Keith Harrison's *Joyride* as workmanship of risk

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Abstract

Debates around contemporary art over the last decade have featured an important and sustained exploration of labour as a concept. Much of this discussion has revolved around social practice and art activism, two developments that can be grouped within the diverse legacy of conceptual art. Rather than being understood as the 'form-giving activity' required for artisanal and industrial production, as was the case in classical Marxism, labour is identified in these debates with thinking, communication, and the performance or services: activities which are associated with so-called 'post-Fordist' capitalism. Influential upon this perspective has been the notion of 'immaterial labour' which has been popularized through the work of Italian post-autonomist thinkers including Maurizzio Lazarrato and Antonio Negri. This paper will explore the question of labour through the work of a practitioner whose activity spans the boundary between contemporary art and ceramics, Keith Harrison, who gave a keynote address to Making Futures, 2015. Harrison's current project Joyride, a Jerwood Open Forest commission, responds in a sophisticated and thoughtful way to changing forms of labour under post-Fordism, specifically the demise of the Longbridge production plant for Rover cars, as well as the interconnection of driving subcultures with regimes of pleasure and 'self-destructive' behaviour. This paper will read Joyride, alongside Harrison's extensive body of work, as an ambivalent statement about processes of post-industrial deskilling. In one sense it is elegiac, referring to the loss of the craft skills that survived within certain kinds of industrial manufacture – the production of clay prototypes for Rover cars, for example. In another sense, it is affirmative of the communities that can assemble around an project that makes a virtue of spectacular failure: Harrison's plan to drive a clay scale model of the last Rover car to be made at Longbridge off a ramp in the middle of Cannock Chase Forest. This work, it is argued here, is an important emblem of the tensions that affect deindustrialized, post-Brexit Britain.

At dusk on the 30th September 2017 a clay replica of a Rover 75 was winched to the top of a wooden ramp, rolled down it, launch into space, and then – what? The outcome was not the culmination of this artwork, so much as an inevitable and bathetic end point. Before the car very briefly flew and then pancaked to the ground, the question was really whether this feat would be possible at all. Across over a year of preparation, the artist Keith Harrison had worked with many collaborators, including an industrial model maker whose career had been spent shaping the prototypes for car bodywork. This art work, *Joyride* (2017), as with much of Harrison's output, was about the preparation for a strange spectacle, as much as the spectacle itself.

My area of research specialism is contemporary art, more specifically conceptual and post-conceptual art, and the legacies of art forms that Lucy R Lippard famously identified with the 'dematerialisation of the art object'.(1997) This has led me to be interested in the way conceptual art and the complex post-disciplinary developments that arrived in the wake of this movement can be understood in terms of skill and deskilling. Keith Harrison's work can be situated in this space. A graduate of the MA Ceramics and Glass at the RCA, his work references craft and industrial processes, but it is does not involve handwork or craft skill in the traditional sense.

In this short paper, I will attempt to explore *Joyride* in relation to David Pye's concept, 'the workmanship of risk'. (2015) By adopting this approach, I am intentionally testing the limits of Pye's concept by using to examine an art work that is not so much identified with the production of object, as with their destruction.

Typically, Harrison creates events – almost always involving clay in some capacity - where process becomes emphatic because the outcome is so clearly placed at risk of bathetic anti-climax. It is difficult to describe *Joyride* in retrospect, except as an obviously quixotic scheme that Harrison recruited a wide range of people to help him to execute.

When Pye wrote of workmanship - 'the essential idea is that the quality of the result is continually at risk in the process of making' (2015: 4)– he was trying to reorganise the concepts used to describe the relationship between craft skill, design and industrial production. His terminology avoids opposing the hand to the machine, because the hand is almost always required to operate in concert with tools and apparatus of some kind. Nor did Pye attempt to argue that industrial production resulted in objects that exhibit less skill or quality. He carefully sidestepped the legacy of the Morrisonian tradition of craft, by contrasting workmanship where the outcome is predetermined (certainty) and where it is uncertain, dependent on the maker's skill.

The workmanship of risk retains a place in industrial production because at some point highly skilled makers are required to establish a pattern for the workmanship of certainty to follow. A key example of this practice can be found in automotive industry. Although the production line for motor vehicles is now largely robotic, there is still – even with the emergence of 3D modelling technologies - a small place for fine modelling skills in the design and prototype stage of car manufacture. This process is considerably altered by digital fabrication techniques, but even now hand modelling is still used.

At the centre of *Joyride* there is a tribute to the workmanship of risk upon which the very form of the car body is predicated. The replica Rover 75 used in the performance was made from a plywood structure, which was then coated with local Longbridge clay, under the supervision of Anthony Tovey, an industrial model-maker who once worked at Rover. This process involved considerable technical difficulty, because the clay – unlike modelling paste – shrank as water evaporated from it. Integral to the materiality of this project there were technical challenges that were created because the work needed to link skilled labour to a specific place, the Longbridge plant in which the Rover had once been fabricated.

