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Refiguring Expression

21 May 2017

Playing Favorites: Kleinian Object-Relations (with)in Jasper Spicero's *Living Waterway*

Jasper Spicero's *Living Waterway* is a series of wall-mounted and freestanding sculptural objects first exhibited in April, 2017 in New Galerie, Paris. While Spicero employs a diverse array of fabrication approaches, the works are unified in their aesthetic cues—evoking both a clinical, highly curated nostalgia and a nostalgia for the clinical. The psychological bent of the work— with objects in various states of schizoid overinvestment or paranoid neglect— opens onto a larger problematic as to how aesthetics might be reconciled with Kleinian object-relations. Melanie Klein (1882-1960) placed materiality at the center of our psychic lives, grounding her psychoanalytic theories in the objects we encounter, project onto, covet, fear, absorb or reject, beginning with the mother's breast. Klein herself used an aesthetically cohesive collection of toys to stimulate children's imaginations and unpack their phantasies. It's easy to see then, how her work might relate to a contemporary sculptural practice in which heterogeneous found objects are manipulated and suffused with strange affects. There is a correspondence between the early-childhood determinism of Klein's theories of identity formation and the roots of aesthetic preference, which lead artists to make nostalgic work (Tan Lin will be instrumental in linking consumptive modes with creatively productive ones.) Since, in Klein's words, "spatial contiguity often stands for temporal contiguity," we find in Spicero's hinged, linked and telescopic structures a buckling futurity—the sentimentality of programmed obsolescence. His acid-etched emo doodlings evoke psychoanalysis as, in Deleuze

and Guattari's words, a "bizarre sort of box painted with bourgeois motifs," — a baroque surface crowded by the proliferation of universalizing Oedipal models and jargon. (In their present extinction we see that the emo was the later-day involution of psychoanalyst.) And then the inherent paradox of the title *Living Waterway*: can the cleansing mother remain a 'living' mother? (In Klein's world she is so abstract as to be dead.)

Preliminaries 1) On Melanie Klein's Toy-Box (A Paranoid Reading)

Kitsch conceptualist Mike Kelley differentiates the realm of sculpture from the realm of toys based on whether they contribute to or diminish a sense of corporeality. For Kelley, fine-art sculptures usually operate on a human scale and "hold their own power in relation to the viewer." But where toys are concerned, "in the process of projecting mental scenarios onto them, [the viewer] loses sense of themselves physically (75)." In Melanie Klein's pioneering strategy of 'play analysis,' supervised play presents an opportunity to work through a child's bodily anxieties which otherwise remain inaccessibly repressed. One famous example involved a developmentally-delayed four-year-old boy named Dick. Klein picked up two trains, calling them Dick-train' and a 'Daddy-train. Dick rolled the train into the station while Klein narrated, "Dick is going inside of mummy." By verbalizing the young boy's latent fears, Klein was able to convert the "unnamable real" into a "comforting imaginary," thus liberating the boy from his "phantasy-life" within the void of his mother's body (Kristeva 165). The sessions culminated in a pragmatic reaffirmation of Dick's own physicality and agency, a reversal of Kelley's disembodied idea of play.

Although they were often efficacious, Klein's methods still raise a number of questions— including whether she had elucidated Dick's own symbolic equations or imposed her own Oedipal narratives onto his play in an act of creative "countertransference" (143). The field of

marketing is the heavily indebted to psychoanalysis, and in this sense, Klein's approach feels like a miniaturized rebranding effort. One might also wonder how the design of the toy might not facilitate certain prescriptive modes of play.

To address this concern Klein theorizes the aesthetics of her analysis toys in a 1932 text. She writes, "their smallness, their number and their great variety give the child a very wide range of representational play, while their very simplicity enables them to be put to the most varied uses" (Kristeva 49). Klein isolates two somewhat contradictory qualities within her toy-set—1.) its "great variety" or heterogeneity which photographs shows us included lathe-cut, hand-painted persons, animals, trees, gates and vehicles and 2.) the simple/generic quality of the figures—which rendered them versatile sites for projection. The two toy-set qualities are contradictory in that a heterogeneous set cannot be further simplified, whereas a simplistic set is founded on redundancy. In western culture simple is also perceived as 'cute' and cute things are seen as substitutes for children (child-like). Cute is the generally accepted style for a child's play-thing,¹ although at the end of the day a child can play with any object whatsoever, be it radish, coal lump or clothes pin. Additionally, in a field when a person, a phallus, a baby and a turd are all equated because of their vertical orientation (the lowest common formal denominator), by comparison Melanie's dolls are not simple but elaborately detailed. (The dogs are spotted, the trees are coniferous and some figures even have buttons running down their jackets.) Perhaps then, their "simplicity" is derived not purely aesthetically but also from their limited functionality. Besides the wheels of the vehicles, each toy is hewn from a single piece, i.e. there

