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Erratic Room

Lyla Rye

Essay by Shani K Parsons

A dark doorway looms; fitful light from beyond the threshold beckons. Upon entering, you may chance upon discordant collisions between sound and image, or perhaps instead a dark and quiet moment's repose, allowing pupils to widen and attention to focus on the absence of sensory stimulation. Images continue to appear and fade -- at times swiftly, other times slowly; a door slams, light sprawls across a living room floor. Other images evoke decidedly non-domestic spaces -- walls from a virtual world collapse; a crack crawls across a foreign roadway. From your cloistered vantage point within the darkened room, enveloping projections assume the form and function of apparitional windows on an unsettled world.

One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark.

Annie Dillard¹

Throughout human history, dark rooms have occupied a spectral presence in our imagination and memory, and even in today's brilliantly illuminated world we continue to spend a significant portion of our lives within them. From the theatre to the bedroom, we enter or invest these anomalous spaces with feelings of anticipation, trepidation, fantasy or fear. Curtains closed, we await the return of light to our eyes, whether through the spectacle of performance or through sleep -- itself a kind of personal performance in the theatre of dreams. During those first moments when darkness begins to settle upon us, our senses become finely attuned to the subtleties of atmosphere and existence, focusing inward upon the flow of our thoughts even while searching outward for any clue of what remains to be seen. In the absence of light, our minds take flight, seeking exits and entries through any aperture that can be discerned within the shadows. In the dark, where space becomes boundless and untenable, our most imaginative selves take centre stage, enacting our innermost desires and deepest dread.

Lyla Rye's *Erratic Room* is one such anomalous space, finely tuned to interrogate and conflate dualities of light/dark, inside/outside, past/future, and reality/fantasy in ways that destabilize our assumptions as to what constitutes a "safe place" (e.g., home or sanctuary) in the world today. However, unlike the archetypal house or stage, *Erratic Room* is devoid of physical features, becoming a pure distillation of the anticipatory, fantastical spaces of the darkened theatre and the bedroom before sleep, as well as an echo of the once-magical creative spaces inhabited by digital

photography's forebears, the camera obscura and darkroom. Going back even further: our distant ancestors brought to life the very earliest of humanity's pictorial images within the deepest of caves. In all of these hidden, hallucinatory places, representations of the real are carefully wrought within beams of light emerging from the end of a torch, out an aperture, through a lens. In the developing image before us, we make a mirror of reality, in which we desire to see ourselves.

But what happens when the lens is blurred or the window breaks, when there is no careful control? What of the mirror image then, and our place within it? *Erratic Room* confronts us with these all-too-likely potentialities. Rye's source imagery, featuring architectural and urban apertures, enclosures, edges and experiences, are made stranger through strategies of framing, pacing, positioning, inverting, and stretching or collapsing (of time, space and scale), constituting an off-kilter vision of the world just beyond our walls. Looking through such troubled portals, we sense the true fragility and porosity of our carefully built enclosures – lights penetrating closed windows or gaping doors, floors tilting and bulging, gates shaking, walls being breached or broken down. Split between angled mirrors, the resultingly skewed projections defy our innate sense of perspective and gravity, adding a physical dimension to our feelings of instability. Out-of-sync sounds, unmoored from the images and actions they originally corresponded to, reverberate with an echo or foreshadowing of past and future uncertain events.

Playing across the walls and floor in front of, around, and even upon our bodies, *Erratic Room's* randomized series of sound/image permutations functions as a virtual architectural intervention. Simultaneously delimiting and expanding the boundaries of the space it occupies, the room begets a similarly confounding effect upon our imaginations and memories with its trapezoidal representations of windows, doors, floors, walls, gates, and stairs under varying degrees of duress. Here (and by extension, anywhere), the normatively protective devices we have built to sequester ourselves from the outside world have an equally sinister potential to betray or entrap us.

In what shelter can one take refuge? Space is nothing but a 'horrible outside-inside.' In this ambiguous space, the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting.

