

# SCALING HOME IN CRITICAL STUDIO PRACTICE

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss the notion of scaled representations of the home in contemporary art from the contextualisation of Metamodernism with attention to oscillation and the condition brought about by experiencing the scaled subject. It will discuss a set of differentiated philosophical ideas relating to, on the one hand, phenomenology and metaphysics contrasted with, on the other hand, speculative realism (SR) and object-oriented-ontology (OOO). Test cases of work from artists Thomas Doyle and Erwin Wurm will be discussed as further analysis to the author's own critical studio practice, represented by the miniature series 'Hidden Memory' (2017)

KEYWORDS: Scale, contemporary art, metamodernism

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore through Metamodernism the idea of the scaled home in contemporary art and in relation to the author's studio practice with the understanding that when natural scale, that is to say, what we proportion to ourselves in measurement and comparison to our own bodies in everyday life, is changed and instead is either represented much smaller or larger to natural scale, the ways in which we contextualise such a change is proportionate to how we might ought to consider its implied agency in comparison to our own, to what this paper will term as a 'viewing condition'. For example, when natural scale is represented in miniature, we tend to think of such a scale shift as "fascinating" or "cute" because it poses no risk to our own safety and that we, the voyeur is in control of our viewing experience however, when natural scale is, in turn, represented as the gigantic then our perception of such is that of caution because our own bodies are smaller and therefore more vulnerable in comparison.

When this scale shift is represented in contemporary art, the role of our relationship with the art object also changes because, in addition to our viewing condition, what we bring to the artwork through memory can change the way we consider our own relationship with the the subject inasmuch as the role of irony plays out when we experience a reversal of scale as represented when a miniature is, for example, upscaled to a larger size yet still takes on the aesthetic of a being a fabricated miniature. Whether we witness scaled artwork in a gallery or somewhere else, our role and relationship with these types of artworks surmount a consolidated experience that, for representations of the home, engage with an audience on a primal level. Our need for shelter and community is one of the most primary human fundamentals and home as both a concept and a physical necessity brings forth emotive values to an artwork relating to home, which otherwise are not the same as how, say, we interpret different subject matters related to natural scale outside of this thematic.

The role of scale in art has as much to do with aesthetic as it does with narrative. Even outside the intent of art, resizing natural scale has historically allowed the subject to communicate its placement by a representation of something else. For example, the quintessential miniature, say, the ship in a bottle traditions, have long been associated with oscillating fictive and factual recreations, whereas monuments often focus on the depiction of actual characters or placed events that recreate a prior point in history relevant to the present, that is to say, seen from the perspective of the present holding reference to the past. Yet for the home, we enter into a different kind of space that is dependant on our own memories of domestic inhabitants. If a person, referred to hereafter as an agent, for example, was affected by trauma or hardship centred through an aspect represented by the home then subsequent representations of dwellings would take on a different meaning than others who are without such situations held through nostalgic sentiments about the same kinds of visual iconography. This of course resonates the notion that what we bring to art from our own memories of the past determines how we experience art in the present, and in turn, remember that artwork at some point in the future when it is recalled through memory. Similarly, such a relationship enacts the same kinds of memories we furnish into a spatial environment by what we recall and bring to a subjective space much the same as if it was considered to be a memory palace, that is, a mnemonic space where ‘objects or things became indicators of remembered events, points, or ideas.’ (Wilson, 2016)

By these sentiments, this paper considers that resizing natural scale in art to be an important factor in determining how the artefacts of contemporary art attest to new knowledge while at the same time how these artworks of the home represent our personal narratives situated in memory. In doing so, the examples to be discussed will

posit the agent as an integral part of the artwork's agency aligned to a post-Kantian perspective. The home, whether it be a fixed structure such as a house, an apartment, a hut, a factory, a caravan, or an intervention such as a cave and natural enclave, all represent a space of human inhabitancy and when this space is engaged through art making, the territory by which we identify as providing to us both physical and emotional shelter necessitates a more intrinsic experience for the subject to communicate and, secondly, to enact a symbiance for an agent to experience such by a strategic visual communication.

Representing these ideas in practice will examine works from artists in comparison to the author's studio practice. Erwin Wurm's surreal houses developed in the artworks *Narrow House 1* (2010) and *Fat House* (2003) will contribute to discussion with Thomas Doyle's train set miniature genre dwellings ironically digressed through the works *Armistice* (2011) and *Mire* (2013).

