Ojalá se derrumben las puertas
Luciana Lamothe

The Ecotectonic Imagination of Luciana Lamothe
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Potencies of formlessness

It is claimed we can protect ourselves from earthquakes by standing under a door frame. It is not the door itself that saves us – that device to create closed, demarcated interiors – but the empty space in the structure, the arch that supports the walls, even when made of heavy rocks suspended as if weighing nothing. *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas* [Hope the Doors Collapse] (2024) invites us to experience the collapse of what doors are supposed to seal. The undulatory force of the quake destroys but first stretches, subjects what is extremely solid to extreme forces, breaks the rule of movement of the immovable and applies it to the lightness of ribbons lifted on an updraught. The material of the work might lead us to abandon our fascination with interiorities and leave only the hollow remainder where we can inhabit the energy released by the quake. The broad strips of phenolic plywood suspended a couple of metres above our heads protect us like arches while putting us at the centre of the movement. At the ends, we find different types of wood and the phenolic itself opening into sharp-pointed strips that break the ostensible formal smoothness of the undulating curves to recall the wood chips embedded in the plywood. These clusters sprouting at the edges test an elastic energy in the material, which seems to stretch in waves only to break violently – like any wave – over any body in its path.

In a series of works created between 2012 and 2013, Lamothe experimented with saliva as an imaginary plastic material. Though apparently far-removed from her more recent work and closer to the vandalistic gestures of her early output, these saliva pieces provide a kind of geological fault-line that allows us to trace the expressive continuity of Lamothe's practice. Under the entry *Crachat* [Gob] in the critical dictionary of *Documents* magazine (Paris, 1929), Michel Leiris states that the gob of spittle has a magic of its own because its materiality envelops a disgraceful act. It is impossible to dissociate its aggression from its eroticism. As the site of breath and soul but also of speech, the mouth cannot detach itself from the viscosity of spittle, that symbol of formlessness. In *Escupir sobre el espejo* [Spit on the Mirror] (2013), spittle is spat onto the reflective surface, adding a violent, sensual dimension to the classic operation of formally articulating the mirror's imaginary elements. In *Perspectivas* [Perspectives] (2012), saliva again anticipates the problem of multiple dimensions of scale, this time by measuring human bodies in strands of saliva. The saliva's viscosity between the fingers renders this measurement a delicate task that relates the bodies to the tension of the stretched strand. The elasticity of the strand of drool calls into question the measuring tool in and of itself. The use of saliva as filter and ruler in *Perspectivas* and as an expressive material in *Craché!* [Spat!] (2012) allows us to tackle Lamothe's gesture: this is not about a head-on clash of forms but about understanding the power of the formless growing in the material's agency.

What has happened between those tensed strands of drool and the iron tube structures? Less a radical change in the work's perspective than a simple modulation of that sensual violence implicit in the gob of spit. It is no longer about measuring the body or the reflected human image but about continuing experimentation around the hard and the soft, that which morphs at the edge. At the edge; not in the symbolic, material centre, that is, but in the roughness of a limit that can become something else.

Intensive scale

Tubular structures are central to Lamothe's current works, as they are in *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas*. The introduction of wood into the structures in the form of large phenolic plywood boards, enabling curves and movement, activates a new dimension of tension in the works while, at the same time, amplifying their scalar power. The large-scale structures (which invite us to measure ourselves head-on with the work) and the use of industrial materials (whose treatment suggests homogenisation, standardisation and control of their properties and powers) lead to an inaugural moment in twentieth-century visual arts: US minimalism. Critics have pointed out that the minimalism question no longer focuses on the work's plastic attributes but on the scene it displays. The minimalist scene presupposes a dramatic encounter between the bodies of the work and human bodies, which are measured specularly and spectacularly. The critic Michael Fried used the term *theatricality* to think about this new configuration of the aesthetic experience of the visual arts, in which the spectator's body entered the scene, measuring itself, with the presence of the work. Georges Didi-Huberman used an even more risqué term, *anthropomorphism* in dissimilarity, to convey the presence of the work turning the gaze on us. To think about the dramatic in terms of scenes and gazes presupposes an anthropocentred analytical framework in which everything that happens becomes an opportunity to take the balance of the human scale.

