



# LYLA RYE

by Virginia M. Eichhorn

Lyla Rye's work has been principally about defining space. In particular, I remember two exhibitions of hers from the early 1990s. The first was an exhibit produced by Toronto's infamous Nethermind Collective. The group took over an old warehouse building at Queen and Dufferin streets in Toronto, effectively transforming it into a kind of cross between a surreal funhouse and a trip through the rabbit hole into Wonderland. The works were mostly sculptural, ranging from a large "breathing" inflatable at the entrance, to macabre doll figures clothed in beautiful antique christening gowns. In the midst of these works was Rye's installation; a fluorescent orange stripe she had painted in the gutter which ran through the building. The colour was beyond intense and the effect was dazzling. There was an inherent tension created in this simple contrast between the dingy industrial space and the lurid paint. Through this simple act of demarcation, Rye caused viewers to alter their experience of the space. People jumped over her line. They wandered the length of it on one side and followed it back on the other. It became a border or a path, an interruption or an embellishment of the space, depending on how one interacted with it.

Viewers encountered a similar experience at her show in 1995 at Robert Birch's former gallery space in the basement of an old building in Toronto's Morrow

Avenue complex. There Rye had to contend with stone walls and wooden posts. Her installation consisted of orange strings connecting the posts together. Sometimes the strings went through them, sometimes around. As with the Nethermind installation, she created a space within a space. The thin strings contrasted with the heavy posts and stone. Once more there was a kind of tension achieved. What was the purpose of the strings? Were they holding things together? If they were broken would things fall apart? Were viewers supposed to go underneath them, or were they intended to keep people out? Using very simple materials Rye was able to create something whereby the viewers questioned how they were supposed to — and how they were allowed to — interact within a newly defined space.

Her interest in establishing space comes very honestly and naturally to Rye. With a background in both fine art and architecture, Rye's conceptual installations often deal with the intersection between public and private spaces and how one's sense of or understanding of borders can change and shift with one's perspective. This ongoing concern can also be seen in the video work which she has been creating over the last five years. Rather than concentrating on physical borders and spaces, however, Rye's work has now shifted into exploring those which relate to



Still image from *Byte*. Lyla Rye

relationships and the realm of the emotions. How this work is constructed and presented is informed by her sculptural and installation background.

The birth four years ago of Rye's daughter, Lena, acted as a catalyst for a new and continuing body of work. Rye has taken elements from her experiences as a mother and an artist and transformed them into work that has been called both engaging and disturbing. She has videotaped Lena engaging in such ordinary activities as nursing, smiling, eating ice cream, and playing. Rye, however, doesn't just record an activity. Her work examines the psychology of space, the divide between the public and private realms, and the relationship between muse/model and artist.

*Siren* (2000) for example, is literally a little hole-in-the-wall piece. When viewers bend down to peek through the hole they are presented with a video image of a very young baby. While the child looks around peacefully, the soundtrack is that of a crying baby. What they see doesn't coincide with what they hear. This conflict between visual and auditory senses is compelling for viewers. As they continue to watch, they see the baby seemingly become aware of the crying and she begins to cry as well. Rye's title for this piece works on a number of levels. The siren is literally the cry of the baby. As with a baby's cry, a siren alerts us

to something that is wrong. Sirens are also the mythological women who lured Odysseus's sailors. Rye here is paying homage to the strong and profound attraction that parents feel for their children. Whether crying, laughing, or sleeping, the attachment and allure found between parent and child is intense.

A more recent work, *Subdue* (2002), is a very sculptural installation. On a video monitor one sees a large mouth singing a lullaby. Superimposed upon it is a black and white image of the top half of a woman's face. She is talking, giving instructions to her child over and over again. On each side of the image is an LCD screen with an image of the child; one side depicts the child with her hands over her eyes and the other with her hands over her ears. The directions given by the woman to the child are very specific. A mimicry between the repeated instructions contrasts with the repetitions of the lullaby. While both are intended to get a specific response — to induce sleep or to get the child to do what is asked — the child's reluctance (and ultimate power) is shown in her refusal to comply. This work references the shift in power between parent and child. It is a nebulous thing, changing as time goes on. It also reflects the child's growing awareness of being filmed. While her mother might want her to comply, the child can choose not too. In this case the finished work has to



reflect the restrictions imposed on it by the child. It is no longer possible for Rye to fully direct and anticipate how the final work will resolve itself. *Subdue* and Rye's other recent videos become, to a degree, a collaboration between mother and daughter.

A number of these video works were exhibited at the Art Gallery of Grimsby in 2002 under the title *Separation Anxieties*. The overall theme of the works was the parent-child relationship. This is a subject which is very under-explored in art and which is relevant to a broad set of current social issues. In creating these works, Rye states that she is questioning what is socially acceptable within a parent-child relationship, what is psychologically healthy for a child, and what happens when the two are different.

The show at Grimsby was very successful and the exhibit went on to the eyelevelgallery in Halifax in the summer of 2002. Shortly after the exhibition opened, a complaint was made to the police regarding *Byte*, one of Rye's videos. This work dealt with the potential for hurt, in both directions, in a parent-child relationship. Based on a twelve-second video, it depicts mother and daughter playing a favourite game. Rye, while holding Lena, sings into Lena's mouth. This time, however, Lena has had enough of the game. She leans over and bites Rye's lip. Rye's gasp of pain and facial wince clearly show that this was not rehearsed. Hearing her mother's cry and seeing her make a "funny" face, Lena laughs and smiles at the camera.

The twelve-second video sequence is repeated again and again. Sometimes the image is multiplied,

sometimes it has been pixilated or parts of it isolated so that what we see is distorted. Over 40 manipulations of the same clip form the eight-minute video. Some have superimposed black squares or sections of the image that bleach or blur over time to direct attention to different aspects the interaction. Deliberately, Rye references how the media recontextualizes events.

