



HAND/MADE: The Digital Age and The Industrial Revolution

HAND/MADE: The Digital Age and The Industrial Revolution

Kleinert/James Center for the Arts (Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild)

36 Tinker Street, Woodstock, NY 12498

September 4 – October 18, 2015

Opening reception: Sat. Sept. 5th, 4-6pm

Panel with Nancy Azara, Katie Cercone and Emily Harris at 3pm

Exhibition Statement

by Katie Cercone with Nancy Azara and Emily Harris

Artists: Karen Azoulay, Jude Broughan, Katie Cercone, Alex Chowaniec, Coco Dolle, Elisa Garcia de la Huerta, Emily Harris, Maria Hupfield, Molly Lowe, Jason Lujan, Colin McMullan, Erica Magrey, Diane Meyer, Benjamin Phelan, Kara Rooney, Tarragon Smith, Jonathan Taylor

An historical, regional center for the arts located upstate in Woodstock, New York, the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild was founded in 1902 as a reaction to the spiritual and cultural upheaval resulting from the industrial revolution. Based on the vision of the wealthy British settler Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead and his American wife Jane Byrd McCall, Byrdcliffe at the time served their determined wish to build a utopian Arts & Crafts community. The name “Byrdcliffe” was a combination of the middle names of Ralph and Jane. Begun in England during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Arts & Crafts Movement was founded as a remedy to the rapid urbanization and industrialization happening across Europe. For a small group of artists that coalesced into the Arts & Crafts movement, most of whom had acquired their family wealth as a *result* of the industrial revolution, there developed a need for community, homespun artist collaboration, and the sense of sanctity granted to craftsmanship and the handmade. The industrial revolution set in motion a serious cultural angst about people being replaced by machines; that angst still lurks in the collective consciousness today.

For our show here at Byrdcliffe, which we’ve elected to call *HAND/MADE*, we’ve selected artists based on the notion that today’s unparalleled digitization of culture represents a period that is historically relevant to the industrial revolution. We are living in an era where the speed of communication and the capabilities of web-based and other digital mediums have far surpassed our wildest dreams. These futuristic modalities have, whether we like it or not, changed the very fabrics of society and of social interaction itself. The age-old people versus machines debate appears more relevant than even before in an era in which our privacy, our attention spans, and the pace of our everyday lives seem less and less under our own control. Just as was the case during the storm of the industrial revolution, it is often the role of the artist to question the effects of the new structures being erected.

Many of today's artists have a similarly dogmatic reaction to the "new frontier" presented by the Internet, just as did the outspoken members of the Arts & Crafts movement that founded Brydcliffe over a century ago. If we peer back at our ancestors, we see that in many ways, the natural outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution was the violent fascism of Italian Futurism and the massive holocausts executed via mass-produced weapons and chemical warfare.

Today, as human beings both inconvenienced, empowered, and some might say bombarded, overwhelmed or "strung out" on digital media and communication, many people are seeking out something to remedy the effects of the overwhelming digital turn. Many artists featured in *HAND/MADE* are returning to something resembling ancient or indigenous ideals centered around earth-based wisdom, community, the mindfulness of the present, especially the sacredness we experience when manifesting an artwork directly from heart to hand. Two artists in the show whose work expressly deals in the lived experiences of creative community are Colin McMullin and Jonathan Taylor. For McMullin, his projects are much less full-fledged works of fine art than full-scale long-term collective initiatives, upon completion of which whole communities take ownership of the work. For Taylor, art provides one outlet in a world where, "We have made for ourselves a world of turbulence and contingency and find ourselves in a race that cannot be won, but only perhaps survived – together."

Although many artists historically have been proud Luddites, today we also see a number of artists making purely digital and web-based art, one clear advantage being little or no start-up costs and a huge potential for worldwide visibility. In many ways, the Internet has leveled the playing field and created equal access to audiences as well as valuable cultural goods and real material resources around the globe. Whether we look to Alex Chowaniec's conceptualizations of the human figure in hybrid space or Tarragon Smith's figurative landscapes responding to the ephemeral nature of humans in the world, we see both of these artists, of Canadian descent, using art to draw conclusions about the shifting potentialities of human life amidst the outgrowth of digitized fields and pan-global interwebs. Similarly, artists Benjamin Phelan and Karen Azoulay interrogate the realm of the body and technology. Azoulay's ongoing series "Primordial Mud" uses digital photography to capture a practice existing somewhere between performance and

sculpture. With the precision and permanence of technology as her container, Azoulay is free to perform the ephemerality of divine feminine rights using clay and flowers. For Phelan, his interests likewise lie in the “precisely literal translations technology enables,” and his works amount to a process of “exporting models directly from perceptual space into physical reality without hesitation.”

One characteristic distinguishing artists of *HAND/MADE* is that their work somehow connects to both the realm of technology and the handmade object. Another criterion curator Nancy Azara has maintained from the beginning is that each artist in the show has grown up with a computer. Consequently, the oldest artists in the show are in their mid-forties. As consultants, Katie Cercone and Emily Harris questioned Nancy’s seemingly age-based discrimination, while Nancy simply felt there was a whole new person developing around (digital technology) the web, and that their sensibilities, process, and approach to making art were intriguing and curious, if not problematic. What exactly happens to human beings, particularly artists, who have access to a computer from a young age and develop an innate knowledge of technology?