## SITUATING SCALE IN PRACTICE

Erwin Wurm's *Narrow House 1* 'is a to-scale model of his childhood home, a building typical of Austria's post-war suburban architecture, only the sculpture has been shrunk to 1 m[etre] width and pivoted at an unusual angle.' (Lewben Art Foundation, 2015) 'In 1960's Austria, similar houses were being built on a massive scale for the middle class who sought to fulfil the dream of owning a private house.' (Contemporary Art Centre, 2015) With this in mind, Wurm's recollections of growing up in what he terms as an oppressive childhood regime is revisited in these works, which are of interest not only because of the way the artist manipulates scaled space but, more important to this paper, by how he engages a matrix of grafting his childhood memories onto the artwork itself to create tension through scale.

*Narrow House 1* is from a series of larger scaled representations of Wurm's childhood house where an agent can enter inside the dwelling to see the forced restriction of space first hand. For example, the bathroom situates an oddly shaped bathtub of normal length but its width, like the other rooms and spaces inside the house, are impactfully condensed in size, making the house itself appear to be tangled in an optically warped illusion. The impact of these spaces that Wurm engineers is that an agent is invited to make comparisons with their own natural scale then map such understandings onto the artwork, resulting to comprehend that something is out of place. As 'Wurm's father was a police detective, his mother a housewife; he recalls his childhood and teenage years as a period of strict limitations and constraints' (Contemporary Art Centre, 2015) which

evidently proceed throughout his work and continues the oddity of experiential restrictiveness for the subject inasmuch as his memories of an oppressive restraint are mapped onto both the agency of his work and its subsequent formalism.

Wurm uses scale with an intent to make an agent feel uncomfortable yet the way in which he constructs the artwork resembles the serenity an upscaled train set dwelling miniature. The currency of this strategy plays out a visual anomaly where an agent is not necessarily witnessing a the construction of a natural scaled house but rather, at an altered and upscaled miniature of an actual house thus being a copy of a copy of a real house. While *Narrow House I* looks like a real house on first read, and on entering the dwelling provides the horizontal scale of a real house, the alterations, however, of its width, holistically positioned throughout, give the building a synthetic and manufactured aesthetic simply because the artist has changed the way an agent can interact with the artwork when comparing it to its real world counterpart, thus inviting a fascination and nostalgic overlay for the agent to engage with and move through its cordoned spaces. Likewise, Wurm's strategy to use scale as a disruptive tool is repeated in *Fat House* 'as a commentary on middle-class consumer culture' (Frearson, 2017) by creating a full scaled house 'but its walls appear to have swollen out, so they look more like fatty flesh than an architectural structure.' (Frearson, 2017) Reminiscent of a surrealist version of a cartoon house, its presence enacts the aesthetic of an enlarged miniature not necessarily what an agent might perceive as an *actual* house measured in full scale. When it was 'installed on the lawn outside an 18th-century palace in Vienna' (Frearson, 2017) the work's oscillation affects the way an agent ought to perceive the subject. Even at full scale it still appears to be an enlarged miniature; even outside the white walled environment of galleries and situated instead in a natural environment the artwork is still 'imbued with a humanlike adiposity' ([www.wppt.de](http://www.wppt.de) and [www.agentur-simon.de](http://www.agentur-simon.de), 2018).

Continuing these tensions between the subject and the agent, the recent work of Thomas Doyle imbues a sublime context through miniatures that often portray the gentility of iconclastic, middle-American, rural Rockwell-eque homes lodged 'that teeter on the brink of catastrophe' (Lisa, 2018) or unnatural phenomenon contrasted by the innocence of characters contemplating the aftermath of such disturbances. Doyle himself describes the works to 'dwell in the arena of the uncanny; they tend to be psychological and heavily focused on narrative.' (Doyle, 2011) In *Armistice* (2011), an elaborately crafted farm house stands next to a large undefined crater - whether this be a sinkhole, a seismic accident or an act of war - dwarfing a father and daughter interacting near a sand pit in the dwelling's backyard. While the home stands literally torn in half with its entrails strewn into the hole and spilled throughout the front yard, the oblivious nature of the

figures attracts an eeriness to the work reminiscent of the cinematic framing of the destroyed coastal house in Steven Spielberg's film *1941*. (dir: Spielberg, 1979) As Doyle states that 'the pieces' radically reduced scale evoke feelings of omnipotence—as well as the visceral sensation of unbidden memory recall... seeming to suspend time itself—with all its accompanying anguish, fear, and bliss' (Doyle, 2017), we return to the same kind of presence in Wurm's work that raises tension through scale yet for Doyle it enacts 'feelings of anguish, distress and sometimes peace.' (Lisa, 2018)