Yet it would be a trap to write Lamothe's work into this tradition. Certainly, the large plywood and iron structures she works with might suggest that the game proposed

tests the relationship between the human scale and the scale of the work. Lamothe's structures, however, reconfigure the crux of the debate around minimalism so completely that they end up exceeding it: her way of problematising anthropism presents itself less in terms of size than power. It is no longer about bodies of different scales subject to a logic of reflections and sharing a theatrical scene in which the action is suspended. Rather, Lamothe introduces a performatic relationship that foregrounds the action.

The material does not *stage* the scalar relation to the human body but *activates* it along with the bodies, which measure forces rather than images. The structures cease to be a scene observed at a distance and act in the space in intrusive mode. A fold: the surface curves, loses its direction and returns, turning back on itself, setting up interiors with no interiority. The tensile forces in the folded, curved and shaped wood act and interact with the bodies that explore them, operating through folds: the movement of the surfaces amplifies hollows, loops and knots. The plywood is treated like a textile, a mesh of threads frayed at the edges, breaking the surface and the plane only to open out and multiply the folds. Here again, the minimalist dogma of the encounter between bodies observing each other, gazing at each other, is distorted to the point of changing its meaning completely. Without interiority, the gaze – that quintessentially subjective element – loses depth and unfolds as a vision with no subject, a line with no bottom or reverse that composes provisional interiors within its folds.

In such works as *Metasbilad* (2016) or *Prueba de tensión* [Stress Test] (2014), materials morph through the work, enabling logics of flexibility, elasticity and resistance that are sensitised through interaction with viewers. A heavy material like a sheet of phenolic plywood yields slightly under the weight of the person interacting with it, reversing its structural function and liberating new formal and material potencies. Just as the dry hulls of insect exoskeletons crumble at the touch once relieved of their protective function, architectural materials normally used to provide another structure with additional external support turn out to be at once expressively fragile and hard. Scales – both extensive (dimension) and intensive (resistance) – wobble, collapse or almost crumble: it is impossible simply to assign a clear number that multiplies and grows to produce a device of great size or resistance but instead, like some strange Alice, constitutes a treatment of those scales that increases and decreases at the same time.

In the works *Ensayos de abertura* [Opening Tests] (2018), *Mutations* (2018) and *Brutal Ambivalence* (2019), Lamothe explores the plasticity of metal through a device grounded in a more strictly visual logic. The ends of metal tubes, with their shiny, homogeneous surfaces, are torn into strips of twisted iron like capricious roots mutilating the relation between the tubes' form and function. Operated on violently with a variety of tools, this mangled material brings into play the deterritorialisation of the tool function so that the tool becomes an agent of transformation and destruction. In *Free Function* (2016), the cutting effect can rend the tubes, like branches from a tree after a storm, breaking the line of vertical ascent and violently veering off in a new, often destructive direction. Deleuze and Guattari were fascinated by the plastic rather than the fixed nature of metal as a variable material that could take any form but could, above all, withstand any tension. The metallurgical flux generated by Lamothe allows contemplation of the intense life of metals subjected to temperatures and modelling, the colours of fire and the reflectivity of its shine. What grows at the edges, in this case, are the very forms metallic matter is capable of: fingers, branches, tentacles, the ends of the tubes break the straight line in an explosive visual effect. Taken to its limits, the material begins to twist and buckle, becoming rough and porous.

These two moments converge in *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas*. On the one hand, there is the moment that tests the human and the non-human in corporeal terms. The installation is transitable and, at times, inhabitable, while echoing the form of the primal shelter, the apparent protection of the roof, but always open-sided, suppressing any sense of closure and inviting movement through and around the plywood boards and iron tubes. On the other hand, that quasi-static, visual/sculptural moment of materials taken to the limit of their resistance and embedded in threshold zones. Here, we not only encounter the intervention of industrialised materials but their hybridisations with recycled or discarded pieces of wood, fallen branches and other modulations on the wooden body that spring up within the piece.

