

## Nicola Ellis in residence at Ritherdon & Co Ltd

### By Lauren Velvick

The Art in Manufacturing residency series and Nicola Ellis's practice are a fitting match, with an antecedent interest in value, exchange and circulation, Ellis is well placed to scrutinize and reimagine the inner workings of Ritherdon & Co Ltd, Darwen. Commissioned as part of Blackburn's Festival of Making, this residency scheme is now in its second year of pairing contemporary artists with manufacturers of cardboard, plastics, wallpaper and street furniture. Some recurring themes have emerged through conversations with Ellis, site visits and on viewing the residency's outcomes, which manifest both materially and interpersonally. These include time, colour and ethics, and here I will use them as a framework through which to discuss Ellis's work and process, along with the conditions of Blackburn with Darwen and the Festival of Making. The proposal made by the Art in Manufacturing residency, that contemporary artists would have something to learn from industrial manufacturers, and vice versa, places the two in opposition, or at least in contrast with one another. To contextualise this within current discourse, much has been made of 'artistic thinking' as discussed by Luis Camnitzer<sup>1</sup> and the power of creativity to solve problems, possibly in order to justify public funding for the sector, and to ameliorate worries about swathes of potentially unemployable humanities graduates. There are also widespread misconceptions and exaggerations around the kind of work performed by firms like Ritherdon which is well articulated in Richard Sennett's 'The Erosion of Character', "Sennett suggests that the "weak work identity" of contemporary workplaces — distinguished mainly by computerisation, in his treatment — results from the utter illegibility of the work processes to the workers themselves."<sup>2</sup> Many of the processes at Ritherdon are computerised, but this doesn't mean that they are illegible to the people who perform them and operate this machinery, and there is in fact a policy of 'multi-skilling' in the factory, whereby staff are trained in multiple areas. Ellis's work and experiences at Ritherdon problematise distinctions between the spheres of culture and manufacture, exposing interesting meeting points, and surprising discrepancies between assumptions and reality.

This has meant that rather than producing conflicts, Ellis has been able to work within and around the existing processes at Ritherdon, an electrical enclosures manufacturer founded in 1895. Beyond the machinery, which is fascinating to an outsider, one of the most striking things about the factory, especially compared to typical art spaces, is the way that spaces are universally kept to a standard of neatness. This is true from the shared staff kitchen to the factory floor, and is enforced partly through a system of photographs of how a space should look. While at first glance this might seem overly strict or oppressive, it is entirely pragmatic, there is no space or time to deal with each others' mess because Ritherdon operate a highly efficient 'no waste' policy. Ellis notes that this high level of efficiency, which allows little room for manoeuvre or error, means that even the slightest intervention into the making process can yield significant results. In line with this, much of the new work that Ellis has produced utilises the factory's off-cuts and their minimal wastage, with some of the materials slated to return to the factory for recycling once their exhibition is over. There has been a focus in recent years on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/26/67920/editorial-artistic-thinking/> accessed 03.06.18

<sup>2</sup> <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/jasper-bernes-logistics-counterlogistics-and-the-communist-prospect>

the etymological root of the term 'curator', "Origin of Curator: Latin, from *curare* to *care*, from *cura* care. First known use 1561"<sup>3</sup>, arguing that this role should be a caring one, and emphasising the importance of care as an action and a concept within the production and display of contemporary art. Considering this idea in terms of spaces of industry, mine and Ellis's observations of Ritherdon both noted the care taken in shared spaces, of equipment and of each other. Of course, in a work place that's full of dangerous equipment, health and safety aren't something that can be joked about or left until last, an accident can easily result in tragedy, but that's also the case in galleries. There are numerous accounts of technicians and others being injured or even killed by falling sculptures, with artists who work with heavy materials in large quantities, like Richard Serra, springing immediately to mind. The canon of monumental sculptors who make use of industrial materials, including artists like Serra and Judd, is the one that Ellis's work most obviously fits into, but Ellis's acknowledgment and foregrounding of the manufacturing and recycling processes that attend to these materials introduces an ecological, and economic dimension, that also alludes to the notion of care and responsibility in the way that monumental minimalism in general does not. Ellis mentions a particular rule within the Ritherdon factory, that if you see somebody doing something unsafe or if you know there's a better way, you have to tell them. This indicates that the factory staff must be better than most at taking criticism impersonally, and leads me to reflect on the continuing crises within art criticism, including the recent 'what do critics owe to artists?' conference organised by Brian Dillon. Perhaps if artists and cultural producers were able to conceive of criticism in the way that Ritherdon's staff do, a lot of hurt feelings could be avoided, and leaps forward made.

