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### *“Jennifer and Kevin McCoy: Transposing Time and Space”*

(catalog essay, for the “Learning to Watch” exhibition, Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, Spain, April 2004)

No one living today is older than the cinema, invented over a century ago, but many can remember a time before television was a daily domestic presence through most of the world. Such people are older now; when those of us in our middle years were small, TV was a cramped, grainy black and white image contained in a clumsy physical box with scratchy sound. But artists of Kevin and Jennifer McCoy’s generation grew up with the electronic media in their current, endlessly branching and broadening form, liquid, immaterial, and omnipresent.

Computer technology has introduced unprecedented possibilities of transmitting and manipulating images and information, on an unprecedented scale, and with unprecedented ease and speed. That ease, that speed, and the new formats of these fluxes of images and information are seductive and powerful. Most of us now beyond childhood use or are exposed to systems and pathways of communication that were unimagined by the public at large within our memories; and most of us imagine that the same process may recur again and again during our lifetimes. The shock of the new is old, a constant in modernity, but it continues to surprise and unbalance. To help us navigate it we may find ourselves looking to art—and particularly to artists who, both by date of birth and by inclination, know the most recent phase of our permanently radical condition as a literal second nature.

The McCoy’s new piece *Soft Rains*, intricate and entertaining, is rooted in the history of film, which, however, with slice-and-dice aplomb, it chops into a new form: its cinematic syntax is parsed not by any familiar story-telling ambition but by the electronic synapses of the computer. The work comprises seven platforms, each supporting its own tabletop stage set, a movie location in small. We see model-scale suburban houses, warehouse buildings, city streets, parks, all peopled by tiny toys. (The McCoy’s use resin figures made by a German company to populate train sets.) Together these seven places make up a single narrative. We start with a scene recalling the David Lynch of *Blue Velvet*, a white shingled house sporting an American flag on the porch and tulips growing in a straight row against the white picket fence in the garden. Next the housewife who lives here—always identifiable by her red dress—goes to a dinner party at a hotel, an opening on a bigger life. She starts to think about escape, to imagine fresh options for herself. In the next episode she visits the loft of a male artist who paints big, mural-sized paintings; she attends a *soirée*, hobnobs with collectors, and when everyone else leaves she stays and spends the night. Soon she will show up as a nightclub singer, a James Bond-type action hero, and—hey, these are the movies—an ax murderer.

Poking in from above and to the sides of the McCoy’s sets, and from every different angle, are miniaturized cameras and lights on flexible arms, a tentacular body obtruding in the visual field. The spectacle of these metal pipes snaking into and through the McCoy’s scenarios of human action reminds me of the Sentinels of the Wachowski brothers’ “*Matrix*” movies: many-limbed machines, squidlike in form, embodying the threat applied by a hostile outer world to the microcosmic safe zone of life. These visual conduits violating the McCoy’s stage sets are similarly the emissaries of a surrounding framing structure, electrical and metallic, of wires, cables, and computer and video gear. But if the symbolism is parallel the tone is not: where the Wachowskis’ Sentinels incarnate an enduring fear of the robot, a fear going back to the Frankenstein story and before that to the thousand-year-old Jewish tale of the Golem, the McCoy’s equipment, even while it visibly actualizes the intrusion of a machine world into the private sphere, has a comic quality. Disrupting the images it exists to record, this untidily extended labyrinth of cameras on tubes suggests a contraption sufficiently overcomplicated to surprise us that it works.

In conventional filmmaking a camera watches as an action unfolds in time. The McCoy’s upset this schema: except for one section of a location inspired by Fellini’s *8 1/2*, where a camera moves forward and then back again on a little motorized track, the scenes and their figures remain still. They are shot, however, by several cameras simultaneously, each from its own angle, each focused on a different area of the set, and the multipart compound of images that these cameras together create is then sent to a computer that picks from the range of choices, “editing” it into—a movie, which plays on a large screen. “We handle the passage of time,” says Kevin, “by spreading things out in space to represent different moments, which are intercut onscreen to suggest movement in time and place. Each story is told in eight to ten shots. All the camera feeds are live; the computer makes up the selection.” What he is describing is actually a magical shift: the instantaneous translation of a physical space distributed over a large horizontal field, in which everything exists simultaneously and three-dimensionally but without movement, into a flat visual space on a vertical screen, in which nothing has any physical depth and in which physical simultaneity is converted into temporal sequence and action.

Photography and then cinema made it possible to distribute images globally in the form of a material object, the print or celluloid film reel; radio and television broadcast sound and images immaterially through the air. The array of contemporary technologies based on the microcircuit is putting the distribution of information through yet another metamorphosis, one still in process, but a crucial question it poses can already be asked: what kind of thinking and sensing individual will develop through interaction with the new machines. *Soft Rains* is the latest outgrowth of the McCoy’s speculations on, or realizations of, the ideas and thought patterns that these technologies make possible, the conceptual vessels through which they channel our minds.