She also shows how perception and reality can differ.

This subtext takes on an ironic significance in light of what happened with the video. *Byte* was seized and Rye's eyelevelgallery exhibition was closed down after the Halifax police received a total of five complaints about it. The warrant claimed that the video was obscene and, under Section 163 of the Criminal Code, "corrupts morals." The Halifax police (on the advice of the Crown prosecutors) didn't lay charges against Rye, but wouldn't return the tape. Rye countered and accused them of censorship.

The incident was covered by the national news and has earned Rye a dubious notoriety. Even now, reviews of and reactions to her work are clouded by what had happened in Halifax. People often react emotionally to *Byte*, based on what they have heard about it, not what they actually see. When Rye's work was exhibited at Cambridge Galleries during December and January 2002-2003, written comments by visitors called the work "disturbing" and made reference to the "open mouthed kiss" exchanged by Rye and Lena. There was no kiss in any of the works on view. People were "seeing" what they had heard about, rather than what was actually displayed. (Interestingly, when the work was exhibited earlier in Grimsby, comments left by visitors called the work "intriguing," "provocative," "interesting," and "inspiring.")

What happened with Rye and *Byte* brings forth many questions and issues relating to hyper political correctness dealing with intimacy with children. It's a topic that most people can relate to. Artists have had to deal with it before — and, unfortunately, will likely have to deal with again.

In the 1970s, Jacqueline Livingston, then a photography professor at Cornell University, was scorned by friends, accused of child pornography, and fired from her teaching job after exhibiting photographs of her son, husband, and father-in-law in the nude. The images of her son showed him in a moment of natural childlike self-exploration. Livingston was perceived as committing a social breach of the motherhood role and was investigated by the Department of Social Services for alleged child abuse after the American Society for

the Prevention of Cruelty to Children charged her with producing kiddie porn. The charges were later dropped.

In 1991, the Birmingham Public Library removed six drawings from an exhibit by Teresa and Jean Campbell. The Alabama library officials deemed the works "not appropriate." The drawings show a mother breast-feeding her baby and were described by the artists as a celebration of motherhood. After public outcry in support of the artists, the work was returned.

Eli Langer's 1993 exhibition at Mercer Union consisted of imagery purportedly exploring aging and the passage of time. Five of Langer's paintings and 35 drawings were seized when someone complained about them after reading Kate Taylor's review of the exhibition in *The Globe and Mail*. Toronto's morality squad threatened Langer with the full penalties of Bill C-128; a ten-year jail sentence for anyone who creates, owns, sells, distributes, or exhibits "visual, aural, or written representations of any sexual activity of people under 18 years of age." Sharon Brooks, the director of Mercer Union, was subsequently charged with possession and display of pornography, a lesser offence which nevertheless carried a five-year prison term. The charges against Langer and Brooks were eventually dropped by the Metro Toronto police and, after several trial date delays, in April 1995 the Ontario court ruled that Langer's drawings had "artistic merit."

In an article in *EYE* magazine, Oliver Girling wrote, "This was an emotional year in art, in which nothing much seemed to happen. But within that calm, there were a lot of individually striking shows. It all came crashing down at the end, with criminal charges being laid against an artist under child pornography laws. If anything positive can be taken from this goofy situation, it's that someone still gets nervous, or thinks other people will, when they look at paintings."

Like Langer, Rye's work is rarely discussed now without having to address in some way the notorious events in Halifax in 2002; however, Rye hasn't let those events compromise her integrity or her beliefs as either an artist or a mom. Ask any parent and they'll say they learn a lot from their children. If nothing else, parenthood firms up a strength in one's convictions. Rye's beliefs are fervent and she doesn't compromise on what she thinks is important.

The visual arts world hasn't traditionally been a "family friendly" place. I once worked at a gallery for someone who, when she was pregnant, said that she didn't want anyone to even be aware of the fact that

she was having a baby — "it" was to be ignored. Often work centered around moms and babies is dismissed as being nice but not important. Rye is part of a new generation of artists who are changing that. To have her work seized and labelled pornographic is a complete and total affront to her as a parent and as an artist.

Rye expresses in making work that explores and expresses the complexities of a parent-child relationship. She was shocked when she first heard there was a complaint about *Byte*, as were most people who heard the news. Initially there was a feeling of vulnerability as well; were she and her husband John going to be investigated by the Children's Aid Society? Potentially lose Lena? She responded by confronting the accusations and by standing up for the intentions and integrity of her work.

Today, Rye says she continues to try "to work out some of the stifling feeling I have in regards to my creativity since the Halifax incident." Nevertheless, it is impossible to go through something like this without being affected. It is difficult not to let it compromise one's work. As an artist, or as a parent, one can't let false accusations cause self-censorship for fear of being accused of acting inappropriately.

The experience in Halifax dealt directly with the issues which Rye is exploring in her work. She questions how much should private lives be open for public scrutiny through examining and testing the perennial border shifts between public and private. She constructs spaces where we glimpse what might be ordinary, everyday occurrences — singing lullabies, eating ice cream, getting dressed — but always with some kind of disjunction in the presentation of the work that creates a visual tension. Rye's videos deal with the space of emotions and relationships, rather than physical place. The physical placement of the players, and the manner in which the narratives are presented or obscured, is deliberate and essential in reading and understanding the content and metaphor of her art. Rye's work deserves to have viewers approach it with eyes and mind wide-open, rather than closed off by hearsay and prejudice. ♦

Virginia M. Eichhorn is an independent curator and writer in Kitchener, Ontario.