

*From the Border:
An Introduction to Ojalá se derrumben las puertas*
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‘We hope we will know what is unknown.’¹
Hélène Cixous

In her reflections on the act of writing, Hélène Cixous exhorts us to hear the inaudible, face the invisible, understand the incomprehensible, think the unthinkable. She seems to argue that all artistic endeavour is something like a leap into the void left in our minds by the unknown, that place where knowing and unknowing collide and mutually destroy each other. *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas* [Hope the Doors Collapse], the exhibition and book forming Argentina’s participation in La Biennale di Venezia and presenting the work of Luciana Lamothe, occupies that strange space of the indeterminate described by Cixous. It inhabits the (visible and invisible) borders that separate the human from the non-human, the natural from the constructed, the known from the unknown. In *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas*, Lamothe interlaces pieces of wood and pipes, bodies and structures, mutability and permanence, to create spaces within spaces that modulate forms of violence and hospitality in a tense equilibrium of interdependent forms.

If Lamothe’s earlier works put increasing strain on the materials to the point of blurring the lines between flexibility and rigidity, softness and hardness, the industrial and the natural, the four sculptures that make up *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas* take these dualities into radical territory. They now establish an affective relation with the material world to shape a particular form of living, thinking and feeling. The work posits matter as a principle of the real and a common horizon of all there is in order to provoke a series of displacements in constructive systems and the relations we establish with our environment and each other. In search of these new forms and sensibilities, the artist expands on her previous investigations into the functions, limits and potential of materials and their interactions with architecture with the aim of subverting some of its traditional imperatives and uses. A tangle of steel and wood thus positions us in an environment whose material forces manifest their own agency and erode the anthropocentred ontology of modernity.

Lamothe’s work began to take on its present form in the turbulence of Argentina’s economic, political, social and institutional crisis of the early 2000s. This turmoil transformed the ways we Argentinians related to our city and to the people and objects around us. Among other things, it forced us to rethink and denaturalise the logics of our social and material interactions. It attacked the foundations of everyday life and forced us to redesign the archi-

tectures and infrastructures that contained us and create new, more flexible, more solidary ones. From its inception, Lamothe’s is a project born of collapse.

Lamothe’s early works embraced vandalism as a driver, language and methodology. They made absurd use of tools and exercised a certain violence on materials in the public space. Over the years, however, her practice adopted space as a material, and the action shifted towards architecture as an object determining the dispositions (agency or potential) of human and non-human bodies and their interactions. Lamothe then set about challenging the limits of her essential materials/tools (wood and scaffolding), taking them to extremes of indeterminacy. In the indeterminate, she found the necessary space to articulate the violence of the crisis and by erasing the dividing lines within the construction/destruction binomial and opening lines of flight from the economic and emotional asphyxia that marked her generation.

In the introduction to *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (2014), the architect Keller Easterling argues that infrastructure is a ‘hidden substrate’² containing the rules that govern the space of everyday life. As ‘a soupy matrix of details and repeatable formulas that generate most of the space in the world’³, infrastructure – and one of its prime expressions, architecture – allows our bodies to circulate, interact, produce and generally exist within the confines of space. In its most extreme form, it determines what lives or dies within the system. In its least radical expression, it merely sets the rules of the game and defines a limited universe of possible relations for life on Earth.

Lamothe reorganizes this set of relationships in her works. Her sculptures address objects (human, infrastructural, industrial and ‘natural’), their latent potentials and the spatial field in which they exist in order to test alternatives to their familiar forms of interaction. To do this, she offers us a specific set of tools and perspectives that allow us to observe, represent and analyse our constructed environment and the structures humans have designed or occupied over time. Her systems of scaffolding and phenolic plywood infiltrate architecture and infrastructural forms to reveal the layers of techno-textures, information, history and relations that make up their quasi-industrial, quasi-natural bodies. By displaying the dismantled innards of our constructions and recomposing them in new, unexpected spatial formulations, *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas* insists on the possibility of effecting changes to our constructed environment and so also to the webs of relations and interactions that shape the world.

Lamothe displaces elements from their usual places in the system: scaffolding becomes structural rather than supportive, its ephemeral temporality, its role as a tool and its mutability replacing the permanence of iron and concrete; wood abandons its rigidity to embrace softness, decays, turns into coal, turns to dust, mutates. Lamothe turns her gaze to how our bodies and subjectivities interact with their environment and how these transformation processes operate. She constructs an excessive ecology that shapes and reshapes itself over and over through experimentation. Bodies, branches, trunks, curved, burnt, drilled and slashed wood, steel pipes and clamps are interlaced in vibrant, mutable, embracing forms. She thus creates a medium in which the rules of the game are not determined by the logics of infrastructure or modern architecture but by elusive, imperfect, impure solutions. Her structures are labile, vibrating with the touch of bodies and an energy of their own, seeming to want to collapse. They hold no guarantee of success, or even survival; their forms correspond to the real needs and possibilities of their component object/bodies, exploring combinations that embody an always latent potential lurking in space and matter. They assemble objects, forces and subjectivities in a constant becoming. Lamothe's meticulous manipulation of the material world combines elements and sequences of reactions, weights and counterweights, invoking more-than-human alliances and a spatial alchemy that generate new formal, aesthetic and affective possibilities for the bodies and objects they contain. She creates undisciplined spaces opposed not only to the constructive forms of modernity but also rebelling against what Malcom Ferdinand calls '*l'habiter colonial*' (colonial inhabitation), the violence of which subjects territories and human and non-human bodies to a system of extractivist exploitation. Each of the four sculptures that make up *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas* functions as an enveloping inhabitable space that disorganizes the hegemonic constructive system while suggesting another way of conceiving our relationship with the material world around us. At the same time, they contain forms of care and violence – inevitably interlaced by the dissent necessary for the sensitive construction of collective intelligence⁴ – that are manifested in the slashes, joints, assemblages and torsions essential for the work to keep its form: a series of wounds and sutures that acknowledge the burden of centuries of social, spatial and material conditioning on human and non-human bodies.