One of the more elusive qualities of Doyle's work is how an agent is immediately seduced by the cuteness of his subjects to then be confronted by the oscillation of the ironic and of fear. As we are undoubtedly accustomed to consider miniaturised rural buildings anchored on green lawns and rolling fields as akin to the safety of idyllic hobby modeling, these tensions fueled by Doyle's conceptual matrix does not easily reveal itself until further assessment of the subject discloses more acute scenarios masked by the enchanting devices comparative to the conceptual interventions also found in his work *Mire* (2013). Reminiscent of the flying house in *The Wizard of Oz* (dir:Fleming, Cukor, Taurog, Vidor, 1939), *Mire* presents three versions of the same house transcending an oddity through its composition. Firstly, is this work comprised of three separate houses about to fall on top of each other? Secondly, is it rather a clever visual trick to indicate the embedded house inside what appears to be a sinkhole mapping a temporal trajectory flying up into the sky or thirdly, has something just occurred to indicate a falling house through separated glimpses of captured time? These questions play out Doyle's use of optical tensions which, not surprisingly, are attached to another level of phenomenon that ultimately toys with his agents and that of his subject in complete tandem.

Doyle's unity in achieving such relational astuteness provides a mid ground for a wider conceptual evaluation in his work that brings us back to a departure point for Metamodernism. If one was to consider an analysis of both *Armistice* and *Mire* in terms of oscillation then one key factor to attest new knowledge in these artworks also draws upon a concentration between the nostalgic effacements of cinematic collective memory - we have seen before these places that Doyle constructs, not necessarily in one particular movie but rather, located from an entire generic suite of films; it could not only be *The Wizard of Oz* but also something else like it. In fact, it could be any instance from a collective consciousness visualized from a mytho-idyllic presence and, of course, through the same surmounted literature from children's fiction garnered from, say, Hans Christian Andersen and Enid Blyton. These images are very much at the core of Western childhood iconography and by fueling tensions between a depiction of such, and moreover, exploring the ironic with disruption through the subject, challenges the

lull and comfortability brought from remixing nostalgia with the uncertainty of the sublime as captured in scale.

## HIDDEN MEMORY

In reference to the author's studio practice, the series *Hidden Memory* is comprised of multiple scaled dioramas featuring dwellings constructed within a climate change thematic whereby layers of epoxy resin, representing rising sea levels, encroach each tableau with only the upper levels and rooftops of houses represented above the water line. In the work *Home Still Stands* (2017) a small train set miniature house is mounted on a vintage book embedded in resin to reveal the rooftop and a street light jutting out of the scene reminiscent of the Hitchcock approach towards cinematic narrative where the director would often show a plot point just before or after it had occurred.

One of the key indicators which inform this work is from a Metamodernist presence of oscillating between nostalgia and the ironic but, moreover, through irony, these works also critique speculative realism which is, of course, at odds with the post-Kantian position of nostalgia that places humans at the epicentre of their own ontology. On the one hand, the nostalgic element of the dioramas physical form situates itself through an overly idyllic European miniaturised landscape akin to, in this case, iconography from Germanic fable and Romanticist painting traditions much the same as Doyle's artwork allures his audience into a waiting tension. On the other hand, the ironic is located as a meta-dynamic device evident in the rising sea levels which we know are out of place in what an agent's collective memory brings to the artwork. Yet it is the potentiality of the ironic in what an agent knows *could* happen with an accelerated climate change scenario which attests to the disruptive nature of the artwork inasmuch complexity as what an agent knows *is* happening in their own native environment thus informing a visual conversation from the artwork as a mechanism for digression. If an agent is to come to terms with this artwork from the fear of what they know *will* scientifically occur as a result of rising sea levels, and that the fear itself as a conceptual tool is measured against the gigantic, that is to say, an agent's fear of something which is larger than themselves, then one might argue that these dioramas have the form of a miniature but a conceptual space of a monument, thus establishing an oscillation between two such opposing states of experience. Moreover, the device of oscillation used in achieving new knowledge transcends a fundamental principle in the wider series of *Hidden Memory* which has implications for not only the iconography of the home but at a deeper level of how an agent comes to terms with memory in places of inhabitancy when represented through contemporary art.

