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Art history cold cases: artists' labour in the factory

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Abstract

This paper calls into question the context in which artistic production related to industrial history may enter art official narratives. Drawing on the examples of the *Voltron* sculpture series by David Smith (1962); Yvonne Rainer's performance *Carriage Discreteness* (1966) and Stuart Brisley's work at the Hille Fellowship Poly Wheel factory (1970), I will propose that observing the production of artworks within industrial environments implies a twofold commitment for art history. On the one hand, investigating artworks relying on industrial materials and production modes calls for the analysis of the "concrete and direct evidence" that materials provide (Didi-Huberman, 2015; Domínguez Rubio, 2012). On the other, they invite consideration of informal archives and "suspect evidence" related to the tacit knowledge of production, subjective self-documentation and oral history (Rosnow and Fine, 1976).

Seen from this perspective, artists' production in the context of industrial culture and workers' practices of self-managed time both contribute another point of view on how the inscription within the realm of high and low culture is done in art history. At a time when contemporary artistic and curatorial practices show a renewed interest in "outsiders'" artefacts, the different work models and modes adopted by the proposed case studies enable a reading of potential art historical narratives through the lens of working-class studies and the contemporary material turn.

Keywords

factory culture, *pérruques*, contemporary art history and the material turn, process-based production

Casos abiertos de la historia del arte: la labor de los artistas en la fábrica

Resumen

Este artículo pone en cuestión el contexto en que la producción artística relacionada con la historia industrial puede entrar a formar parte de las narrativas oficiales del arte. Tomando como ejemplos la serie escultórica *Voltron* de David Smith (1962), la performance *Carriage Discreteness* (1966) de Yvonne Rainer y el trabajo de Stuart Brisely en la *Hille Fellowship Poly Wheel* (1970), propongo que observar la producción de obras de arte en entornos industriales implica un doble compromiso para la historia del arte. Por un lado, investigar obras de arte construidas con materiales y modos de producción industriales exige un análisis de los “indicios concretos y directos” que proporcionan los materiales (Didi-Hubermann, 2015; Domínguez Rubio, 2012). Por el otro, invitan a la valoración de archivos informales e “indicios dudosos” relacionados con el conocimiento tácito de la producción, la autodocumentación subjetiva y la historia oral (Rosnow y Fine, 1976).

Vista desde esta perspectiva, la producción de los artistas en el contexto de la cultura industrial y las prácticas de autogestión del tiempo de los trabajadores aportan otro punto de vista acerca de cómo se lleva a cabo la inscripción dentro del ámbito de la alta y la baja cultura en la historia del arte. En un momento en el que las prácticas artísticas y comisariales contemporáneas muestran un interés renovado en artefactos “foráneos”, los diferentes modelos y modos de trabajo adoptados por los casos de estudio propuestos permiten contemplar narrativas históricas del arte potenciales a través de la lente de los estudios de la clase trabajadora y el giro material contemporáneo.

Palabras clave

cultura fabril, historia del arte contemporáneo y el giro material, producción basada en procesos

In 1963, Eugenio Battisti wrote about the criticality of the aestheticisation of factories within the new-born industrial archaeology (Battisti, 2001, p. 31-32). The invitation to inscribe industrial sites in the heritage discourse more selectively echoed with his concern for the potentially massive museumisation of abandoned production facilities. If industrial architecture appeared in the 1960s as the very quintessence of the future, their obsolescence and cultural value were still to be assessed. The danger to “flatten and fade things” once the “museum spreads its surfaces everywhere”, to use Robert Smithson’s words, equally applied to the temporality of a renewed art history that Battisti wanted to see in interaction with contemporary art practices (Smithson and Flam, 1996, p. 42). Along these lines, Battisti suggested that in order to deal with “new art materials”, art history would have to accept the impossibility of compiling comprehensive chronologies (Battisti, 2001, p. 19). Secondly, it would need to embrace the necessity to “drill” around the subject of research in a non-linear fashion (*ibid.*).

Battisti’s approach pointed to a central challenge in the gesture of inscribing industry-related artistic practices within art official narratives. In the 1960s, industrial archaeology was treating abandoned factories in a similar manner as any other historical building, therefore casting them in the eternal past of fine arts. At

this point, the discontinuity implied by the impermanence of industrial production modes and materials, as well as the anticipation of utopian and dystopian claims that artists made around them, had not been taken into account in methodological terms. The future point of view that these artistic practices anticipated has consequences not only for the perception of the artworks in question, but also for the disciplinary position that art history engenders towards them.