Constructed from iron scaffolding and plywood boards manipulated into curves and counter-curves, the work's interstices house a series of objects embodying different stages in the life of wood: from its origin, through its extraction as a commodified resource and its industrialization, to its discarding as organic or industrial waste. This approach to materials – which Lamothe calls 'monomateriality' – and a constructive methodology connecting objects, materials and human and non-human bodies through pipes and knots, fittings and assemblages, leads us to experience the smell of the wood, explore its textures with our fingertips, test its resistance with our weight, become aware of its movements and vibrations in our bodies. It forces us to pay unusual attention both to the structures and the materials and to experience them as part of a supportive system of interconnected subsistences.

Ojalá se derrumben las puertas invites us to escape from the moderno-colonial perception and imagination to establish a sensual, affective relationship with materials. The work immerses us in its smooth, warm curves while confronting us with jagged points, tense joints, charred wood, and suffocating joints. It faces us with the contradictions and discrepancies which, as Easterling points out, 'the modern mind abhors.'⁵ The work, in any event, proposes a way of relating to materials (and the world) that is not free of tensions but enables a generative balance of exchange and solidarity. It produces forms based on trial and error and at the scale of the bodies and the forms in which these bodies interact. According to the imaginary of modern architecture, these indeterminate forms should not work, yet, in their indeterminacy, they briefly overflow the ordering categories that separate our bodies and repair a broken bond to imagine another possible way of inhabiting.

Ojalá se derrumben las puertas, the book – a free-standing object in its own right devised by designer Laura Escobar – forms part of the same ecosystem as the work it accompanies without being its reflection. Its form dismantles the usual ways in which we use a book to propose a reading that begins in a traditional way and becomes rarefied when reaching its center, from which the pages double their size and display visual and textual intertwinings. Texts, images and drawings accumulate one after another to build up layers of hands/tools manipulating structures and tangles of branches puncturing the plywood. The constructive and affective principles of the work are scattered about the paper in a visual essay that, like the work, enunciates a different way of looking at and thinking of these materialities: not as detached tools and objects, each inhabiting its own material universe, but as a continuum of relationships and reactions that feed off each other.

The drawings here present hands and different possible combinations of their positions as tools interacting with materials, not through the execution of an action, but through form, potential and the performatic. From observation of the work's component materials and arrangement, the essay by philosophers Guadalupe Lucero and Noelia Billi, 'The Ecotectonic Imagination of Luciana Lamothe', sets out to gauge materials not only by their scale but by the performatic way they relate to viewers, their joint way of acting by gauging their forces. They address Lamothe's commitment to manifesting a material's 'energetic' aspect, namely what is constructed from forces under tension.

While the drawings manifest the energy of the materials, a series of photographs makes us voyeuristic witnesses to the intimacy of the possible linkages between a body and its environment. In the post-apocalyptic heat of a scene of destruction and dereliction, a body tangles with a wooden board, bending it, lifting it, stretching it, exerting pressure on it, distending it, each eventually submitting to the other's weight and shape and disappearing inside it. The body manipulates and is manipulated, surrenders to the physical world, merges with it, re-imagines its linkages and limits. 'Natural History', a text by writer Ana Llurba, presents the city not merely as a backdrop but as a living organism. Just like the body in the photographs,

Llurba's protagonist discovers and experiments with the materiality of a vibrant environment – at once balanced and unbalanced, fragile and harsh – of a city in ruins. An ontology of the world of materials becomes entangled with a dystopian setting to bring a critique of the social and climatic catastrophe looming over us into the present tense.

In a context of extreme violence that seeks to flatten out differences and sweep away dissent, *Ojalá se derrumben las puertas* offers a form of resistance grounded in indeterminacy and divergence to break through the dominant cultural parameters. It enunciates an ecology in which bodies, objects and structures fracture the boundaries that separate culture from nature, the human from the non-human, in order to imagine material alliances for other possible symbiotic, queer, solidary forms of life.

- 1 Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994: 38).
- 2 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2014: 3).
- 3 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft* (2014: 3).
- 4 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004: 85).
- 5 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London/New York: Verso, 2021: 18).