In another sense, Harrison clearly does, in a darkly comic way, place the design of his works at risk. If we are to invoke Pye's question: 'is the result predetermined and unalterable once the production begins?' (2015: 6) – the answer is no. It is certain that the car will be destroyed when it hits the ground; if travels down the ramp, but will it even do that? Would all of the symbolism coded into *Joyride* become meaningful, or merely result in an anti-climax? Through this kind of uncertainty, intrigue is discovered within failure, even though it is a given that the bathos of materiality will assert itself: the replica Rover 75 *will* hit the ground, if it manages to take flight.

It is useful to use the 'workmanship of risk' as a way into *Joyride*, although we are straying from Pye's intended range of meanings. Harrison does not directly control the process of the construction of his projects in the way that a craftsman handles a tool. Rather, a project like *Joyride* depends on the collaboration of many different practitioners. The narrative of the intended feat draws collaborators in because it is so, in a way that the artist often compares to the film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982 Dir: Werner Herzog), in which Klaus Kinski takes a steamship over the Amazon basin, in order to build an Opera house that would be inaccessible anyway. It is the grandiose futility that gives the work its character.

Relevant antecedents might be found in destruction art, the work of Jean Tinguely or Gustav Metzger. Harrison's emphasis on the event and participation can be located within Metzger's concept of 'auto destructive' art as a public art form.[i] At the same time, Harrison's work does turn on its reference to material and its resistances in a way that is illuminated by the idea of the 'workmanship of risk'. I will argue that the defining feature of Harrison's work is that it makes the risk in the process of making resonate with collectivity. This point is best brought out by comparison to a work from the 1970s that also involved the destruction of an automobile, Ant Farm's *Media Burn* (1975).

The consumer product as ideological product

In 1975 in San Francisco the artists' collective Ant Farm drove a reconstructed 1959 'El Dorado' Cadillac convertible into a pyramid of television sets that had been doused in kerosene and set on fire. The group invited the news media to this event, which they called *Media Burn*. Their 'phantom dream car' was unveiled from beneath a star-spangled banner. The two drivers piloted the vehicle using closed-circuit television; a screen on their dashboard showed an image relayed from a camera mounted in an enormous tail fin.[ii] The automobile and television, Ant Farm meant to say, are part of an ideological closed-circuit that stimulates and pacifies the public simultaneously, a careering drive from one thing to another: advertisements, shopping trips, game shows, holidays, etc. leading nowhere.

Since the first mass-market automobile, the Ford Model-T, was released in 1908 the automobile has indeed been central to the experience of modernity. The requirement for road infrastructure utterly transformed everyday life. Morphing with each new model, cars have been designed to be receptacles of fantasy: self-respect, sex, status, danger, new horizons implied in aluminium and chrome, a stream lined value system, around which social practices transformed.

Through the example of the car, we see how skilled craft labour became assimilated and redistributed into complex, Fordist and post-Fordist industrial production. Pye makes this point, of course, when he tries to pinpoint the ways in which the workmanship of risk is present somewhere within the workmanship of certainty. He even uses an interesting analogy – he states that the workmanship of risk is 'stored up capital' (2015: 5) in a process like printing. Writing in the 1960s, he had in mind the way that type had to be carved before it was cast and used to produce identical lettering from printing presses.

In this way, Pye understands skill and uncertainty to be integrally linked, and the source of the value generated within industrial processes. A congruent point is made by Glenn Adamson in his book *The Invention of Craft* (2013), challenging simplistic notions of automation in nineteenth century industry. The processes of industrialisation did not erase craft labour: rather they assimilated and redistributed craft skills. Adamson challenges the often-repeated narrative of the decline and resurrection of craft in the nineteenth century: where the Arts and Craft movement manages to rescue handwork from dehumanizing automation. For Adamson craft cannot be the 'antidote to modernity' (Adamson, 2013: xvi) because, when Victorian material culture is viewed as a whole, craft skills remained central, though they were undeniably altered in their form because of the emergence of automation and new technologies.

Certainly, to witness the clay prototype of the Rover 75 that features in *Joyride* – and to find that this kind of workmanship is still present, even though precariously, in the process of manufacture of cars even now, is to recognise this fact. This is why the involvement of model maker Anthony Tovey in Harrison's project is so important, as recognition of the craft skill, the 'workmanship of risk' that is invested in the shaping of the car bodywork that we witness repeated in identical models in every rush hour stand still.

This reference to skill helps make sense of the elegiac tone of *Joyride*. Although craft skill was not lost all in one go in the process of industrialisation in the nineteenth century – and although the idea of 'craft' is perhaps a kind of discursive effect of modernity itself as Adamson suggests – this does not mean that the workmanship of risk is immune from the encroachment of automation. This is one of the issues raised by current debates about the role of algorithms, machine learning and automation in the so-called fourth industrial revolution. Within some of these narratives, it is pointed out that the nineteenth century was not the completion of the process of automation; it was only the first appearance of the contradictions involved in the development of technology under capitalism.