The artworks are created with an absence of characters and animals with the intention of establishing a stillness imbued from its ecological narratives. As implied in the series artist statement, the notion that humans have become extinct from accelerated climate disruption is present in what remains of their world through the places of inhabitancy left behind is suggestive through fantasy thus creating its own meta-mythology. An agent can perceive that these miniature dwellings represent a construction by humans, and noted signs of human activity amidst the submerged landscapes but there is no visual contact with humans except for what an agent brings to the artwork from their own memories of activity experienced in the homes, from what they remember of the past. On closer examination *Home Still Stands* gives noticeable clues that the activity of its former residents are scattered throughout the underwater scene - a swing set, several garbage cans, the washing still hung on the line, and opened windows are still in situ suggest a tension of the scenario in that we see a home as it would be in the midst of occupancy yet no one is there. Did this event suddenly happen in a matter of moments or have the occupants suddenly moved on in advance? To this we will never know but the point of this example is to highlight, and intentionally represent within the artwork's rationale, that when an agent witnesses a miniature they might consider its agency in terms of a relationship with their own means however, when representations of agents within these tableaux are removed, a tension surmounts from such agency that, as in the case of *Hidden Memory*, establishes uneasiness to substantiate the values needed for the oscillation process to occur, drawing parallels to Doyle and Wurm approach; both artists go back to the past and borrow referential material to influence the present - Wurm from his restrictive childhood Austrian surroundings and Doyle to his own personal narratives. The author is reminded of Bachelard's metaphysics which states that to recall childhood memories needs to be remembered as a child not as an adult looking back to childhood which essentially has been at the forefront of the philosophical bearings of *Hidden Memory* pushed further by Bachelard's understanding of the house as phenomenological device.

Transcending our memories of all the houses in which we have found shelter, above and beyond all the houses we have dreamed we lived in, can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all of our images of protected intimacy? This, then, is the main problem (Bachelard, xxxvi, 3ff)

The influence on these works, and in particular Bachelard's interpretation for the home as an 'intimacy' not necessarily a 'physical' structure from the counter points of phenomenology and Metamodernism, are, although unique in its approach if somewhat unorthodox in consideration, quite essential once combined, as the function of

Metamodernism driven by oscillation can certainly accommodate a phenomenological context including the Bachelard position in creating a premise for the artworks nonetheless contained in their conceptual values for attesting an agency for the house, as object, and home, as sentimentality. However, the hierarchy of such combination is controlled by Metamodernism as the governing matrix using phenomenology as one such presence oscillated against the constructs of irony. For example, Metamodernism as an architecture, a *language* for the artwork's ideas, is able to incorporate metaphysics into its process of oscillation inasmuch simplicity as, say Doyle's merger between the sentimental and the sublime which are inextricably conceptual opposites. Yet returning to speculative realism, essentially the opposite of Bachelard's approach, the tensions induced for *Hidden Memory* come also from the frictions of the irony played out in quite a different manner to Doyle and Wurm's work which obviously is centred from a Post-Kantian premise, that is to say, an agent's perspective at the core of its own dialectic.

The second artwork from the series titled *No Matter What Happens...* (2017) with the longer expanded title - which intentionally becomes an impossibility for curators to catalogue due the character limit of most database softwares in title fields thus used as a disruptive strategy and a commentary on the commodity nature of contemporary art economics - for the title being *No Matter What Happens and No Matter What is Said and Done, Just Wash Your Hands, Brush Your Teeth, change your underpants and Keep On Driving Until You Reach The End of Where You Would Like to be the Furthest Away From, Even if it Takes you Places Which Are Not Necessarily Interesting or Entertaining or Relevant to Your Career Progression or Social Media Relationship Status that has Taken a Surmounted Effort in Keeping Plain Judgement of That Which Has Always Bothered You in Secret But You Never Said Anything Because You Were Trying to Keep the Peace and Thought it Wasn't Really Important to Bring it Up Even Though You Kept it Under The Surface as Duty to Your Position of Being an Upstanding Model Citizen in The Eyes of the Law Without Discussion to the People who Really Managed to Annoy you over the Five Decades you Worked at the Company Just as Long as it is The Farthest Away From Where You Understand it is to be Related to Here and Now* depicts another landscape void of characters which have been captured in a moment of rapid transformation. A lone building peak of what appears to be a large, stately home juts out of a flooded tableau, encapsulating a hidden scene of rubble and jumbled equipment which has suddenly been transformed by great force into an underwater territory.