Having outlined the important role that rules, and a mutual understanding of how to enforce them, operate within a factory like Ritherdon it is crucial to also acknowledge the importance of personal discretion and aesthetic judgement. In particular, harking back to my earlier invocation of Sennet's analysis of modern-day labour, it is pertinent to note the way that performing similar tasks repeatedly does not actually seem to degrade aesthetic enjoyment in the way we might assume. Ellis recounted how the entire Ritherdon staff would be excited about the finish of a bright new colour, or a one-off shade for a specific client. In this way, everything about colour, surface and texture that might excite an artist or connoisseur is also exciting to those who manipulate these materials on a daily basis, even in order to produce products that are not recognised for their aesthetic value. The powder coating method that is used to colour the majority of Ritherdon's products involves using electrostatic energy to coat objects in a loose powder, which is then cured with heat in massive ovens and cooled on slowly rotating racks. Powder coating is preferred to using wet paint because it gives a more even, harder and thicker finish, and it is this desire for a tough, smooth finish that informs the aesthetic sensibilities of Ritherdon's staff. One of the colours that was in use when I visited was a muted sage green, a shade that wouldn't be out of place in a trendy homewares collection, and was in fact a perfect match for the ball-point pen I'd purchased that day. With this in mind I was surprised to learn that the small cabinets that had been coated with this green were actually designed to go underground and would rarely, if ever, be seen.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://seattleareaarchivists.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/definitions-list.pdf> (accessed 01.06.18 6:27pm)

Having characterised Ellis's interventions at Ritherdon to have been sympathetic to the workings of the factory, it was in experimenting with the powder coating method that a little conflict arose. With a system that has been designed to overcome the issues of a previous method, in this case the dripping and sagging of wet paint, to introduce the possibility of imperfection is understandably jarring. During her residency Ellis has created 'paintings' that were made by powder coating custom made sheets of steel and brackets to suspend them with, but due to the specialised nature of powder coating these had to be produced by Ritherdon staff on Ellis's instruction. The artist describes a process of choosing colour and finish through written correspondence, inviting those skilled in the process to advise, and mixing new colours for the first time in the factory's long history. However, despite the new colours and gradients producing attractive results, in the end Ellis opted to use only the colours that were already in use at Ritherdon; a variety of greens, white, black and red. The resulting works make striking use of the characteristics of powder coating, particularly in how the electrostatic method achieves mark making that would not be possible with other materials. In one painting a smattering of dark red on a white background looks like a celestial image that has been inverted, and in others a smooth sweep of white makes diamond shapes on a glossy dark green ground. These works preserve the gloss and some of the evenness that is satisfying about powder coating, simultaneously troubling this with marks that look like flour thrown sideways, or giant spray paint lines, but too perfect and machine-like to have been made entirely by hand. At the Ritherdon factory there was one corner where the older style of wet paint coating was done, that exhibited a number of visual tendencies observable in contemporary art, and could've been transplanted wholesale from any number of project spaces. On this, Ellis commented that the aesthetics of Ritherdon were essentially fulfilling her needs. Here it is relevant to consider again the notions of value and use that inform Ellis' work; what need could there be to see sculpture if you are surrounded every day by feats of material endurance, tension, transformation and vast changes in temperature and tempo, and what does Ellis's practice bring to this environment?