The line of demarcation between outside and inside [is aggravated] ... juxtaposed in us [are] claustrophobia and agoraphobia.

Gaston Bachelard²

And yet – a certain wonderment forestalls fear as our eyes adjust and we begin to see some of the shadows for what they represent. Recognition allows memory to meet imagination, tempering the unknown and opening up passageways toward

understanding and integration of our sensory experience. In this way *Erratic Room* moves beyond mere funhouse effects and voyeuristic chills into a space of questioning and contemplation. Lights angle over walls in a way that recalls night cars haunting childhood windows – but was that fear, or a sense of comfort one felt, wrapped up in blankets on a cozy bed? Sunlight streams through window blinds, recalling the warmth of a summer afternoon – or is that the advancing crispness that winter twilight brings? And at certain points we see a figure briskly appear and disappear – but this is no ghost. Who is this familiar foil?

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Buster Keaton is disentangling himself from the contrary bed sheet. He is not fighting it as much as trying to understand it. The linen is not an adversary; it is a puzzle to be solved.. With the silent perseverance of a microbe hunter searching out a cure for the plague, he transforms the sheet into something else. His was the spirit of the alchemist transmuting dross into gold. If only to get out of the jam he was in.

In the bed, he twists, turns one way, then another. No soap. The sheet ravel itself around him even more tightly. He stands up. It is a toga. He is a solemn Roman senator, surveying with fixed gaze something out there. Once more, stone-faced though perplexed, he tries to free himself. The sheet is maddeningly enveloping him. Another move... it becomes a flowing robe, the caftan of an Arab sheik. Again, he is at it. A winding sheet! We catch our breath. It has become the white shroud of the three dead little sons returning to haunt The Wife of Usher's Well.

Buster is a prisoner with no means of escape. Does this call for Houdini? Pause. He makes another, somewhat acrobatic turn, and he is free. He gets out of bed, puts on his clothes, and that's it. End of scene.

Studs Terkle³

The presence of Buster Keaton within *Erratic Room* is no accident or joke; his work fascinates Rye (as well as a long list of other artists who cite him as a major influence, from Jacques Tati to Jackie Chan, Samuel Beckett, Woody Allen, and Robert Wilson).^{4,5} Among the images Rye sourced for *Erratic Room* are key moments from two of his short films, namely *One Week* (1920) and *The Electric House* (1922). Both films feature the actor entangled in an epic struggle with structure – in *One Week* he vainly attempts to build a kit home for himself and his new bride; in *The Electric House* he gamely outfits a patron's house with all manner of automated gadgetry which goes haywire to disastrous effect.^{6,7} Like the bed sheet Turkel describes, the houses are puzzles to be reckoned with, impassive machines which offer not security but treachery in their baffling transformations. Windows become exists to be launched through, a stairway propels people into a swimming pool. Walls slip upside down and turn inside out – in Keaton's representation of the world, all that happens in contrary to reasonable expectations.

However as man goes up against machine and fails and fails again, we do not despair but laugh; Keaton's stone-faced determination in the wake of adversity both bewilders and emboldens us. As Terkel observes, "it is not a moment of fright we are experiencing, as much as antic anxiety. Our unsettlement is not unlike that of the little children in Truffaut's *400 Blows*, caught by the violence of Punch and Judy, yet delighting in their terror".⁸ Ever the clown, Keaton nevertheless understands that his apparent lack of emotion conveys an uncanny sort of "patience and power to endure", bestowing a "disturbing tension and grandeur to the foolishness ... For those who [sense it, there is] in his comedy a freezing whisper ... of melancholia".⁹

Like Keaton, Rye recognizes this tension between fear and absurdity, embedding within *Erratic Room* subtle flashes of humour that emerge unexpectedly out of the darkness. In one such moment, we glimpse Keaton dauntlessly clinging to *One Week's* spinning wall, refusing to be cast out of the house he is fruitlessly trying to build. In others, *The Electric House's* runaway stair and perverse pool (one almost kills him, the other foils his melodramatic attempt at suicide) appear and reappear – oblique references to threats and travails (Falls, floods) both he and we must overcome each day in our own presumably secure homes. "Like the hapless diners at the mechanized table [of *Electric House*], we too have had our chairs pulled out from under us, not knowing why the startling mishaps are happening nor how they will ever be fixed. [Yet] we are, oddly enough, not entirely hopeless, but rather mixed with [feelings of] expectation and optimism."¹⁰