Ecotectonics

There is a difference in the architectural field between the stereotomic and the tectonic. Stereotomic constructions involve a continuum of matter, fixing their components to the earth and using its deeper stony layers as an infrastructural support. Tectonics, in architecture, denotes a principle of construction that exposes the material fractures running through a space and is often described as creating structures on a textile model: in other words, clothing or embodying by covering. Whereas stereotomy relates to monumentality, the tectonic has to do with the possibility of inhabiting: it modulates air flows that move and support the forms, and it creates structures by making the tensions between the different materials operational.

In this sense, components are no longer conceived as inert supports but as structuring potencies with their own agency, and when artistic practice is involved, the task is not so much to compose forms as to explore the imagination of the materials themselves. By reclaiming through art the agency of matter, Lamothe creates devices to access intercrossing forces, devices in which specific agential performances dynamically shape the world. These devices can, then, be seen as *open practices* (in Karen Barad's sense) which, by not seeking to close in on themselves, display a dimension in which the forces inherent in the components materialise on reversible pathways. These paths do not 'occupy' the space but somehow exude it around them. The use of plywood boards as a mobile structuring agent could not be more precise: by exploiting the folding of surfaces rather than demarcating boundaries between an outside and an inside (the way a door does), they open up inhabitable space pockets. Here, the imaginative acumen lies in not relying on the idea of architectural form/function but in

dislocating the usual ways in which we think and experience what it means to inhabit.
For human beings, inhabiting means sheltering indoors. We shelter from the inclemency of the elements, hence the identification of roof with house. We need something that sets a limit to the astral space above our heads, and we replace the vertical immensity connecting us to cosmic forces with windows that frame a small patch of landscape to be contemplated from the safety of our protected space. In this configuration, doors are the passing points between outside and inside, marking the movement from the public to the private, nature to culture, cosmos to oikos. But Lamothe invites us to practice another kind of inhabitation, one that teeters precariously on the desire for the doors to finally collapse, to give under forces that confuse interiority and exteriority. This practice involves a reconfiguration of acquired habits: those of someone looking and objectifying from an interior (first their body, then their house). By constructing a room where tectonic forces are exposed in their metastable tensions, Lamothe creates an installation that resembles the crucial instant when a small but incessant shift in the tectonic plates triggers an earthquake, when the forces under tension send the power of their constant vibration into the ground and make everything shake.

This is precisely where architectural tectonics imaginatively converges with geotectonics. It is as if Lamothe, obsessed by the mechanics and dynamics of telluric powers, had chosen the two quintessential structuring elements – metal and wood – to perform what, forbidden to vision, determines the way all forms of existence inhabit, namely the folds and faults of the lithosphere. If the analytical object of geotectonics is different types of deformation (elastic, plastic, rigid), Lamothe's work seems to explore each of these ways in which the materials relate to each other, each exerting efforts, weights and counterweights until something attains a kind of stability or finally gives and snaps.

Ojalá se derrumben las puertas thus constructs a performatic device where we can inhabit the web of relations in which we lucidly and ludically constitute ourselves – not exempt from conflicts, that is. Another name for this constituent relationality – one more befitting our times – is 'ecology'. Along the same lines, it would be even safer to say there is an 'ecotectonics' at play in Lamothe's artistic practice. Indeed, ecology was initially marked by a retreat into the private sphere, the home, as preserved in the prefix 'eco-', from the Greek 'oikos'. And, from the modern period onwards, this association has been welded to the fate of nature. Even today, we associate ecology with the green of plants, with what is not only human, with relations that claim to be harmonious and tend towards a self-regulating balance. Yet its contemporary forms of elaboration have been deromanticised and clearly aim to highlight the ways in which relations constitute practices involving all kinds of existences, including technological ones. If we keep in mind this type of denaturalised conceptualisation of ecology, critical of anthropocentrism, the association with Lamothe's work is an apt one. Her artistic thinking concentrates on the interplay between tectonic entities and forces of different types and scales: in other words, an ecotectonics.