In considering the kinds of making that depend on, at least, a degree of automation, it seems self-evident that there would be little room for improvisation, although as discussed above in terms of power coating, it is a possibility. At Ritherdon the TRUMPF CNC machine dominates the first space as you enter the factory, which is itself a decommissioned tram shed. TRUMPF machines are programmable processors for sheet metal, that can cut and bend in two and three dimensions, and there is a prototyping area at Ritherdon as well as the circuit via which the products are produced, where small innovations are attempted by hand. If they are successful they can be scaled up and programmed into the machines, which reinforces the philosophy of care articulated earlier, that if there is a better way of doing something you are duty bound to share it with everyone else. The way that the production process in the factory is arranged into a circuit is also significant, indicating that the spaces have been designed around how they are used, and so make instinctive sense. This is another interesting contrast to purpose-built art spaces, which are often designed by architects around aesthetic principles with less thought given to practicalities, although thankfully now accessibility has to be taken into account. This circuit formation also means that we follow the sheet metal as it is processed from its raw state into the finished product, first being cut and shaped, then welded and polished, powder coated and baked, and finally assembled. One of the most striking things about this sequence is the changes in tempo that attend to each stage, which for the observer lend a

different atmosphere to each step of the process. Everything is timed precisely, but the pacing of each part of the process is distinct, so much so that they barely seem to relate to each other at all; fast and loud, slow and hot, fast and bright, achingly slow.

In the tram shed, the TRUMPF machine flings across the room at speed, stamping shapes out of them from above. This is the entrance and exit, so there is also a machine for shrink wrapping products that spins them around until they're coated in plastic. Everything in this part of the factory is fast and loud, and it is also where you'll find the off-cuts that Ellis has used as sculptural material to produce the large, hollow boxes that dominated her exhibition at the Festival of Making. Ellis worked with one of factory staff who had commented that if she asked him to make anything, she would 'end up with a box', so they have worked together to form porous box-like structures. The offcuts from the sheets of metal look like robot lace, with light streaming through perfect circles and abstracted rectangles with strange, sharp juts and cut off corners. These shapes are clearly not part of a decorative pattern, and relate to a function that, at least in the exhibition, is not totally elucidated. In viewing them it is notable how the eye tries to figure a regular pattern out of shapes that, while not random, are not designed to correspond with each other decoratively. One significant way in which this new work functions is to emphasise how fleeting, but profound aesthetic enjoyment can be engendered by objects and materials that are not intended for that purpose. The boxes are also left with unpolished welded edges, and little patches of rainbow tempering, further emphasizing their impermanence and status as a stage in process that has been frozen and manipulated, but only temporarily. The hooks that Ellis had suspended from girders in her exhibition space also communicated a sense of having been removed from their true purpose, and in this case they will not return. These are simple hooks made by bending cylindrical metal, that carry the separate components of Ritherdon's cabinets through the powder coating system, ovens, and around the gently paced roller-coaster that dries them. The hooks that Ellis has used are coloured with layers of the powder that coated their cargo, and so relate to the large powder-coated paintings in tone, if not form.

The dawdling drying process was also included in the exhibition by Ellis with a film work that depicts, on a loop, the slow progress of a series of doors on the hooks mentioned above. This juxtaposition of the aestheticised leftover hooks, that are made in house and aren't deemed particularly important by Ritherdon's staff, with footage of their use is characteristic of Ellis's approach to this residency. Whilst her manipulation of available materials and processes can stand on its own, it is essential to her ethos of exchange and an acknowledgement of value that at least part of the process be made visible. It is also relevant in considering the coated hooks, that Ellis made a replacement for each of the ones that she took from the factory. This adherence to an environmentally-informed ethic is as important as the objects that Ellis has produced through the Art in Manufacturing residency. The sharp edges of the powder coated paintings remind us of their materiality and don't allow for a disinterested viewing, and similarly the roughly welded corners of the 'robot lace' boxes emphasise their impermanence. We are left with a sense of the concurrence that already existed between elements of Ellis's practice and the company ethos at Ritherdon. Yet, there is also a palpable sense of the value in pushing those processes, materials and people just a little further than they were initially inclined to go.