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Allegory & Anxiety: On Lyla Rye's *Swing Stage*

by Etienne Turpin

However anachronistic it may sound, it is important to ask the fundamental question: 'what is architecture?' The creation of architecture must be a criticism of the problems of today. It must resist existing conditions. It is only when one faces up to today's problems that one can really begin to deal with architecture. – Tadao Ando

In her lyrical and ludic sculpture, *Swing Stage*, Lyla Rye resists and redoubles the "existing conditions" of present architectural surroundings, invoking an industrial past and attendant social anxieties. Developed for the off-site program of the Koffler Gallery, Rye's installation is presented at the Olga Korper Gallery, situated within the Morrow complex. Built in the 1890s, the building functioned initially as a foundry. Although long divorced from this original use, remnants of its industrial past are still visible in the gallery's high, peaked ceiling and metal trusses. Rye's sculpture re-inhabits this space in a deceptively simple mimetic occupation. A rectangular platform of impressive scale floats one foot above the concrete floor, suspended from the roof trusses with chains that replicate the truss configuration. The black but highly polished surface of the platform mirrors the ceiling above. A circular screen positioned above one end of the sculpture captures a video projection that includes historic drawings of the building, footage from the site, and a Google Earth model view of the adjacent neighbourhood.

In Rye's installation, the swing produces an allegory for an unfixed and mobile ground, that is, an event of encounter. As with every successful allegory, the aspects of the sculpture that we recognize as familiar are only partially so, in that the components are both referential and differential with respect to our "existing conditions" and their history. This is due, in part, to the multiple optical inversions at play in Rye's installation. First, the roof trusses are reflected against the vinyl surface of the platform, creating a peculiar image of a recessed absence in the centre of the piece. Then, the window on the eastern gallery wall near the peak of the roof is reflectively doubled in the stage surface which, depending on the perspective of the viewer, offers a refracted and oblique yet impossible view out of the gallery. Finally, the floating circular projection not only mimics the impossible-to-reach eastern window, but offers a series of possible vistas through a mix of archival and contemporary imagery of the site. The multiple redoubling of the visual economy within the space creates an allegorical encounter; the referent is split between the possible and impossible, the past and the future, and the real and its representation.

The viewer is invited to step up on the low-lying platform and take in the perspective of the gallery from this suspended stage. Immediately, the anxiety of

walking on the raised swing, with its slow but unsettling movement, signals the uncertain ground of the installation. This uncertainty is registered in the body of the viewer. Here, the encounter with *Swing Stage* seems to redouble the anxiety – within the discipline (the body) of architecture itself – that accompanied the development of new architectural types in the late nineteenth century. The Morrow foundry was one of many novel building types that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, which included the railway station, the market hall, and the factory. All of these emerged without lineage and defied architectural precedent, making the historical conventions through which architecture understood itself increasingly untenable. Industrial innovation meant the ground of architecture was literally shifting.

The site-specificity of Rye's installation also shifts the ground of the gallery's architecture through more subtle historical references. Of the many moments of redoubling encountered in *Swing Stage*, the repetition of the roof trusses in the pattern created by the chain suspension is the most visually striking. Less obvious is the fact that the trusses themselves are the double of the work that once took place on the foundry floor – the production and casting of metal. Not only did the Industrial Revolution and its attendant built forms create an uneasiness for architectural tradition, these forms also shaped the spaces within which the technologies of production would become the norm. With *Swing Stage*, the visual economy that connects the chain to the truss, and the truss and the chain back to the foundry floor where they were produced, references and redoubles patterns of industrial political economy as the viewer is held in suspense on the platform.