In another instance, we see a door close, but only under power of a giant hand, revealing the image to be sourced from a dollhouse, that miniature representation of an ideal domestic reality so replete with childhood fantasy and rituals of play.¹¹ Echoing the outsized hand in *One Week*, which tears off calendar pages marking the film's progress through time (and cheekily provides a bathing lady with cover), the surprising appearance of Rye's hand writ large in *Erratic Room* has the effect of breaking the proverbial "fourth wall" separating audience from action, a form of direct address which in this case affirms the authorial presence of the artist and calls attention to the artifice in all images.¹²

This sense of artifice is in fact what unifies the disparate source images which populate the installation. For example, in addition to the hand-built dollhouse and Keaton clips, *Erratic Room* comprises high resolution video set up and shot from within the artist's home, low resolution 3D animation demos from the web, and amateur disaster footage (edited and altered by Rye) also found online. The images are uniformly stripped of colour, inverted at times, and bear the artifacts of their provenance, so that the grainy texture of the Keaton clips speak to the distant cinematic past as much as the pixelated consistency of the found footage is a clue to its internet origins.

Isolating and actualizing the fundamental solitude and surreality in images mined from the fantasy-laden beginnings of film to the present-day profusion of "reality"-

based media (which so often usurps fantasy in its strangeness), Rye circumscribes a contemporary world in which the slippage between fact and fiction becomes visible, even tangible and inevitable. In so doing, Rye has created within *Erratic Room* a potentially transformative, and ultimately transcendent, space. Although we may enter and inhabit this darkened place as prisoners within Plato's allegorical cave, cobbling together a false reality out of the artifacts of shadows, the possibility remains that we may yet freely emerge as philosophers, at home in a world beyond what we already know, dread, or desire.¹³

Able to look upon the light directly, we may come to see and apprehend those illusory "black and white images..." for what they truly and simply are: the purely visual poetry of "pointillism in varying intensities of gray."¹⁴ As Bachelard observes in his *Poetics*, such knowledge bears fruit in far greater imaginings: "When so many doors are closed, there is one that is just barely ajar. We have only to give it a very slight push! The hinges have been well oiled. And our fate becomes visible."¹⁵

SHANI K PARSONS
DIRECTOR, TYPOLOGY PROJECTS
OCTOBER 2013

WORKS CITED

1. Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. New York: Harper & Row. 1989. Print.
2. Gaston Bachelard on Henri Michaux's prose-poem, *Shade-Haunted Space* (1952):
Space, but you cannot even conceive the horrible inside-outside that real space is. / Certain (shades) especially, girding their loins one last time, make a desperate effort to "exist as a single unity." But they rue the day. I met one of them. / Destroyed by punishment, it was reduced to a noise, a thunderous noise. / An immense world still heard it, but it no longer existed, having become simply and solely a noise, which was to rumble on for centuries longer, but was fated to die out completely, as though it had never existed.

(Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Print.)
3. Turkel, Studs. *The Studs Terkel Interviews: Film and Theater*. New York: New Press, 2008. Print.
4. Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film, 2nd ed.* New York: WW Norton & Company, Inc., 1990. Print.
5. Samuel Beckett/UK and Irish Premiere. "Robert Wilson: Krapp's Last Tape." August 2012. Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival. Web. October 2013.

