson’s installation grants permission to play with structure, and with each other, in the safe-space of the sandbox where we learn to try things out. She reminds us that society, architecture, family and all our institutions, past and future, exist in the shapes and dimensions we collectively build. If we don’t like what we see, the responsibility to dismantle and re-build is ours.

ⁱ Though more commonly used to describe eccentric play interfaces within media art/video gaming, the term non-the-less functions as a descriptor of art works/situations that utilize play as the mode of engagement. The term was introduced at ISEA 2008 by curators Gunalan Nadarajan and Vladimir Todorović. See Mathais Fuchs article *Ludic Interfaces* in “Artists Re:Thinking Games”.

ⁱⁱ In addition to numerous monographs and catalogues exploring the artists work, Erwin Wurm’s website URL is - <http://www.erwinwurm.at>

ⁱⁱⁱ For a greater understanding of the history of participation within art, see “Participation” edited by Claire Bishop, and “The Art of Participation: 1950’s to now”, a SFMOMA exhibition catalogue.

^{iv} Ralph Rugoff ‘curators tour’ video available for view on the Hayward Gallery website: <http://festivalbrazil.southbankcentre.co.uk/new-decor/>

^v I am currently enjoying Bill Bryson’s “At Home: a short history of private life”, a fascinating history of house, home and all it contains.