Within this ecotectonic imagination, the use of industrial and discarded strips of wood and of metal structures allows a deliberate reflection on how organic, inorganic and artificial architectures can construct ecologies to accommodate systems of varying scales. When Lamothe chooses to manifest a material's 'energetic' aspect – what is constructed from the tensile forces – she creates an open, agential (ecotectonic) device in which, by accentuating the tensile potencies, one or several ways of inhabiting arise: a possible repertoire of movements. And not just for human beings: the whole deliberately alludes to and draws on possible flows and exchanges between the structures themselves, their relationship with air resistance and gravitational force. All this seems to have reached a metastability that may, at any moment, change and collapse in ruins.

The choice of an industrial timber product like plywood, then, adds a complex dimension to Lamothe's ongoing investigation. Its prominence points to the co-evolution of humans, plants and technico-technological processes, from our reconfiguration of large territories for forestry, to our atavistic relationship with fire (let us not forget that one of the most ancient anthropological markers is the management of igneous power). The presence of charred wood in the work unexpectedly invites us to picture what is perhaps one of the most enduring marks of human activity on Earth: the accelerated energy exchange that has led us to consume as many elements as possible in fire.

End-of-the-world temporalities

The concept of scale has acquired a highly specific meaning in the context of the climate crisis: scales are what have become immeasurable. Human scale cannot be gauged against geological scale unless it loses all traces of humanity. From this all-pervading problem has emerged the concept of the Anthropocene, a quasi-geological classification useful in pointing out the paradoxical nature of a humanity incapable of recognising itself in its traces or the changes it has wrought. It has become apparent that 'natural' matter is not the background upon which the (always human) drama is imprinted. Instead, it itself acts as a creative, formative, resistant agent in the particular relationship that occurs when forces encounter each other. Matter acts without script or drama, proposing forms and withstanding gestures, and simultaneously mobilises elements and imposes problems. Isabelle Stengers uses the term *intrusion* to explain the way the forces of Gaia arise and impose a specific public agenda.

While the contemporary world continues undeterred in its pursuit of more energy sources, fossil or otherwise, Lamothe's gesture places us at a point where ancient and contemporary timelines intersect, and encourages reflection on the imaginary agency of matter. Phenolic plywood is a wood laminate structure in which the temporality of the tree's grain appears as a vertical cut, as against the horizontal cut that allows us to calculate a tree's age. The plywood board thus reconstructs the material in the form of a vertical arrow that pierces and cuts through historical time on a human scale, suggesting the inclusion of speeds and spaces created by beings that, despite their close proximity, are utterly alien to us.

The scales here are measured through the points at which they meet and diffract, and these points imply a particular material fabric that creates – as well as produces – the bodies that inhabit it. The passage of time, rather than keeping to a romantic organic representation (which would lead to marking an individual's development, in the tree's case, by rings), is introduced in a brutal fashion showing, on the one hand, the scorched surface and its effects on the material's consistency and appearance, while, on the other, making us a part of the ancestral origin in which we humans have inhabited the world.

Lamothe's ecotectonics thus situates us at the vertex where different temporalities converge in conflict. The woods (industrial or salvaged, discarded from other constructions or simply public tree remains) and the metals (extracted and modelled from the bowels of the earth) that form it are beset by tensions that support and, at the same time, make their collapse imminent. The tree (and its drifts) as a paradigm of architecture crossing times and spaces, not as the first enduring image of what cannot exist in solitude, but as the sharp tip of a knot of relationships that constructs ecotectonic inhabitation, is an image whose complexity brings up the issues of the global crisis around the production and use of high-impact techniques on the climatic conditions we are living through and forces us to interrogate our desire. Will it only be the doors that collapse? Or will we be crushed beyond hope by the collapse of this world?