¹ Simple figures also correspond with the theatricality of the whole endeavor, like props that must 'read' from the far end of the theatre.

are no costumes to mix and match. We don't get from Klein a theory of the "relation of randomness to the erotic" which Lisa Robertson locates in playing dress-up (182).²

Along with the lack of clothes or accessories, Klein also forbids anything "mechanical" from entering her playroom (despite her proclivity for engine/penis metaphors). This feeds into Deleuze and Guattari's primary critique of Klein: that she failed to see the potential in her ingenious invention of partial objects because "she conceives of them as fantasies and judges them from the point of view of consumption, rather than regarding them as genuine production" (67). In this way, they claim Klein moralizes the partial object in attempt to incorporate it into a totalizing Oedipal narrative. For D&G, there is a world the child discovers on his or her own, enriched by the pleasures of systematic participation. "The satisfaction the handyman experiences when he plugs something into an electric socket or diverts a stream of water can scarcely be explained in terms of "playing mommy and daddy," or by the pleasure of violating a taboo."

Play, like performativity is often defined in opposition to production. However some forms of art production more closely resemble play. Another quote from D&G:

When Claude Levi-Strauss defines *bricolage* he does so in terms of a set of closely related characteristics: the possession of a stock of materials or of rules of thumb that are fairly extensive, though more or less a hodgepodge—multiple and at the same time limited; the ability to rearrange fragments continually in new and different patterns or configurations; and as a consequence, an indifference toward the act of producing and

² And since they are detachable, accessories must be essentially phallic. Recall Vito Acconci's performance piece, *Trappings*, in which he dressed up his penis in doll's clothes...

toward the product, toward the set of instruments to be used and toward the over-all result to be achieved. (7)

Strauss's *bricolage* easily relates to Klein's analytic toybox. Multiple/limited is just another wording of Klein's toy categories, versatile/simple. The toys exist to be rearranged in "different patterns or configurations," or put to "varied uses," as Klein writes. It seems as if the term could be just as easily applied to sculptural or installation artworks like Jasper Spicero's— until, perhaps, Strauss mentions the creator's fundamental *indifference* towards technique, product and/or result. We are lead to wonder, do specific forms of organization separate art from *bricolage* or unproductive play?

Preliminaries 2) On Tan Lin's "Latent Mythologies" (A Depressive Reading)

We can look to poet Tan Lin to help theorize indifference. More specifically, he offers a take on how indifferent consumption figures into creativity. In his prose-poem, PASCAL, he writes,

Only the freedom born of boredom [not having any real desires] is worth having. The most beautiful desires are intentionless, fleeting and empty, like mass entertainment.

Picasso loved the circus and the harlequin. Duchamp loved the hardware store and the Erlenmeyer flask. Most of Duchamp's works are meant to collect dust or disappear behind a flat veil of optical stimulations. (105)

Lin, or the narrator-figure of the poem, is the man of the crowd, evading description— mere life merely passing though. In this way, he too projects himself onto his surroundings, their ambiance echoing his ambivalence (indifference as evenly diffused affect, as opposed to Klein's paranoid-schizoid hills and valleys.). In Klein's myopic world in which every time a child "moves forward, burns breaks, wipes, dirties cleans [or] destroys" an object, it is closely observed,

analyzed, and recorded (Kristeva 165) . By contrast, in Lin’s existential portrait of society, massive events of production, consumption, transcription and material exchange occur everyday sparking absolutely no one’s interest³ or apprehension. Is it the job of the artist to bear witness to these near-imperceptible yet monumental late-capitalist hemorrhagings?

We are given two examples of early 20th century (white male) artists’ object obsessions/projective sites. “Picasso loved the circus and the harlequin⁴.” A regressive obsession, uncannily hearkening back to childhood. There is a Kleinian determinism to aesthetic interests (the sense of the beautiful) established during childhood. Observing an innumerable number of modern and contemporary artists’ interests in cartoons, toys, and adolescent obsessions, it seems that aesthetic life, like emotional life often finds its template early on. It is perhaps a matter of stewardship to a cultural tradition—the younger we are for indoctrination, the deeper our devotion. Then we come to Duchamp’s fascination with the functional, quotidian object—“the hardware store or Erlenmeyer flask.” This impulse is not communitarian but iconoclastic, a paranoid disavowal of the retinal arts in favor of Freudian one-liners. (But I’m more interested in the material than the linguistic, so I won’t linger here.)