For Ant Farm, whose work was conceived in the fading afterglow of sixties radicalism, the automobile represented false freedom, a kind of technological and ideological trap. In *Joyride*, Harrison gives the car a quite different set of possible meanings. Gathering on Cannock Chase to watch a carefully fashioned life-sized clay replica car smash to pieces after driving down an enormous wooden ramp suggests a ritual to exorcise a love-hate relationship; a kind of 'wickerman' for the twenty-first century, maybe. This reading is especially suggestive, because the forest in Cannock Chase, is integral to the work. *Joyride* tries to link the specificity of the natural world, the legacy of industrial production and the subversive and deviant uses to which the car is put at the margins of regulated spaces.

The car is the meeting point of extreme personal liberty and collective monotony; it presents us with the open road and gridlock: the joyride and the daily grind. By emphasising the relationship between car and community, *Joyride* seems to refer to a spectrum of contradictions. This is why for Harrison, the Longbridge plant, about an hour's drive from Cannock Chase and the home of Rover until the company collapsed in 2005, is an integral part of the work.

Founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, Longbridge was the home of the original 2-door mini and directly employed 25,000 people at its height in the 1960s. Over time, a whole community was formed around the production of British Leyland, Rover and MG cars. The automotive industry was and still is a key sector in UK manufacturing. At the beginning of the 1970s, there were 500,000 people directly employed in production; there are around 150,000 now, although the output of the industry has actually increased. (Mors and Brown, 2017: 5) These figures indicate a classical thesis about automation, one that informed Marx's theory of crises based on the 'tendency of the rate of profit to fall'.

Marx argued that the process of capital accumulation involves chaotic and internally conflicted drives that tend toward crisis. Most importantly, competition drives the process in such a way that surplus value is concentrated in ever fewer hands. Large capitals absorb smaller capital, while the working-class tends to be

forced into penury and intermittent employment as a 'reserve army of labour' at the mercy of the cycle of growth and decline, and of the changing technical demands of capitalist industry. Competition between capitalists drives technological development that creates greater productivity, but also less dependence on living labour. Over time, capitalist industries need fewer and fewer workers because new technologies raise productivity, making expenditure on human labour-power uneconomical. This polarisation results in economic crises because, for Marx, it is only living labour that creates value. This, in a severely compressed form, is Marx's idea of the 'tendency of the rate of profit to fall' which 'breeds overproduction, speculation crises and surplus capital alongside surplus population'.[iii]

Whether or not one accepts Marx's account of capitalist crisis and its implications, it is clear that since 2008 theories of crisis have been rehabilitated because of the on-going ramifications of the financial crash. Most recently, these ramifications have been political. The decline of Longbridge, a crucial part of Midland industrial heritage, surely resonates also with resentments about globalisation that are widely held to have contributed to the outcome of the Brexit vote.

So, the comedic bathos of *Joyride,* its courting of anti-climax, seems also to resonate with the article 50 process, an inertial movement (toward disaster?) that requires immense resources, and takes over the machinery of state.

What does it mean finally, to arrogate David Pye's term 'the workmanship of risk' to *Joyride*? Harrison's staging of failure, material processes and collectivity is the central issue. *Joyride* is an elegy: the car was launched at sunset to recall a moment when the car industry and community were closely intertwined in the Midlands. That inter-relationship is not merely historical or symbolic, it is material: expressed most clearly in the communities, and infrastructure, that were built in the shadow of these industries. Because it is material, this inter-relationship endures even though the economic forces that brought it into being have moved on. Being material, this process, once set in motion, cannot be halted without a final expenditure of energy.

In debates about post-Fordism – the movement toward automation, outsourcing and so on – all of which contributed to the demise of Longbridge –this transition has often been evoked as one that results in the predominance of the immaterial. The notion of immaterial labour, for example, has featured importantly in the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt including their work *Empire* (2000). According to their account, post-Fordist social organisation has come to be dependent on affective and communicational labour, labour that produces in their terms 'immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response'. (2000: 32). A number of authors have criticised these influential ideas. Here, I will simply observe that the idea of shift of economic rationale, from Fordism to post-Fordism, when crudely deployed, ignores the temporalities that are built into material infrastructure. When industries go into decline, it no simple thing to reinvest their support structures, including the communities that once served them, with meaning.

The workmanship of risk contained within Harrison's dematerialised art practice, seems from this perspective to invoke the technologies and infrastructure that our social practices are built around. These are *material* forms, governed by the bathos of materiality. The bathos of material is its tendency to hit the ground, in an entirely predictable way. A replica of the final Rover 75 to leave the assembly line the car is hand-sculpted, despite the fact that production is now largely automated. One of the key tendencies in modern industry is more output with fewer workers. And so the question recurs: what will happen? Will the communities that depend upon our industries survive? These are questions that cannot be easily answered. For Harrison, artworks are questions that bring people together. And the spectators are as much the material of the work as the spectacle that they have come to see.

References

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Pye, D (2015) *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Endnotes

[i] The text of Gustav Metzger's 'Auto-destructive Art Manifesto'(1959) is available online: http://radicalart.info/destruction/metzger.html

[ii] Excerpts form Ant Farm's video of the event can be seen here: https://vimeo.com/42173163 See also: Tom Weinberg, "Media Burn: What's in a Name?" Journal of Film and Video Vol. 64, Nos. 1-2 (spring/summer 2012): 51-56

[iii] Karl Marx Capital vol. 3 Chapter 15 available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch15.htm