6. *One Week* Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. Performed by Buster Keaton and Sybil Sealey. Metro Pictures Corp., 1921. Silent B/W Film, Kino International Corp., 2005. DVD.
7. *The Electric House*, Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. Performed by Buster Keaton and Virginia Fox. Buster Keaton Productions, Inc., 1922. Silent B/W Film. Kino International Corp., 2005. DVD.
8. Turkel, Studs .*The Studs Terkel Interviews: Film and Theater*
9. Agee, James. "Comedy's Greatest Era." *Agee on Film, Vol 1*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1958. Print.
10. Oldham, Gabriella. *Keaton's Silent Shorts: Beyond the Laughter*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. Print.
11. The dollhouse is a recurring motif in Rye's work, through which she has mediated her interest in architectural forms and the domestic condition, particularly as it relates to motherhood. (Hayes, Kenneth. "Frank Lloyd Wright's Mother." *Lyla Rye: Hopscotch*. Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2007. Print.)
12. The concept of 'breaking the fourth wall', or direct address, refers to moments in theatre and film when characters acknowledge the audience as spectators. According to film historian Tom Brown, this cinematic device may function variously to establish intimacy, agency, superiority, honesty, immediacy, alienation, or stillness between viewer and viewed. (Brown, Tom. *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2012. Print.)
13. In Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave, the uneducated are likened to prisoners bound within a cave for all of their lives, believing as a result that shadows cast on the wall by a fire are the true representations of reality. Only upon being freed from the cave can a prisoner know the true reality and aspire to the mind-state of philosopher. (Plato. *The Republic: The Complete and Unabridged Jowett Translation*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Vintage Classics, 1991. Print.)
14. Oldham, Gabriella. *Keaton's Silent Shorts: Beyond the Laughter*.
15. Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*.

ERRATIC ROOM

Print Series

The *Erratic Room* Print Series is produced by Lyla Rye in conjunction with the exhibition of the *Erratic Room* installation at TYPOLOGY. For over the past ten years, photography has been an integral part of Rye's artistic practice, and the *Erratic Room* Print Series is the physical extension and embodiment of the ideas she explores in the ephemeral installation.

Conceived as a sculptural photo edition, the print series features four light-filled moments from the *Erratic Room* video projection sequence, each of which has been carefully selected, printed, and mounted between curved supports within a custom

wood box frame. Like the installation, the edition hovers between two and three dimensions, playing with the viewer's spatial perception in its warping of both image and support. The resulting artworks appear to flex and breathe within their containments, shifting in perspective and depth as the viewer changes position.

Digitally printed on glossy fine art paper, the prints are highly reflective and responsive to ambient light and the surrounding environment in a way that makes them truly site-specific: the constantly changing reflections and shadows playing across the photographic surfaces are considered by the artist to be integral to the images. Often ghostlike in form, they function as a visual index to the specific spatial and temporal conditions in which they are being seen.

The Erratic Room Print Series is shown framed with reflections on the next four pages. To see the unframed edition without reflections, see the Exhibition Checklist, p. 25.

ARTIST Q+A

What is your background and how does it shape your interest in visual art? How did you come to be an artist?

I began my post secondary education studying architecture. I actually dropped out of art after grade nine. In high school I was very good at math and had strong three-dimensional perception so architecture seemed like the right direction. In the end it was not a good fit, at least not then and there, but that two years of study influenced me greatly. Once I made the transition to studying visual arts, it actually took me a few years to find a way to use my interest in architecture in my work.

Where does an artwork begin for you? How do you develop ideas and imagery? What materials and processes do you employ? How do you experiment or play?

Starting with a found element is my favourite way to work. Most often I have a material, site, or source footage that I reflect upon and respond to and the piece develops from there without much sense of what the final result will be. On a video project, I usually have to find, create, and alter almost twice as much footage as I ultimately end up using. The pieces grow and grow and grow and then there is a crisis point when I'm lost and confused. I often seem to have to discover the logic by trying as many possibilities as I can imagine. Then I start putting limits on the project and refine the logic more consciously than I did in the early development phase.

Erratic Room began with the Buster Keaton footage and the realization that the architecture was active enough that I could zoom in and isolate it. In his work the sets are almost cast members — they are so inventive, interactive, and mobile. *Erratic Room* then expanded to include a wide range of footage where I could find

that mobility in architectural space, like web animations and product demos. It was also informed by news reports of people being pushed off subway platforms, trucks careening into houses and toxins leaking into basements. I felt a new sense of societal anxiety about the safety and security of built space.

I also have vivid architectural dreams where there are no other people but the spaces change or grow as I move through them. When I remember these dreams I can usually find a starting experience or the memory of a room that was the origin, and then I can consider how my subconscious altered it.

How has your practice changed over time? Has your work evolved in a particular way? Have there been experiences in life or work that changed your approach?

In undergrad, I began studying painting but then made architectural models to paint from. Then the paintings came off the wall and I shifted to sculpture. I always wanted to occupy a lot of space and give the viewer a spatial experience. At first I did this by creating many small objects but by grad school I had developed the strategy of using very ephemeral materials to occupy a large amount of space. This has the advantage of saving money and storage space and allowed me to show site specific works particular to each gallery or exhibition space. I've worked in many unconventional places including warehouse basements, an elevator, a women's prison and a decrepit bathroom of an old rooming house. Each of these spaces was the impetus for a unique piece that was aligned with an investigation into a material and its potential — structural, formal, optical, and referential. The disadvantage of working this way was that if I didn't have any exhibitions scheduled I didn't know what to do with myself and after each show I was left with only images and fragments.

After becoming a mother I taught myself video editing with the help of some very generous artist friends including the late Kartz Ucci, and Michael Balsler, and filmmaker Ross Turnbull. Each of them taught me something about what it meant to work in a time-based medium. But I was also heavily inspired by watching my daughter. I think I carried that responsiveness from the site works to the video pieces. This allowed me to investigate my reactions to unplanned footage of my daughter and me. Video also seemed like a way to impact a large volume of space without much material. I really relate to much of my practice as being experiential. The fact that the work is both ephemeral and temporal locates the viewer within the present moment with respect to the work. Their memory of the experience is as much a part of the piece as anything tangible, kind of like a book: is it an object, a narrative, or your experience of the narrative?

I then developed strategies to have the video imagery impact the perceptual experience of the physical space in which it was situated. I think of this as a contrast to the alternate reality, or window experience, that conventional film presents. In parallel with the video installations, a series of sculptural interventions began to

emerge, and then alongside many of the video installations I developed a series of digital photos. The *Erratic Room* photo series came after the video installation but has similar intentions.

More recently, I've been making *Screen Grab* buttons which are an exploration that comes from long hours of searching the web for imagery and editing video. They represent moments when alternate realities collide in too-perfect-to-be-planned ways. I also like the idea of the collisions of image and text being further re-contextualized when the buttons are worn on people's clothing.

What art/artists/movements do you most identify with and why?

For a wide range of reasons I strongly relate to minimalism, early site constructions and also the first generation of film and video explorations. Artists like Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Bruce Nauman and Gordon Matta-Clark are big influences. In addition to Buster, I have an ongoing art crush on Giotto and his wacky buildings.

What memorable responses have you had to your work, and have they changed the way you think about making art?

When I was doing video work with my daughter that became controversial, the best response I had to the work was in a comment book, from a survivor of incest. This person felt the work was very disturbing but ultimately said that they'd be back to see it again. I was so pleased with this. I felt the work walked the fine line between being too disturbing and insensitive on one hand and so benign that it became cute or forgettable on the other. I don't think I've hit that perfect place since, but the work hasn't been as contentious lately either.

On a day off, what are some of your favourite things to do?

I love to be in nature and to be active. I swim, hike, canoe, skate, ski, and bike. I also read a ton of novels and watch films: Canadian, independent, and foreign, with a smattering of Hollywood.

What are you reading/watching/looking at/listening to these days?

I'm reading Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* and am waiting for my partner to finish Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda*. I am also an avid listener to podcasts on a wide range of subjects from science to spiritualism to advertising to culture. I haven't had time for many movies recently.

Do you collect anything? What? Why?

I don't actively collect anything, as in seeking out things to acquire, except maybe books — novels and art catalogues. I feel that I learn so much about the world from novels in a way that seems truer than what I learn from the news. A novel gives you

a world view, the psychology of the characters and the full arc of events, that is hard to get from the sporadic and often traumatic reporting from around the world that we have access to.

I guess if I am to be completely honest, I have also consistently gathered Danish modern furniture and jewellery in weird materials — bone, glass, felt, porcelain, rubber, plastic, stainless steel, etc. I like to see the inventiveness of designers and experience the joy of having intimate daily contact with the objects.

What are you working on right now?

A single channel video playing with red/cyan colour separation from black and white footage of chase scenes from Buster Keaton's film Cops. I am also starting to think about a sculptural installation where the video element is perhaps simply a light that moves across reflective, transparent, or mobile surfaces.

Name 1-3 contemporary artists whose work you feel deserves more attention.

There are so many, especially mid-career Canadian artists. I have to admit, my first thought is of my partner John Dickson's work. I think his last series of live feed video and audio installations are brilliant (but I am rather biased!). I am very excited to see that Polish artist Monika Sosnowska is having two shows in Canada this year, but at the same time sad to know that I won't have the opportunity to see them.

LYLA RYE
TORONTO, 2013

ABOUT THE ARTIST

My practice explores our relationship with space. Although we spend the majority of our lives indoors, the effect that architecture has on us is mainly unconscious. I have made sculptural and video installations, chalkline drawings, single channel videos and digital photographs that draw attention to the impact of rooms on our psyche. My aim is to create architectural experiences that are slightly unsettling using strategies of physical imbalance, optical confusion and material incongruity.

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ARTIST'S BIO

Lyla Rye is Toronto based installation artist who began her studies in architecture. She studied at University of Waterloo, York University (BFA 1989), and the San Francisco Art Institute (MFA 1994). She works in installation, video, and photography to explore our experience of architectural space.

Her work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally including exhibitions in San Francisco, New York, Adelaide (Australia), Paris, and Berlin. She has work in the public collections of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, York University, Cadillac Fairview Corporation, The Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Harbourfront Centre and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

Starting in the early 1990s she was a founding member of the sculptors' collective Nether Mind. Since that time she has worked in a number of collectives including 5 things, hic and Persona Volare focusing on site-specific installations in non-gallery spaces. She has had exhibitions in a women's prison, various industrial basements, a storefront window, a Debates Room, a juniper bush, a classroom, an elevator, and on the edge of the Canadian Shield.

She is a sessional faculty member in the Art and Art History joint program between Sheridan College and University of Toronto Mississauga and the founder of Mentor Lyla Rye.

www.lylarye.com

ABOUT TYPOLOGY

TPOLOGY is a not-for-profit project space devoted to artistic and curatorial research, collaboration, and experimentation in the production of exhibitions, editions, and related events.

Opened in 2013 by independent curator and exhibition designer Shani Parsons, TPOLOGY's programming emphasizes small group exhibitions, two-person shows, and site-specific installations with an eye toward stimulating dialogue between artists, art forms, ideas, images, objects, environments, and audiences. With a thematic focus on critically engaged, collaborative and cross-disciplinary practices, underrepresented artists and art forms, and community outreach and education in art and exhibition-making, TPOLOGY seeks to engage and inform audiences from all walks of life.

www.typology.ca

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DIRECTOR'S BIO

Over the past fifteen years, Shani Khoo Parsons has built a multidisciplinary practice focused on exhibitions and publications for cultural and educational institutions and organizations.

Blurring the boundaries between art, exhibition, writing, and design, she has produced an eclectic body of work ranging from intimate book works and small publications to immersive installations and large-scale exhibitions for venues including the American Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Modern Art, the Rhode Island School of Design, the Museum of Chinese in America, and Mixed Greens, a contemporary art gallery in Chelsea.

After nearly a decade of living and working in New York, Shani moved to Toronto with her family. Bringing together her experience in all aspects of exhibition-making — as artist, designer, editor, critic, and curator — she is building a hybrid space for collaborative and cross-disciplinary experimentation in TYPOLOGY Projects, an independent venue for exhibitions on all forms of local and international contemporary culture.