The building itself reveals a partially destroyed structure with its walls and roof torn off and the inside roof ripped apart to expose the entrails of the dwelling's interior. As with



Doyle's suggestion that something has just occurred, *No Matter What Happens...* is focused on a sensation of aftermath without the construction of alluring cuteness to instead skip the meditative seductiveness of the appeal of the modeled dwelling to instead arrive at a point of nihilism, that there is no hope and that all is gone, yet how can everything be gone when the subject is compromised with relativism and the romanticist fascination of scale is infused through what the agent brings to these miniatures by way of their own memories and desires?

A consideration for using this method of oscillation is that any opposing idea or theory can be pitted against each other and still function in a normative way, enough to inform the artwork by way of critical presence, making Metamodernism an ideal conceptual architecture for scaled artwork to employ a state of implied relativism. An example as such is to consider both *Home Still Stands* and *No Matter What Happens...* with what Žižek and Bryant lament as Subjective Reality and Object-Oriented-Ontology where '[SR]OOO tries to supplement modern science with a premodern ontology which describes the "inner life" of things.' (Archery, 2017) As there is no place for subject in Bryant's edifice: subject is precisely a nonsubstantial entity fully reducible to its relations to other entities (archery, 2017) in 'his policing all questions of the form "What exists?"' (Sparrow, p.163) instead of, in the case of Bachelard's sentimentality, "Where do I exist", the miniatures traverse these multifaceted opposing views to visually orientate what one might argue to be a nexus of philosophical groundings available for the artwork to communicate on a deeper level of engagement by a method of conflicting perspectives operating independently of each other, and in unison, rather than a perspective which is confined to an absolute of singularity

While notwithstanding, the effacements of the series point to climate change as a device of philosophical discourse within the embedded conceptual implications. Moreover, the *intentions* of the artwork as a viewing condition bring about the agency of the wider series that also brings to the subject an area of analysis contained in the impact that these objects induce for an agent once they map their own memories and observations through visual witness. In comparison to Doyle and Wurm, *Hidden Memory* is not restrictive to a Post-Kantian perspective because of its relationship with Metamodernism but where the difference is upheld is that it *could* be attached to metaphysics just as it could also *not* be aligned to such, thanks to the oscillation factors at work through its own Metamodernist structure. Yet what this allowance permits for the artwork is a broader and more holistic method of consideration to exist as both having an agent-focused and agent-redundant schema without the need for a definitive reductionism.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, the idea of a scaled home in art has presented perspectives that surmount an understanding that altered scale brings forth a conceptual territory applicable to both the miniature and the monumental in ways that transcend an agent's role as a spectator and an observer inasmuch as the contrast established when considering what an agent brings from their own sense of relativism and the irony which dispels this relativism from speculative realism and object-orientated-ontology. In an analysis of Thomas Doyle's *Armistice* and *Mire* and Erwin Wurm's *Narrow House I* and *Fat House*, this paper has demonstrated a breakdown of four critical artworks and how the use of Metamodernism can determine an oscillation that takes into account the presence of the miniature and the monument from the perspective of an agent's experience of both large and small, and the values by which memory can attest to the miniature when mapped onto personal reflections of this process. The resultant understandings have been adopted into consideration of the author's *Hidden Memory* series with mention of the artworks *Home Still Stands* and *No Matter What Happens...* to understand both in terms of conceptual and philosophical groundings as well as to show how scale can be used as a multifaceted device to bring about an awareness of the ideas which can be useful in determining a visual communication from the subject to the agent and its currency in terms of how these reasonings affect both the subject and the agent's resultant viewing condition.

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