Duchamp and Picasso were, of course, among the first fine artists to use found objects in their work. Klein puts the “passionate collector” in the same category as “the artist”: someone whose ““displacement of love to things and interests,” might leave him with very little “love to spare for his fellow-man” (322).⁵ Mike Kelley points out the that the impulse of the artist to

³ According to Sianne Ngai, “interest” is a question of continuity, which “registers the simple fact that time makes a difference in aesthetic evaluation” (134). No one is ‘interested’ in what appears static.

⁴ The harlequin also as a figure who can be liberated from censorship and repression only through performativity.

⁵ Everyone might claim a ‘personal investment’ in junk piles if they remembered that dust is made of skin cells.

collect, including his own “harems” of childhood rocks, business cards, etc., is a form of Freudian repetition-compulsion. (Even ice prince Tan Lin cannot escape this symptom of the death drive, accumulating gorgeously banal design objects, shown as scans.) It seems that each artist has a very discrete, even simple set of concerns, things only they and they alone can notice, which makes it fortunate that there are a “great variety” of artists to make a “great variety” of collections. Contemporary artists find productive continuities in aspects of culture they are ‘naturally’ drawn to, given certain facts of their upbringing. Once the codes are isolated, they can be recombined or subverted. The artist only differs from other people in that an impulse to dissect is circumscribed within her impulse to consume.

Living Waterways Ekphrasis

“So much of childhood is spent in a manner of waiting”—Lyn Hejinian

1. Owari No Kisetsu

concealment furniture, silk rope, 3d printed plastic, yo-yo, button, interior wall paint, fabric dye, carrying case, marbles, miniature pool ball, silk rope, stylus pen

-In terms of color, Spicero expresses remarkable restraint, confining himself to the lilacs and greys of Victorian half-mourning (with perhaps a note of cyan or periwinkle, when called for). Two competing focal points are a child’s backpack hanging from a peg, dwarfed by its own zipper, and a reparative-patchwork android hand dangling from a ledge. The sculpture is extended to portrait orientation with the addition of a yoyo and two styluses hanging like plumb-bobs from the android’s fingers.

-What appears at first glance to be a simple shelf and coatrack is revealed by an interior hinge to be a form of “concealment furniture,” used by gun owners to keep their weaponry

hidden but close at hand. In Kleinian object-relations, the oscillation between engratiating presense and terrifying absence of the mother/supplicating breast is at the center of all human conflicts (a psychology grounded in ‘peekaboo’). The cabinet, like the space “between the doors” where Dick hides within his mother or the wardrobe from *Story of The Eye* occurs frequently in psychoanalytic literature as womb, prison, refuge and site of projection (164). The concealment shelf is likely marketed as method of maintaining easy weapon access while curbing the paranoia or potentially catastrophic envy of house guests. In truth it is a method to distribute guns under every cushion and within every drawer, cabinet, nook or cranny via the guest’s psychic projections.

-Schemes of distribution/dispersion are always central to Spicero’s work. In his videos he often borrows from the aesthetics of surveillance⁶—a Foucauldian decentralized power structure in which, under an omniscient gaze, each person is frightened into regulating themselves. In *Living Waterway* Spicero uses pool-balls, a game whose initial stroke produces a randomized distribution, which all subsequent plays attempt to reconcile. And then there is the dust and dirt, dispersed particulates which settle into seams, rehearse folds and gently announce edges. Filth often indexes use, as in the case of the tactility of the “transitional object,” or first possession, which becomes suffused with bodily substances as the young child embraces it. As Mike Kelley observed with regards to his own sculptural practice, when such tarnished childhood objects are exhibited they are usually taken to embody childhood trauma—a calcification or sudden severance of the child from the material interplays that make up their world, like the fallout of a blast.

⁶ In a form-content parallel, the look of surveillance photography is defined by a small censor which only a small amount of light information reaches, producing randomized white-noise graininess.

Trauma is generally conceived as a non-linear reverberation, boggling the minds of psychoanalysts who sought to chart human development on a strict timeline. (Freud struggled to justify why, if pleasure was the goal of human existence, the mind would want to repeatedly revisit a painful past.) Spicero's work, in its patina, certainly possesses a haunted or razed quality. The objects anticipate a child who will never return.

-The sculpture presents two alternative schemes of gravity: a downward force which causing objects to depressively droop, and a consumptive, vortex-like pull in which the android-hand seems to be sucking in marbles. Their integration—or expulsion— feels forceful. It illustrates the Kleinian *amalgam* in its “diverse array of internal objects” (Kristeva 64). A found object its sculpture is only differentiated from *bricolage* in its interior logics, its interior modes of organization.