Erica Magrey, for one, has adopted video, performance, and sculptural work to explore the ways in which bodies are transmuted into abstraction. Her handmade props operate live and virtually via digital video, a process the artist adopts in order to look deeply into the anthropomorphic space in which human beings and objects collide. Diane Meyer obscures sections of historical photographs through interventions of cross-stitch and embroidery. Exploring the psychological weight of these sites and the failure of photography to preserve personal experience, her works are handmade relics that explode fixed notions we associate with the historical evidence of space and place. Perhaps related in some ways to the work of Magrey is that of Jude Broughan, whose practice involves the juxtaposition of found photographs with her own original shots. Working by hand to create a “flow of space” around the photographic images, her compositions continually refuse to capitulate to the seductive appeal of the hermetic “finish.” Meanwhile, artist Emily Harris adopts a range of handmade and low-tech materials to investigate technological, ecological and social concerns in the visual. Her video and drawings featured in *HAND/MADE*, *Two/Four Time*, look to the video camera as an instrument and framing device in concert (or perhaps) in conflict with the physical body as framing device – taking a close look at the visceral appeal of looking and the peculiar, perceptual sensations that can accompany digital formats.

In the work of Native American artist Jason Lujan, digitally processed hybrid images are joined with conventional media, creating images “reflective of the layering of transcultural experiences.” Similar to Lujan, artist Maria Hupfield, also of Native American origin, uses a fusion of cultural elements to diffuse our readymade assumptions about ethnicity, geography, identity, and society. One of many artists in *HAND/MADE* who utilizes live performance, Hupfield has arranged to perform a durational set within the gallery wearing her handmade silver Lady Moonrider suit. In this particular case, Maria is using digital technology in the form of a time lapse camera to document the slow withering away of her beloved moonrider suit, which she will finally lay to rest in its worn state after her *HAND/MADE* performance.

One trend clearly evidenced in a number of artists in the show, including Hupfield, is the marriage of a digital medium like photo or video with live performance and installation. Much like Magrey, artist Molly Lowe uses video, performance and installation to explore “the awkwardness of living in a human body.” Other artists in the show whose studio practices involve more traditional arts flow into (feminist) performance and video include Elisa Garcia de la Huerta, Katie Cercone and Coco Dolle. In addition to their studio practice, Garcia and Cercone co-lead Go! Push Pops and Dolle directs Milk and Night, two feminist collectives that operate on fluid, collaborative models based in divine feminine wisdoms.

Likewise, several of the artists in the show are loosely connected through the New York feminist art community. Kara Rooney, who in addition to her studio practice also writes for the *Brooklyn Rail*, included articles by a few of the *HAND/MADE* artists (Coco Dolle, Katie Cercone and Nancy Azara) in last September’s special feminist edition of the *Rail*. Specifically for Rooney, her writing operates in conjunction with her art practice, which is largely based in exploring communication systems - how oral methodologies and lexical forms inform interpersonal sharing. In line with *HAND/MADE*’s inquiry into the affects of the Digital Age, Rooney explores how the “collective consciousness has shifted” within a contemporary society marked with “technological drives and other isolationary models.”

In totality, artists of *HAND/MADE* offer a small sample of creative producers who are affectively making work bridging the divide of the digital and handmade. Their works

serve as a symbolic record not only of their resistance to and/or celebration of the digital turn, but of the powerful production of meaning that happens in between the virtual and the real.

valley has been invited to select \$1000

experience with specific artists as well as

photography (Michael Citron, Robert

(845) 338-8131, www.fallforart.org.

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IMAGINING DOILIES, TRIVETS, and armies of disgruntled grandmas, some students still giggle at the notion of the Arts & Crafts Movement as an expression of genuinely revolutionary intent, but of course it was in its own time and social context, which is to say the Industrial revolution. Philosophers of art such as John Ruskin and idealistic practitioners and entrepreneurs such as William Morris expressed values in fiery opposition to the mass produced artifacts of the industrial age, the degraded conditions of its workers and the despoliation of its environment. Originally a British phenomenon of aristocracy rebelling against aristocracy, Woodstock's Byrdcliffe Colony (founded by a British aristocrat) was one of the first and perhaps most famous examples of this paradoxical Utopian thinking and practice in the United States.

Highlighting stark parallels between the Industrial age conditions of the Arts & Crafts Movement and the digital present, the exhibition *HAND/MADE: The Digital Age and The Industrial Revolution* opens to the public Friday, September 4 at the Kleinert/James Center for the Arts in Woodstock, with panel talks and a reception beginning at 3 p.m. Saturday, September 5. In the shadow of the

Byrdcliffe colony, curator Nancy Azara, with her advisory team of Katie Cercone and Emily Harris examine how the present replays the artistic dynamics and issues of the industrial age.

Write the curators, "The 'people versus machines' debate appears more pressing than before in an era in which our privacy, our attention spans, and the pace of our everyday lives seem less and less under our control. Whether inconvenienced, empowered, or even 'strung out' on digital media, modern societies retain a need for something to remedy the effects of the overwhelming digital turn that characterizes the last decade."

Artists respond to digital pressures with various kinds of affirmations of the organic and the community-based, the handmade and the homegrown. *HAND/MADE: The Digital Age and the Industrial Revolution* includes work by Karen Azoulay, Jude Broughan, Katie Cercone, Alex Chowaniec, Coco Dolle, Elisa Garcia de la Huerta, Emily



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Magrey, Diane Meyer, Benjamin Phelan, Kara Rooney, Tarragon Smith, and Jonathan Taylor.

A number of free public performances will accompany the exhibition: on Sunday, September 6th at 5pm is *A Thousand Times Thy Light: A Participatory Performance Experience Led by Legacy Fatale* (Coco Dolle and Shawn Bishop) and *Go! Push Pops* (Katie Cercone and Elisa Garcia de la Huerta). This participatory art dance ritual at the Kleinert/James presents a new-age spin on the Shakespeare poem "A Thousand Times Good Night." Two additional performances will close the show in October.

— John Burdick

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information.