Drawing on the examples of the *Voltron* sculpture series by David Smith (1962), Yvonne Rainer’s performance *Carriage Discreteness* (1966), the exhibition *9 at Castelli* (1968) and Stuart Brisley’s intervention at the Hille Fellowship Poly Wheel Factory (1970), I will propose that observing the production of artworks within industrial environments implies a twofold commitment for art history. First of all, the necessity to consider the inadequacy of linear accounts for handling the hybrid temporality of “new art materials” that emerged at the crossroads of aesthetic reflections, heterogeneous labour modes and materiality. Secondly, the difficult assessment of an art production in which skills and crafts referred to spurious social and cultural contexts, both in terms of their making and reception. From this perspective, investigating artworks that rely on industrial materials and production modes calls for the analysis of the “concrete and

direct evidence" that materials provide (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 42). Furthermore, it unravels the centrality of informal archives and "suspect evidence" related to tacit knowledge and subjective self-documentation in the reconstruction of hybrid artistic works and practices that, at the time when they were produced, prefigured a potential "future knowledge" (Dominguez Rubio, 2012; Rosnow and Fine, 1976; Schwab *et al.*, 2013, p. 9). That contemporary artistic and curatorial practices show a renewed interest in outsiders' artefacts has enabled the different work modes adopted by art production in the factory to be read as potential art historical narratives through the lens of working-class studies and the contemporary material turn. Moreover, the relationship between artists' production and industrial culture may be broadened to include other forms of self-managed and creative time that happen within the factory, while also contributing an alternative vision of how art history deals with the inscription of artefacts in the realm of high and low culture.

Factories in exhibition

Eugenio Battisti's concern about the critical museumisation of industrial sites echoed with the use of the symbolised studio space as a source of materials for installation and a curatorial palimpsest for performative exhibition processes. As early as in 1962, David Smith had shown how the abandoned Italian Voltri factory could be turned into a collective craft workshop and supplier of industrial leftovers for his *Voltron* series (Wisotzki, 2005). In the following years, the appropriation of former industrial buildings for exhibition-making was, as Julian Myers-Szupinska suggests, a "symptom" of the "developing absence of light-industrial labour from the city centre" (Myers-Szupinska, 2013). Motivated by the new model of the peripheral industrial park, the displacement of production facilities outside the city in the 1960s would anticipate the massive crisis of the manufacturing economy (Molesworth, Darcie and Bryan-Wilson, 2003; Jones, 1996). In time, this translated into the increasing availability of abandoned industrial sites. As "raw and industrial materials enter(ed) the studio", the exhibition space progressively lost its salon-like refined and decorative atmosphere. An experimental approach was adopted that, writes Myers-Szupinska, equated art and viewing to labour for both the artists and the audience (Myers-Szupinska, 2013).

Evidence of this shift in artistic and curatorial labour modes surfaced at the *9 at Castelli* show in December 1968, where Robert Morris convened a group of process-oriented artists including Giovanni Anselmo, William Bollinger, Eva Hesse, Stephen Kaltenbach, Bruce Nauman, Alan Saret, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Gilberto Zorio. After more than a decade of loft-living in New York, where artists' studios had been established in industrial districts along with small craft workshops, the fact that the exhibition took place in a former warehouse at 103 West 108th St., site of Leo Castelli's new gallery,

appeared to many as an opportunity to bring art back home (Leider, 1968; Zukin, 1989, p. 3-15).

Programmatically challenging the exhibition format and space, *9 at Castelli* invested the structural and conceptual frame of the site as a whole. The stress on the production phase and the setting up of an experimental arena where artistic processes would happen 24/7 largely relied on their being camouflaged with the industrial materials available on-site and on their impermanent, dynamic form. In this regard, Robert Morris had previously commented in his "Notes on Sculpture" that the idea of industrial production had not changed until quite recently, and that the main breakthrough in this respect would be the upcoming "automation of production involving a high degree of feedback adjustments" (Morris, 1967, p. 24-29). Further, continued Morris, as much art labour was taking place outside the studio, the factory may have provided an alternative production situation for sculpture in the way that specialised workshops had in the past.

The many differences between art labour and the industrial assembly line did not prevent 1960s artistic and industrial processes from sharing a common critical vocabulary. In many ways the recognition of artistic practices as labour is indebted to the social and political unrest of the time, leading to a multiplicity of claims around the exhibition being the work and the artist being an art worker (Bryan-Wilson, 2009). In her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles phrases it powerfully in the form of an activity-oriented autobiography, where the notions of work and labour merge in the context of art: "I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art" (Laderman Ukeles, 1969).

As the concluding sentence shows, in Laderman Ukeles' statement the broadening of the notion of labour from a gender perspective bears the aesthetic consequence of considering all of her working activities as art: "My working will be my work", she further wrote in her *Manifesto*. This claim to wholeness echoed with reflections on labour alienation and with the common refusal, by artists and workers alike, to be considered in a metonymical fashion as mere hands. What art labour was trying to achieve in its own conceptual version of the shift from manufacture to service economy was the possibility, says Lucy Lippard, that "the (artist's) studio is again becoming a study", both as a site of conceptualisation and a conceptualised space (Lippard, 1968, p. 31-26).

This was acutely related to the fact that art production was happening outside the studio, as both Lippard and Morris emphasised, while also experimenting with multiplied originals through collective production processes, as in Daniel Spoerri's *Galerie MAT* and Andy Warhol's *Factory*. However, the focus on the studio somehow overshadowed other ways in which artistic and industrial productions may have crossed paths, beyond simply spatial cohabitation.

EAT: trans-disciplinary promises of the future

In establishing a parallel between the art strategies and the factory, another element to consider is the encounter with the many promises of technologies. How these different forms of labour could play out when invited to interact with technologies was paradigmatically experienced in Yvonne Rainer's performance *Carriage Discreteness*, a performance presented as part of *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering Festival*, at the 69th Regiment Armory, New York, in October 1966.

Rainer's performance was commissioned by Billy Klüver for a series of events performed in October 1966 that was at the origin of EAT – Experiments of Art and Technology. Co-founded by engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, EAT would pursue the goal of “creating the social and cultural context for artists and engineers to collaborate, as a way to support technological and industrial involvement in the arts” (Klüver, 1994).

The commission to Yvonne Rainer was no exception. The making of *Carriage Discreteness* was shared with a “technological partner”, the physicist Per Biorn. The script consisted of a list of tasks, aimed at activating the props fabricated by Carl Andre and the technological kinetic stage elements. The choreographic sequence crossed paths with the technological protocol, even though technological problems led Rainer to improvise. Whereas the improvisation element is included in the documentary account of the performance as a decision made by the artist, going back to the events in 2006, Yvonne Rainer recalls:

[...] For a week before my October 15th performance I became Per Biorn's errand girl, going back and forth to Lafayette Street to buy motors, transistors, circuit boards, and other paraphernalia required for the programming of the remote controlled 'events' in my piece [...]. On the evening of the performance I sat with my walkie-talkie in the remote balcony overlooking the 200 × 200-foot performing area [...]. The choice of this imperial position has been a source of much subsequent embarrassment for me. Why couldn't I have allowed the performers to move the objects in any way they pleased? After all, the piece was about 'the idea of effort and finding precise ways in which effort can be made evident or not.' [...] The walkie-talkies didn't function. Nothing seemed to be happening... Finally all I could do was instruct the performers to move the objects at random. (Rainer, 2006)

The notion of fiasco and failure is often evoked in the memoirs of artists entering industrial processes or facing co-production. Not only may the result be unexpected, due to the need to coordinate different languages and practices, but often, as in the case of EAT, the utopian expectation for the result of the collaboration overshadows the reality, and technicalities, of the work to be shared.

Furthermore, Yvonne Rainer's account of her experience emphasises one aspect often implied by the encounter between

artistic labour and industrial labour that relates to the hierarchy between the artist who conceives the work and the engineer who implements it. This hierarchy, in the case of EAT, descended from technological limitations, but it was also the expression of a particular class articulation and division of labour. Yvonne Rainer had established her performance as a horizontal interaction between performers, artists producing the objects and co-authoring the choreography, whereas the technological problems in the performance made the artists involved become the “errand girls” of the engineers.

The aesthetics of the assembly line

In the 1950s, Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio and Asger Jorn had argued that the assembly line and the artistic process shared a common vocabulary through experimenting with “industrial painting” (Bandini and Pinot Gallizio, 1974). As early as the 1960s, it was clear that radical differences in procedures made it possible to quote industrial processes and materials in the studio, but ended up with considerably more challenging results when it was the artist entering the factory organisational system.

One premise is that the shift from manufacture to service economy seemed to bear little aesthetic consequences for the collaborations between artists and industrial processes. Besides raising critical reflections of art labour organisation, it also brought forward the subtle distinction between producing art and producing in an artistic way. This double-take was at the centre of artistic residencies in factories emanating from the Artist Placement Group in Great Britain and, in particular, in Stuart Brisley's experience in a furniture factory, the Hille Fellowship.

The Hille Fellowship project started for Brisley in 1970, when he was selected by the Artist Placement Group (APG) to perform the tasks envisioned in their collaboration programme. As we read in the contract that stipulated the context of the co-working experiment, the APG developed from the idea to place individuals (artists) in organisations (industry) to “draw attention towards the development of creative behaviour within the environment” (APG, 1970). According to the contract, the artist could be independent “of the commercial motive” and of “the industrial argument”, and be involved in an activity that permits him or her to “speak’ to all levels” (APG, 1970).

Where EAT aimed to establish creative collaborations between artistic and technological partners in the experimental context of the applied research laboratory, APG positioned artists as “consultants” rather than as residents (Schwab *et al.*, 2013, p. 191). In his report on the Hille Fellowship project, Brisley summarised this drive in the assumption that “‘creative’ activity, as symbolised by art, the artist, and the process of art, may be thought of collectively as a model for societal interaction” (Brisley, 1970b). The goal, we read in Brisley's notes, was for artists to intervene and “offer ‘potential’ solutions to

the 'qualitative' crisis of human activity in industry — through the introduction of processes of continuous organic change in relation to property oriented cycles" (Brisley, 1970b).

In this context, when considering the kind of collaboration he wished to establish with the Hille Fellowship Factories, Stuart Brisley imagined two possibilities. The first one related to materials and sculptural expertise, and to the idea that the industrial space could enhance art making through its "work procedures" (Brisley, 1972). The second option would have been to interact with the "more organic aspect of Hille", and involve the artist not only in the materials but also in the philosophy of the place and the people who made it work.

In Brisley's view, artists and industry had thus far mainly collaborated "on a practical level at some distance from the industrial conflict" through patronage, financial donation, donation of materials, commissions, or the making available of specialist skills and techniques (Brisley, 1970b). Even if with best intentions, this relationship did not challenge the system within which the factory acts.

The point for Brisley would be to work on the organisation of labour and in collaboration with the workers, more than under the tutelage of the management. If he finalised the agreed sculpture during the residency at Hille, Brisley nonetheless reflected on the forms of collaboration with the workers contributing to the production. He verified that they were aware of the kind of chair that they produced; he took advantage of their skills in stacking chairs for creating his sculptures, but he equally offered his craft to change the colours of the machines and improve the working environment.

Voltron: Art in the factory as a public situation

In Stuart Brisley's vision, in the 1960s and 1970s artists who worked in public situations were very likely to come into contact with industries (Brisley, 1970b). Moreover, among them, some may "have at the base of their work an understanding and intention of the possibilities of social alternatives which determine the forms, context, and content of their work" (Brisley, 1970b).

As Brisley suggests, this potentiality could play out in an attempt to infiltrate the labour structure that the artist was interacting with, but also end up in a clear separation of the artistic intervention from the social conflict engendered by the factory labour organisation. The latter is the case of David Smith's participation in *Sculture nella città*, an open-air sculpture exhibition organised by curator Giovanni Carandente in the Umbrian city of Spoleto in 1962 with the intention of bringing modern, mainly abstract, art into the heart of the medieval city.

Among artists invited, David Smith participated in *Sculture nella città* with 22 sculptures from the Voltri series that were placed in the Roman amphitheatre of Spoleto. As the name of Smith's series would

suggest, the sculptures were produced in the Voltri Italsider factory, an iron mill that had just been closed at the time of the initiative and that was described by Giovanni Carandente as "a sort of large graveyard of ferrous scrap destined for demolition" (Carandente, 1962).

The invitation for David Smith to participate in the show came through another artist taking part in the event, Beverly Pepper. Pepper clarified that besides offering a working space in an Italsider factory in, among other places, "Genoa, Savona, Naples, Trieste", Carandente had agreed with Italsider that they would supply artists with "workers and the materials". Thirty years after the event, in 1992, Carandente acknowledged that artistic production in factories was unexceptional at the time of the *Sculture nella città* exhibition. Among the consequences, Carandente included the more "architectural" scale of contemporary sculpture, but omitted any change in art labour organisation. The collaboration between factory workers and artists was portrayed in accordance to the Renaissance collective workshop stereotypes, where a post-Leonard engineer derived "from the fusion of artist and worker" (Carandente, 1992, p. 143). In this process, the artist was the idea-maker and the worker was the "hand" under whose purely technical and unconscious expertise the artwork takes shape.

When talking about the reasons for inviting David Smith to produce sculptures for the Spoleto open-air exhibition, Carandente responded in extremely formal terms and connected his curatorial choice to the history of abstract sculpture. If sculpture was typically related to "taking away" matter, in the factory it became an issue of "adding" and "combining" (Carandente, 1992, p. 142). Yet, looking at the biography of David Smith, we find additional motives. Smith had been a member of workers' unions since the 1930s and, like him, many other artists were involved in the Federal Art Project. Under these circumstances, he had consciously identified himself "with working men... by craft", because of his past work as a welder and his artistic choice of producing sculptures through welding processes (Smith and Gray, 1968, p. 61; Wisotzki, 2005, p. 347). Though acknowledging that his aesthetic approach differed, Smith was further stated to believe in "a working man's society in the future and in that society I hope to find a place" (Smith and Gray, 1968, p. 61; Wisotzki, 2005, p. 347).

Frequently comparing his studio to an industrial workplace, Smith defined it as "a small factory with the same make and quality tools used by production factories", where "[s]tocks... are kept stocked on steel shelving, more or less patterned after a factory stockroom" (Smith and Gray, 1968, p. 52; Wisotzki, 2005, p. 359). He also described his process of making sculpture in ways that echoed the industrial means of production to which he had been exposed while working at Studebaker and American Locomotive: "My aim in material function is the same as in locomotive building: to arrive at a given functional form in the most efficient manner" (Smith and Gray, 1968, p. 52).

The contrast between Smith's union involvement and the way in which he described his production process for *Sculture nella città* is

quite shocking. In a letter dating from 1964, Smith went back to the collaboration at Voltri and connected the exemplarity of his experience in the factory with total freedom and independence: "They gave me everything I asked for: a room at Colombia Excelsior, an interpreter, a driver, six workers". Besides emphasising the companionship with the workers, he comments positively on the Italsider management policy: "They let me search in all the factories [...] work over time [...] I was never annoyed by bureaucratic and social problems, or any other question" (Carandente, 1992, pp. 142-43).

Blue-collar engineers of fantasy

The two parallel sides of David Smith's experience of producing sculptures in industrial settings somehow disorients the art historical interpretation and requires the construction of an alternative conceptual map. Just as with Yvonne Rainer's counter-narrative on the failure of the collaboration leading to *Carriage Discreteness*, and Stuart Brisley's criticism of Artist Placement Group's approach to the industrial labour organisation, the assessment of Smith's experience with welding in the studio and the factory invites for a change of scenario. In a potentially alter-factual story of the collaborations between workers and artists, the notion of the artist that acts as an idea manager and delegates the production of his work to craftsmen and workers may be challenged in favour of a more material vision of conceptual art.

A second common assumption that may be brought into question concerns the deskilling of craft within industry and that of aesthetic production within art. Indeed, Carandente's "engineer of fantasy" is a mythical creature born at the juncture between the intellectual and the blue-collar worker, but where the head at the origin of the cultural production is very clearly positioned on the artist's side (Carandente, 1992, p. 145).

To challenge this predicament, recent curatorial practices have increasingly included an alternative history, coming from other disciplines, such as labour history and new working-class studies that may give prominence to creative productions (poetry, sculptures, homers...) from workers. In this respect, as Yvonne Rainer's performance *Carriage Discreteness* shows, even though the model of the artist delegating an instruction to the workers for producing a sculpture is a most practiced (and studied) one, other models seem to emerge. That industrial labour may be observed according to categories established in artistic practices, in order to identify forms of collective, self-managed activities that infiltrate the industrial context, is a hypothesis implied by both the EAT and the APG experiences.

Most of these histories are based on informal archive materials in artists' studios and factories alike, providing documentation on works and practices – with a particular focus on materiality and production processes. Their partial nature, due to the increasing lack

of witnesses more than fifty years after the event, make the collection of these alternative materials and stories non-linear and incomplete. Yet, in observing these art historical cold-cases, the materiality of the artworks themselves, and the understanding of their making, may point to another form of testimony that goes beyond meta-information contained in oral history and documents.

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