“After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age,” writes new media theorist Lev Manovich, “the computer age introduces its correlate—the database. Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise, that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.” *Every Shot, Every Episode* (2001) works out that idea systematically. Its starting point is the ‘70s TV show *Starsky and Hutch*, a cheesy California policier that, like so many of its kind, spat out the same visual and plot elements ad nauseam. (Despite the conceptual content of the McCoy’s art, the images it orchestrates often have a friendly familiarity.) The McCoy’s subject the show and its contrivances to a taxonomic analysis it was never intended to withstand: they break down the shots and sequences in twenty episodes into 300 categories, then collect each example of those categories on CD’s. Physically, *Every Shot, Every Episode* consists of three monitors and a long shelf of CDs bearing labels: EVERY ZOOM IN. EVERY YELLOW VOLKSWAGEN. EVERY PLAID. EVERY TILT DOWN. EVERY SEXY OUTFIT. EVERY PLANT. Some of these categories are methodological (EVERY TRACK OUT), some are visual (EVERY BLUE), some rest on character or plot (EVERY WIFE AND GIRLFRIEND, EVERY MOAN OF PAIN). In every case, though, the CD is simply a sequence of *Starsky and Hutch* clips showing whatever the label describes: a tracking shot, a blue, a moan, and so on, each quickly followed by another version of the same thing.

“It’s a strategy for looking at narrative in a different way,” says Jennifer, a former film student, “maybe more from the point of view of the maker or the production process rather than the spectator.” It’s also a kind of extension ad absurdum of Jean-Luc Godard’s quip “All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun”—an index of every girl, every gun, and every example of 298 other recurring elements of a mediocre thirty-year-old TV show. “Using *Starsky and Hutch* was a distancing device,” according to Jennifer. “The show was something not so many people would have very specific memories of, so they focus on structure rather than on recognizing their favorite episode.” The title *Every Shot, Every Episode* likewise emphasizes structure, not story; and it is the same with *Every Anvil* (2001), which puts the Warner Bros. Looney Tunes cartoons of the 1940s and ‘50s under the same kind of scalpel. Here, though, instead of cataloguing every device of plot and *mise-en-scène* into which they could break the show down, the McCoy’s concentrated on the cartoon’s violence; so that the CD’s have titles like “EVERY HAMMER AND HATCHET,” “EVERY FALL FROM A GREAT HEIGHT,” and on through poisonings, evil geniuses, wafting odors, tornado spins, explosions, screams, and other varieties of exigency.

Works like these led to *Horror Chase* and *The Kiss* (both 2002), which similarly broke down the structure of sequences of film but did so in the medium of film itself. *Horror Chase* is based on Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead 2*, *The Kiss* on Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat*; reconstructing and reshooting famous passages of these movies and then subjecting them to an algorithm that constantly reedits them as they are projected, the McCoy’s permit each frame to lead to a different follow-up from the one we might expect, turning over the syntax of cinema to a randomized computer process. A new piece, *Learning from Las Vegas*, is closer to the database works. The title is borrowed from a canonical work of American architectural studies, published in 1972 by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour—a book that argued for the value of vernacular taste in building, of the “decorated shed” of Las Vegas-type hotels as opposed to the stripped-down structures of the modernist International Style. Applying this principle literally, the McCoy’s take twenty-one movies shot in Las Vegas (Martin Scorsese’s *Casino*, Jonathan Demme’s *Melvin and Howard*, and so on) and break their images down into pedagogical categories: LEARNING FROM SWIMMING POOLS. LEARNING FROM CASINO EXTERIORS. LEARNING FROM MIRRORS. LEARNING FROM NEON. *Learning from Las Vegas*, then, like *Every Anvil* and *Every Shot, Every Episode*, turns story into database, stripping out the passage of time, the development and connection of one event to the next, and the sense of a place or environment as a continuous context for human action, and giving us the same visual events in list form.

*Soft Rains* seems to move in the opposite direction. The miniature locations are information of a kind, illogical and unconvincing though it is. Already toylike and peopled by dolls, the sets also mix scales, so that different parts may be quite different sizes. They are designed not to create a unity of place but to make sense in front of the cameras, which is quite another thing: shot by one camera, a plane may appear as a wall; shot by another, from a different angle, it may turn into a floor. The tabletops, too, being constructed without outer walls, lack the dioramalike backdrops of real stage sets, which are planned to block all trace of anything but illusion. The result is that the cameras may catch not only the scene they are placed to record but also the view beyond it, offstage or in this case off the table. When they feed their live images to the screen, you may see other viewers up there, or yourself, in the background that passes for sky. And yet, obviously synthetic as it is—it might be an animated version of a Laurie Simmons photograph—some kind of film does play. If, in the earlier works, the McCoy’s were breaking narrative down into its basic elements, here they seem to show the opposite process: the creation of a story, with a structure and a progression in time, out of static arrangements of physical facts. The point, I think, is not some kind of *retour à l’ordre*, but a cheerful game with the arbitrariness of the stories we tell to make sense of our lives.