-The 3-D printed android arm imposes a fractured futurity onto this otherwise folksy world. It provides an imaginative critique of technology as the extension of human bodily capacities. The suspended styluses resemble chained ‘security pens’ of banks and other vaulted bureaucratic spaces, but are here hang suspended as a continuation of the finger's vector. (One fingertip— with Swiss-army purposiveness— has been replaced with a threaded screw.) In much the same way as in a child's drawing might feature a giddy proliferation of 100 fingers on a single hand, Spicero's arm contains an anatomically suspect proliferation of joints. (And each ball-in-socket joint possesses four times as many degrees of freedom as the standard hinge.) Does this intricacy afford the hand increased expressive potential⁷, the ability to form interstitial expressions? Does it pass between thresholds of intensity, the Deleuzian organ-as-gradient? It

⁷ Sylvan Tomkins: “The finger does not ‘express’ what is in the forearm, or shoulder or trunk. It leads rather than follows the movements in these organs to which it is an extension.” Like the face, its behavior is more precise and complex than the structure to which it's attached.

snakes off into a segmented arm, evoking Popeye biceps, buoys, or an anaconda mid-digestion. Rodin, the most well-known sculptor of disembodied arms, said that “Beauty is like God; a fragment of beauty is complete” (Kelley 83). That’s true of fragments, but what about segments?

2. Lennus

fabric dye, acid etched ceremonial ribbon cutting scissors, digital c-print, wood, enamel paint, interior wall paint, marbles, coat hanger

-You don’t have to be far out of psychoanalysis kindergarten to connect a huge pair of scissors with castration anxiety. However I’m more interested in how the scissors open onto psychoanalysis by way of the emo.

- ‘Emo’ is short for ‘emotional’, a hypernym encompassing a broad range of affects but evoking principally negative ones unless otherwise specified. The project of the emo, like that of the psychoanalyst, is to traffic in emotion.

-The naïve doodles Spicero acid-etched onto the scissors have a distinctive emo flavor. There is actually very little to the emo aesthetics beyond scraggly doodles and a certain asymmetrical haircut—hence the relevance of scissors. The emo loves schizoid surfaces. Covering one’s jeans and converse in automatic writing is also widespread— a projective “personalization” which mirrors the way one slobbers onto the original “transitional” object, bear or ‘blankie.’. Middle school pencil cases and fashion articles are not the first objects we’ve ever encountered but the first objects that we feel to truly represent us (because we picked them). The introduction to commodity culture—earning to shop and spend money independently— calls for its own series of object-oriented rites.

- Like the psychoanalyst, the emo exhibits a strong oral fixation, not for pipes but for lollypops.

-Like the psychoanalyst, the emo is concerned with matters of translation. She speaks for the non-vocal: *Rawr means I love you in dinosaur.*

3. Edie As A Child

water trough, hand held system, enamel paint, acid etched metal, button, clothing

- Spicero's body of work relates primarily to two different recreational pursuits: scrapbooking and video games. While I don't know much about the artist's past, I'd be willing to wager they are contingent/circumstantial interests he acquired growing up. Both bear a complex relation to indexicality. In scrapbooking (which Spicero invokes through twee fabric choices and embroidered photographs) real physical artifacts (diplomas, stamps, baby shoes, etc.) intermingle with textual accounts of history. In video games, art directors must impose a history onto virginal 3-D models in order to make environments feel 'convincing'. This is done by mapping image textures onto the forms and adding low-level relief for scratches, dents and eroded corners. In scrapbooking the material is treated as an image, while in video games an image becomes the material.

-Video games are thought to be the form of media that best facilitates totally immersive projection. In an interview Spicero stated that in an interview Spicero stated that he wanted his installations to "have the depth of (...) a 12-hour video game."

- Spicero includes a handheld gaming device, now alien in its obsolescence. Programmed obsolescence is not a death drive but an interfaced technologic imaginary, one machine dreaming of another. What Jasper Spicero also finds fascinating about the clinic: gentleness-as-protocol, like the seed prefigures the flower.

-The device is cradled by a wall-mounted sink. We recall the more classically surrealist sinks of Robert Gober, which gush in perpetuity, like the furiously angsty child of a sink and a

fountain. We think of the “wash basin with running water” which Klein included among the illustrative material in her playroom as a symbol of the mother’s body. (Kristeva 49). And the inadequacy of this baptismal mother—for a swing provides much better nostalgia for the womb. Noone can feel the water they’re suspended in! A ‘Living Waterway’ is an ambient one, producing white noise, a field of averages, like blood rushing past the ear.

-Overall Spicero is more interested in the doctor’s waiting room than the Kleinian playroom. Bureaucracy sees no difference between forcing someone to grow up or ignoring them until time passes. This is the blank face of modernism— and the easy-to-clean institutional furniture from which it took its aesthetic.

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