

# AUTOMATIC RUINS

COLIN LYONS

March 8 – April 12, 2014

**W**hen I stand before *Automatic Ruins* by Colin Lyons, I literally see the exposed corpse of the Industrial Revolution. Pieces of decrepit machinery and corroded mechanical components make an obscene and fascinating spectacle. Its obscenity stems from the chemical and mineral erosion blurring what had previously been a distinct, mathematical, logical, elegant shape. The time of mechanical machines is coming to an end. The beauty of gears is subjected to the corrosive work of time and history. The nineteenth century Fordist machine is now a dismembered and unrecognizable mass. This deterioration is akin to the disfigurement of worm-eaten flesh. And this obscene spectacle fascinates precisely because it evokes a predictable death—death by saturation of our civilization's production of industrial waste. In heralding the eventual depletion of oil, *Automatic Ruins* shows that the end of the combustion engines

era and Taylorist utopia is at hand. The spectacle of this decline is captivating. Georges Bataille made us aware that the concept of death is erotic. Something is always aroused in a person's unconscious when witnessing the depletion of power. In a way, the pieces that Colin Lyons is showing at OBORO are details of a larger tableau, a larger work: the collapse of Detroit.

The incredible downfall of a city that embodied the supreme economic power of American modernity has the makings of a Greek tragedy. Historic fate mixed with financial greed and the economic prerogatives of globalization had their way with a system imagined as the model city of the future, a future as beautiful as a gas engine! In the utopian fervour of its advent, we even came to believe that one day a New Detroit could be built on Mars or the Moon. Yet what is tremendously liberating for those of us who are watching this ruination live is understanding that beyond the anxiety we feel at this vertiginous end of an era, no power is eternal, no matter how industrialized, militarized or ideological it is. Like our own bodies, power is itself a body subjected to the erosion of the elements and of time.

In the acidic game staged by Colin Lyons, I calmly witness the imperceptible, yet constant erosion of large-scale systems. In my eyes, the ultimate beauty resides right here, in the awareness of the constant advance of chemical and material winds—at work in the cosmos and in our bodies—on the world of ideas and theories. Watching copper sulphate metamorphose into zinc sulphate in real time and on the scale of an exhibition, I feel time's processes accelerated. Looking closely at the acid-corroded pieces that the artist staggers on an iron stage, like a collection of formalist curiosities, I think about the Flemish *vanitas* painted to remind us of the impermanence of all things on earth. True, human existence is

impermanent, but ah! how precious is this brief time that our biological life makes possible, this consciousness, this imagination, these desires that inhabit and open us to the world and to others. The purpose of the sixteenth and seventeenth century *vanitas* was to summon the humility we must cultivate in order to live our human lives justly. Big business and religious fanaticism equally ignore this summons. The exhibition of these objects-ruins draws its relevance from this perspective. On seeing them, I am reminded that nothing in my species is permanent, even the worst.

Beneath the melancholic veneer of *Automatic Ruins* another reality surges, that of transformation and the infinite cycle whereby matter never completely dissolves but only changes state. Like this we progress from a time of concrete gear-driven machines to a time of abstract chip technology. We replace Detroit with Silicon Valley. We are on the verge of a new imperialism, a revamped utopia that imagines itself as the great new conqueror of all space and dimensions of our existence. Yet, in looking closely at the pieces of the old regime's corpse laid out before me, I understand at last that the fluctuations of this age are only the visible parts of a much larger transmutation, which for millennia has been changing one state into another, into another, into another, into another.

Pascal Dufaux, January 10, 2014