Notably, as industrialization in the nineteenth century made way for mechanization and standardization, a concomitant eventuality occurred on the side of consumption. The famed “transparencies” of iron and glass construction, including iconic works such as Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace in London, 1851, and Gustave Eiffel's eponymously named tower for the Paris Exhibition of 1889, helped to reframe the anxieties of industrial production through an architectural image of democratic transparency, physical lightness, and an open syntax of visual commerce. Yet these icons are not the end of the story. Present-day architectural apprehensions are less a matter of formal precedent or typological pedigree, and more concretely tied to issues of uneven development and rapid gentrification.

Looking up from *Swing Stage* to the small circular eastern window, we might also assume a reference to the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts, not by way of the physical removal of material to create an opening to the outside (despite a surprising formal similarity), but through the ephemerality of Rye's platform from which any view of the exterior is pursued but never completed. Of particular note is Matta-Clark's *Day's End (Pier 52)* (1975), a piece executed over several months as the artist, suspended in a harness above the abandoned New York city pier, cut geometric but partial sections from the corrugated steel walls of the former workspace, creating a veritable clock (sunlight passed along the cuts and down a central trough through the pier floor) that rendered the workday visible again.¹ As

the pier was already emptied of its industrial past, Matta-Clark could address the loss of labour through the site's decay, and the loss of social history signaled by this absent working class. Similarly, Rye stages a confrontation, by way of the swing as allegory, between the lost space of the functional foundry and its renewal as an ornamental type. In this regard, the title *Swing Stage* alludes to the suspended scaffolds used for construction or maintenance on the exterior of high-rise buildings. It can thus be read as an ambiguous allusion to the very process of gentrification, or "urban renewal," which prevented the foundry from falling into terminal disrepair and allowed the gallery to remodel the space in its own renewed image.

Swing Stage also seems to hint at the idea of the stage as a site where the temporary suspension of disbelief can occur. If this is the case, can *belief* also be suspended on this platform? For an allegory to work, both disbelief and belief must be held in moments of differential suspension. In this sense, Rye's sculpture is both *mimetic*, with regard to the formal image of industrialization, and *disjunctive*, with respect to the space it inhabits and the visual tropes it makes manifest. This use of a compositional disjunction nested within a formal logic of mimicry characterizes a mode of art making that is especially contemporary. That is, as the activist and critic Craig Owens presciently argued in his study of art and postmodernity, it is precisely allegorical.² The allegory allows for an open and dynamic relation produced by a mimetic but disjunctive presentation of recognizable forms.

We may borrow from Matta-Clark's description of his own practice of intervention to characterize Rye's sculptural suspension: "Angles and depths can be perceived where they should have been hidden. Spaces are available to move through that were previously inaccessible. My hope is that the dynamism of the action can be seen as an alternative vocabulary with which to question the static inert building environment."³ Through the staged anachronism of the industrial foundry and the multiple redoubling created for the viewer held in suspension on the platform, Rye has created an anarchitectural and allegorical sculpture that undermines any inert sense of building or static sense of ground. As we try to find our balance, and then our orientation, we encounter the allegorical accuracy of Rye's redoubling of our "existing conditions" and the persistent anxieties they produce.

Etienne Turpin
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Notes

Epigraph. Tadao Ando, *El Croquis 44* (September, 1990), 192.

1. Interview with Gordon Matta-Clark, reprinted in *Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2006), 215-220.
2. Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October 12* (Spring 1980), 67-86.
3. Gordon Matta-Clark, quoted in *Urban Alchemy/Gordon Matta-Clark* (St. Louis: Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, 2009).

Lyla Rye is a Toronto-based installation artist. Her work has been exhibited across Canada including at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria; The Power Plant, Toronto; the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax; the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge; and the Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto. She has shown internationally in San Francisco, New York, Adelaide, Paris, and Berlin. Her works are in the collections of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, York University, Cadillac Fairview Corporation, the Tom Thompson Art Gallery, Harbourfront Centre and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery. (www.lylarye.com)

Etienne Turpin, Ph.D., is a founding editor of the architecture, landscape, and political economy journal *Scapegoat* (www.scapegoatjournal.org), and a research fellow at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan.