

Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia



Michelle Lopez, *Ballast & Barricades*, installation view at Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2019-2020
Photo: Eric Sucar

Michelle Lopez and Michael Queenland in conversation

Artists Michelle Lopez and Michael Queenland—who met in New York and then worked closely together as professors in the Sculpture program at the Yale School of Art—talk about invisibility, image making, the bane of the sculptural object, and politics, on the occasion of Michelle’s exhibition *Ballast & Barricades* at ICA Philadelphia and Michael’s new installation in the Los Angeles Public Art Triennial (*Current: LA Food*).

MICHELLE LOPEZ: When we left our respective teaching posts at Yale University in the summer of 2016, you were heading to the American Academy in Rome for a year, and I was going to Philadelphia, having just gotten a new academic post at the University of Pennsylvania, Weitzman School, Fine Arts. Then that fall, Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election. I remember the day after; the grief set in and affected so much of what I made that year. What was it like for you in Rome?

MICHAEL QUEENLAND: My experience of that moment was frustrating because I couldn’t physically be involved in the protests that were happening in the U.S. , but on a lot of levels it was a gift to be outside of the United States.

ML: Yes, there was a sense of outrage and everyone was going to the streets. It was really inspiring for me to go to Washington, DC, with my son and be a part of that collectivity. My perception is that your time at Yale was somewhat isolated, and then finally in Rome you could think full-time about your work again.



Michael Queenland, Rudy's Ramp of Reminders, installation view at ICA, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2012
Photo: Monica Orozco

MQ: Yes, I was able to tap back into a more organic way of working. Not long after I arrived in Rome, I started collecting things I came across on the street—basically things that would eventually end up in a landfill I guess my being drawn to things on the ground was a continuation of a mixed-media installation work *Rudy's Ramp of Reminders* [shown at ICA, Los Angeles, in 2012] and its relationship to the ground, and things that are made to have a short life span. All those things distributed, consumed and then thrown away in an urban space, like packaging, flyers, and newspapers. The most surprising thing that developed was the material shift from Rudy's Ramp of Reminders use of ephemeral materials to the tile mosaic works I made from that time in Rome [Roam, Kristine Kite Gallery, Los Angeles, 2017].

The work you sent me that's part of your current show *Ballast & Barricades* at the ICA in Philadelphia (2019–20) covers a six-year time span. How did that come together?

ML: I'd call it a mini retrospective of ideas that were circulating when I was working with you at Yale. It started with *Blue Angels* (2012), these abject ten-foot-tall metal pieces, that brought a certain doubt regarding image making and object making—related to the "representation" of archetypes that you speak of in Rome. I was also contending with the male-dominated legacy of Minimalism, but connecting it to my experience of this quite real sense of violence when the Twin Towers came down in 2001. I was immersed in notions of debris and throwaway objects as a result of 9/11. *Blue Angels* was about collapse—not only of capitalism and a certain idealism, but also a falling form quite literally.

I am also interested in flags as an assertion of nationalistic power, so I was making these abject sorts of SOS flags. It always felt like a failure on my part that I was continuing to make images. I didn't want to replicate those images or even think about forms or bodies, because they were already becoming so throwaway in a sense—not as powerful. So, like your impulse of wanting to go to the ground, I wanted to evacuate the sculpture of image and volume and subject. That's why I moved toward this idea of the mirrored smoke clouds. That flagpole piece *Halyard* (2014) was about how power is embedded within the architecture of the hardware of flags, less in the flag itself. The real propaganda is the expression of power through the monolith of a big phallic flagpole, and the sound of the flag flapping.

MQ: In *Ballast & Barricades*, I see a connection between drawing and abstraction, and what you were saying about trying to evacuate an image. Abstraction can be a resistance to making an icon, or just feeling that an image isn't capable of conveying something genuine or accurate.

ML: Yes, but abstraction can also be a safety net, or it can feel like this safe, accepted space of production, at least in relation to Minimalism, which is so accepted now as an aesthetic. You can project what you want onto a mini-

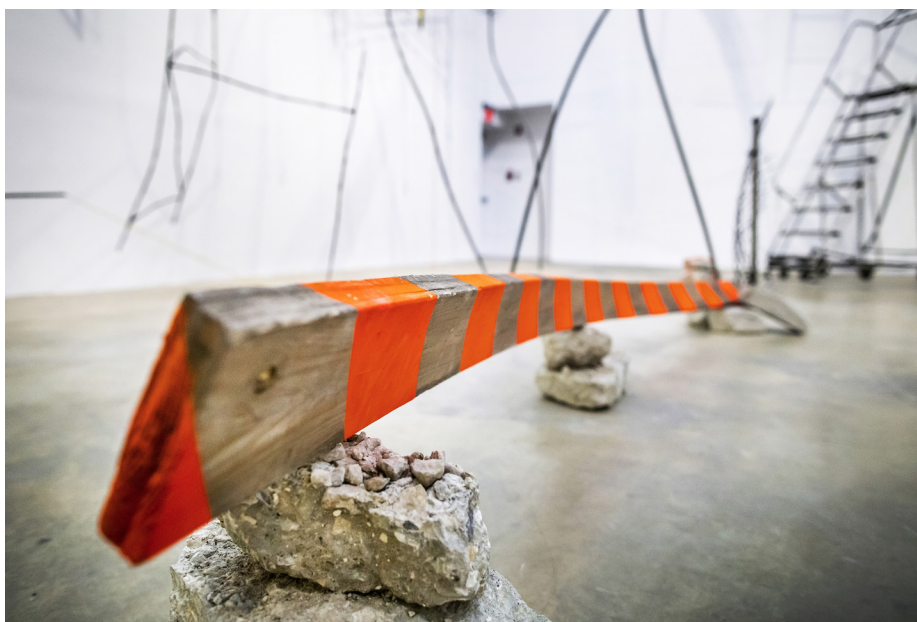
Mousse Magazine / 27 mai 2020

Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Conversation

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegaillard.com

malist form, and that can be dangerous or depoliticized (which is ironic, because Minimalism began as a political stance). So I wanted to think about to what degree politics could be conveyed through a line in relationship to a wilted flagpole, for example.

Throne (2016), this kind of emaciated seat that was Alberto Giacometti-like, continued the trajectory of a sparse-ness or an evacuation, even of real power. And my installation *House of Cards* at Simon Preston Gallery, New York (2018) operated along these same lines. It was this minimal kind of Arte Povera-inspired project made out of very thin scaffolding and twisted metal rope, barely supporting one another, counterbalanced with paracord and rubble. I wanted to incorporate my thoughts about foregrounding infrastructure in relation to drawing. How much could I talk about this sense of collapse that we are all feeling by having everything be so tenuously balanced?



I was also trying to activate the space between these forms around the viewer's body with a whole other language. Remember when you and I were hiking in the summer of 2015 in Sleeping Giant State Park in New Haven? You were starting to collect objects on eBay and you were describing them to me, and I was walking methodically in front of you and hyper-listening, which is the beauty of going on a hike. It was beautiful because you were drawing the object through language. I wanted to see how, through psychoanalytically describing unfamiliar objects, in a non-cultural way, you could evoke them and have them appear in front of you. By talking and gesticulating, you can build them with language and the body. It was the same way of thinking about the Ballast & Barricades piece after doing the *House of Cards* installation: of the body being present via the viewer but also invisible in terms of an image.

So when Alex Klein, curator at ICA said, "Make this a project that you could do nowhere else," I tried to take advantage of the thirty-foot-high ceilings and have the scaffolding be scaffolding and creep up the walls. It was important that within each line there is a signification of a flagpole, a barricade. Here is a broken house, a fraction of a ladder, scaffolding. I wanted to straddle the line between abstraction and this current political collapse, so there are these political or architectural registers of building and also temporary construction spaces that we see everywhere in terms of what we think is an ever-evolving, improving city. I was trying to map out an ephemeral building structure that denotes progress, and collapse.

MQ: It was interesting to see photographs of the installation and imagine the experience of being there in person. It took me a while, zooming in and around the images, to understand that the entire environment and structure is all physically connected, and made there in the exhibition space. I was imagining what it would feel like to encounter the scale of the work, walking around and underneath all of that counterweighted metal. In the pictures, the space looks flattened and the lines of the metal scaffolding become more formal and abstracted against the white walls, like a drawing. At the same time, there are recognizable things like scaffolding, construction materials or things used in managing crowds. My first impression of the improbable physicality of the sculpture were tied to my associations of the infrastructure of a city, which, like you said, is a sign of something being destroyed and constructed at the same time. There's this invisible activity that's happening all the time in cities—economic, political, and social forces that are fueling this activity in the background.

ML: It came also from thinking about sculpture as performative element, so most of the installation was just intuitively responding to the space. We were installing in the gallery for three weeks, welding on scissor lifts. The idea was to have things be delicately

Mousse Magazine / 27 mai 2020

Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Conversation

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegaillard.com

balanced, but also threatening.

MQ: I feel like I recognize the material presence of global capitalism in the materials you're working with, and how it creates monoculture from one urban space to another.

ML: Sure, the familiarity of that kind of debris. So much of the rubble from House of Cards and Ballast & Barricades was taken from the streets of Philadelphia—houses or roads being torn down or dug up. Taking the rubble, I was feeling that this was someone's history or someone's infrastructure and wanting that realness in the work. The house fragment is that too. A flattening is happening there as well.

MQ: How do you feel about the exhibition at ICA, now that some time has passed?

ML: I'd love for it to travel so I could do it again in a different configuration. But I feel like it's never enough. I got an email some days ago about de-installing and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do with all that stuff.

MQ: It's strange. It seems like what it means to make sculpture and experiences that isolate a specific physical experience has changed, now that so much art is experienced online or at art fairs. It's less about a specific physical experience and more about how object translates through a camera lens or image.

ML: I always think about the word "encounter." As artists, we are trying to create this encounter that you can't have on social media platforms.

MQ: What does the encounter do?

ML: I think it's in relation to the viewer, where you're having an experience connected to meaning, where possibly that physical experience of what you're seeing is coalescing to create an understanding of how and who you are in relation to the space. A little like listening to live performance. I don't think we're trained enough to articulate the kind of intelligence that forms can communicate. I want the conceptual and the formal to find each other. I'm trying to use those muscles to build on that language.

MQ: But people are having encounters every day out in the world.

ML: Really physically, or just virtually?

MQ: Both. I'm think about Guy Debord's book *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). At the end of the 60s he recognized that our physical experience of the world was becoming more and more mediated through images. Now, physical experiences are enhanced and shaped by virtual interactions like GPS.



Mousse Magazine / 27 mai 2020
Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Conversation

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegaillard.com

ML: *Ballast & Barricades* relates to this tornado project that I've been working on for a few years, which has to do with reimagining our virtual space. I've been wondering how to deconstruct our mediated internet space architecturally into an installation. I'm interested in surveillance power: Who's controlling who? Can we control our destiny through social media? We think we can. The installation *Joplin Project* (2020) is for a planetarium or dome context. It stems from my work with the mirrored *Smoke Clouds* (2016)—ephemeral, phantom forms in the aftermath of an explosion where the cloud appears and disappears due to the nature of the mirror. It led me to looking at different cloud formations, whether digital information clouds, or tornado clouds from epic natural disasters like the 2011 Joplin tornado that wiped out a Midwestern town in less than half an hour. I wanted to think about how contemporary violence becomes more and more invisible.

I've been working with mechanical engineers and animators to build cloud and debris formations circling above within the planetarium while the viewer is at the center, in the eye of the storm. I wanted to replicate this feeling of mass destruction that we are seeing environmentally but also psychologically and technologically. There's a lot of "stuff" and information all around us, which we are mismanaging. I'm curious about the word "management" that you've mentioned to me before in relation to cataloguing. That word seems to take up a lot of space in the ways we navigate our world in general. What did you mean by that?

MQ: I mean the maintenance and life of work before and after it's been shown, which in a lot of ways is an extension of the work itself. For Rudy's, as part of the work, I was interested in the management of the inventory of things.

ML: Because it was an index?

MQ: Well, in a lot of ways it was about sourcing things and then recontextualizing them sculpturally. I was interested in the space and process of an Amazon fulfillment warehouse, managing a seemingly infinite quantity of things as something that maybe points to the current condition of objects and sculpture. The difference is that it is just me – I don't have a warehouse of employees.

ML: You could have a website of *Rudy's Ramp of Reminders* as an archive or collection.

MQ: That's true. Maybe Rudy's becomes dematerialized at some point.

ML: Because the art world is so different now?

MQ: I think so. I notice physical static things don't hold attention so much anymore. We live in a time of animated things and images: video games, AI, smartphones. We're constantly interacting with moving things, which is why performance, video, and film are so dominant now. Our attention is more geared toward things that are in a motion. The last sculpture class I taught was based on ideas that I was thinking about in my work: vehicle, time, image, invisibility.

You were talking about "encounter," and I'm curious to hear how you create an encounter in your work. To me, the encounter is about a recognition of reality and the moment before understanding or meaning kicks in. One of the things I was looking into at that time, was this philosophical theory about the nature of reality called critical realism. In critical realism, reality is stratified into different layers: the real, the actual, and the empirical. The primary and all-encompassing layer is the real. The basic idea is that there are unobservable events that cause all of the observable ones. One example would be existence of gravity. Gravity generates actual events that we can perceive, like something falling and hitting the floor. In relation to encounter, I'm interested in my work to try to re-create something like this: a rift where all of a sudden you become aware of the real—the mechanism or thing that holds everything together.

ML: That sounds like sculpture to me. Who wrote the theory?

MQ: Different philosophers have theorized about it, but the philosopher I'm thinking about is Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014). He theorized about alienation as a result of relating to just one layer of reality. It's similar to the Buddhist idea that we are alienated because we believe we are separate from the things we perceive, which causes us to suffer. That's why it's so tenuous and strange to make and manage things.

ML: I can't think about sculpture with a capital S because it's dead already. I think about the capturing things that you can't see or you can't know.

MQ: That's an aspect of sculpture that I've always been interested in. I've always been drawn to objects that have a purpose and a history. There's an energy or trace of experience that's communicated somehow. In the shift away from the physical that we were talking about, the invisible is now more instrumentalized.

ML: The invisible is helping us navigate, date, socialize—but none of it is real, right?

MQ: No. Nothing is real. If you think about our current relationship to the invisible, it is commodified through data collection: who you know, where you go, what your search history is. Those social relationships or interests used to be private and invisible. A friend of mine once said about my work that it is trying to re-enchant the world, which gets back to this idea of the encounter

Mousse Magazine / 27 mai 2020

Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Conversation

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegaillard.com

versus a commodification of the invisible.

ML: What we think is invisible actually isn't what is invisible in the encounter because if that could be commodified we could be a lot richer maybe. [laughter] I think that re-enchantment is in relationship to the encounter: they both create a parenthetical space that repositions things differently, maybe magically.

MQ: Yes, I'm thinking about the relationship to the unseen between art and commerce: from art's impulse to re-enchant the world, to commercial cellular technology or social media that connects you to people while at the same time commodifying your relationships. Basically two different ways of relating to the unseen.

The experience you created in *Ballast & Barricades* is not something that's asking for anything. It's a gesture that invites an encounter with "the real"— whether it's invisible mechanisms or imminent collapse.

When I think of collapse, I think of what we're going through right now with the coronavirus pandemic crashing the world's economy. There's been this sense of imminent collapse since 2000 and the Y2K hysteria. In *The Fourth Turning* (1996) by Neil Howe and William Strauss, they describe a pattern where societies go through four cycles every hundred years, and the fourth part of that cycle is crisis, where there's a growing distrust in institutions and past values that eventually are torn down and collapse. What comes after that is a period of chaos and potential catastrophe. Eventually a consensus develops around new ideas and the cycle starts over with a period of growth and new ways of living. In your work there is this impression of imminent collapse. Since the 1960s, there has been this impulse to tear down or dismantle a larger invisible structure. From Y2K to the end of a Mayan calendar cycle in 2012, there's been an anticipation of an end or collapse.

ML: It could be a good thing. I've been researching with Google's Security Division, Jigsaw, for the robot aspect of the tornado cloud project. Jigsaw fights hacks by cyber thief bots, DDOS (distributed denial of service). When these bots attack globally, the most haunting thing about it is the numbing silence in the removal of information. The bots are preventing us from accessing information. I find it beautiful to think about violence on those terms: this kind of invisible nothing that happens as a result of things being shut down. What would you do if you couldn't access anything? Could be kind of be liberating, right? This silent warfare is terrifying but also so liberating with all of that stuff gone. It's like your comment on management: the management is just so overwhelming that if it all just went away, maybe we could begin again.



Mousse Magazine / 27 mai 2020
Ephemeral Building Structures: Michelle Lopez at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
Conversation

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegaillard.com