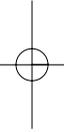


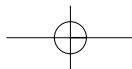
Breathless

Cornelia Parker
&
Rob Smith



Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey

Essay by Dave Beech
Edited by Michael Petry





Above: Cornelia Parker, *Inhaled Cliffs* (1996), Bed sheets that have been starched with chalk from the White Cliffs of Dover

Overleaf: Installation view, Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey
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Breathless

Cornelia Parker is well known for her use of found objects, which she then transforms into startling conceptual artworks. Silver musical instruments are flattened and suspended in *Breathless* (2001) and the remains of a shed blown up by the British Army form the elements of *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991). Her use of objects in unexpected ways continues in the number of intimate sculptures that compliment the large-scale projects. *Embryo Firearms* (1995) features the machined metal forms of guns in an early stage of manufacture and *The Measure of Man* (2004) is formed from a war medal stretched and drawn into a jumbled mass of wire.

Likewise *Inhaled Cliffs* (1996), seen at the Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey, appears to be formed solely of folded white sheets, yet further investigation finds that they have been starched with chalk from the White Cliffs of Dover. Her transformations are so unexpected that they force the viewer to have a sharp intake of breath.

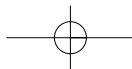
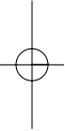
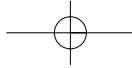
Rob Smith's work eschews historical and cultural references in favour of an idiosyncratic and 'contraptionering' approach to the transformation of objects. For *Waterwheel* (2002) Smith constructed a waterwheel which was anchored to the bank of a river and used to grind a rough rock into a rounded pebble exhibits here.

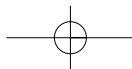
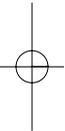
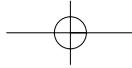
Smith's *Air Drawings*, (2006) are each made up of ten thousand holes hand punched into paper. The punching of these holes is governed by a strict set of parameters based on the relative sizes and proportional volumes of the five main constituent gases in air (nitrogen 78%, oxygen 21%, argon 0.9%, water vapour 0.06%, and carbon dioxide 0.04%). The holes are meticulously counted so that the only difference in each of the two metre square panels is the random arrangement of the holes.

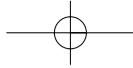
Measurement plays a major role in Smith's large-scale floor piece *Circumference* (2006). The work consists of hundreds of round objects with a hole in the middle placed around the perimeter of a six and a half meter circle drawn directly onto the gallery floor. The diameter of each object in the piece has been measured and added together so that they fit perfectly edge to edge around the larger circle on the floor.

Both artists see the world in a headlong breathless rush towards experimentation. They are visual scientists. They form a hypothesis and test it against the materiality of objects within the closed logic of their methods. The objects emerge from these experiments transformed into an artwork, each of which is as much an outcome of the method as it is an aesthetic choice. They question the materiality of our world and having acted upon it transform our experience of it anew.

Michael Petry







The Machine Whisperer

Technology has an undeserved reputation for being austere and inhuman. A whole section of science fiction literature is based on the idea that technology is cold – and therefore cruel and menacing. Machines, we fear, are like untameable wild animals: you can't reason with them. As technological society colonizes every aspect of the lifeworld, from electronic banking and cosmetic surgery to intensive farming and nuclear energy, modernity has not eliminated risk but increased it. Natural risks, such as lightning, flood and disease, have been augmented with a new set of manufactured risks. In a science fiction novel, then, Rob Smith would be a dangerous man, because he has an affinity with equipment, he speaks the language of technology and can hear the heartbeat of the machine.

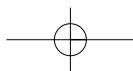
Technology is natural to our species, like language and culture generally. But within modernism, technology took a sinister turn. The machine, according to Andreas Huyssen, has become our 'other'¹. Since at least the development of the railways, he argues, 'the machine came to be perceived as a demonic, inexplicable threat and as a harbinger of chaos and destruction'. Paranoia about out-of-control technology is rooted in the actual experience of modernity as dominated by machines of all types. And the fantasy of the cruel and destructive potential of technology is launched in earnest by the reality of the mechanized battlefields of World War I. Immediately it was no longer possible to argue for technological progress as progressive per se.

In the cultural context of the fear of technology, Smith's online work *Stopped Clocks GMT* is reassuring. By collecting photos of stopped clocks, Smith shows us images of the all too human mortality of machinery. Smith raises them from the dead, though, in a digital act of reanimation that reinserts the clocks back into a time-keeping sequence. Each photo is displayed for the minute that it shows, telling the time once again in its own limited way. He performs the kiss of life on technology that has grown old and lost its place in society. It has lost its threat too. In modernity it is easier to love broken machinery, and for good reason. Smith is not a technophile in the usual sense of someone in awe of the power and value of technological progress; he is a technophile only in the sense that he treats machines with care.

An early piece, *Waterwheel*, from 2002, encapsulates Smith's humane and humanizing relationship with technology. A stone is placed in the drum of a waterwheel to turn it into a pebble. Placing the waterwheel in a river, the stone is ground down into a small pebble by the constant flow of water circulating grit around the stone. Nature is given a helping hand in a gesture that replicates the prerequisite of technology: its mastery of natural forces. At this scale there is nothing intimidating about Smith's little feat. Technology seems harmless when it is the equivalent of a toy or a pleasant expression of ingenuity. Imagine a river full of such contraptions, though, and you get a glimpse of the inherent risk that technology poses. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it, the domination of nature through science and technology inexorably results in the domination of humanity itself. Technology, in turn, transforms us into little pebbles too.

Dave Beech

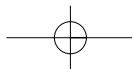
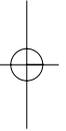
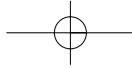
¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, London: Macmillan Press, 1986, p.70

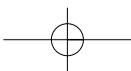
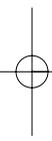
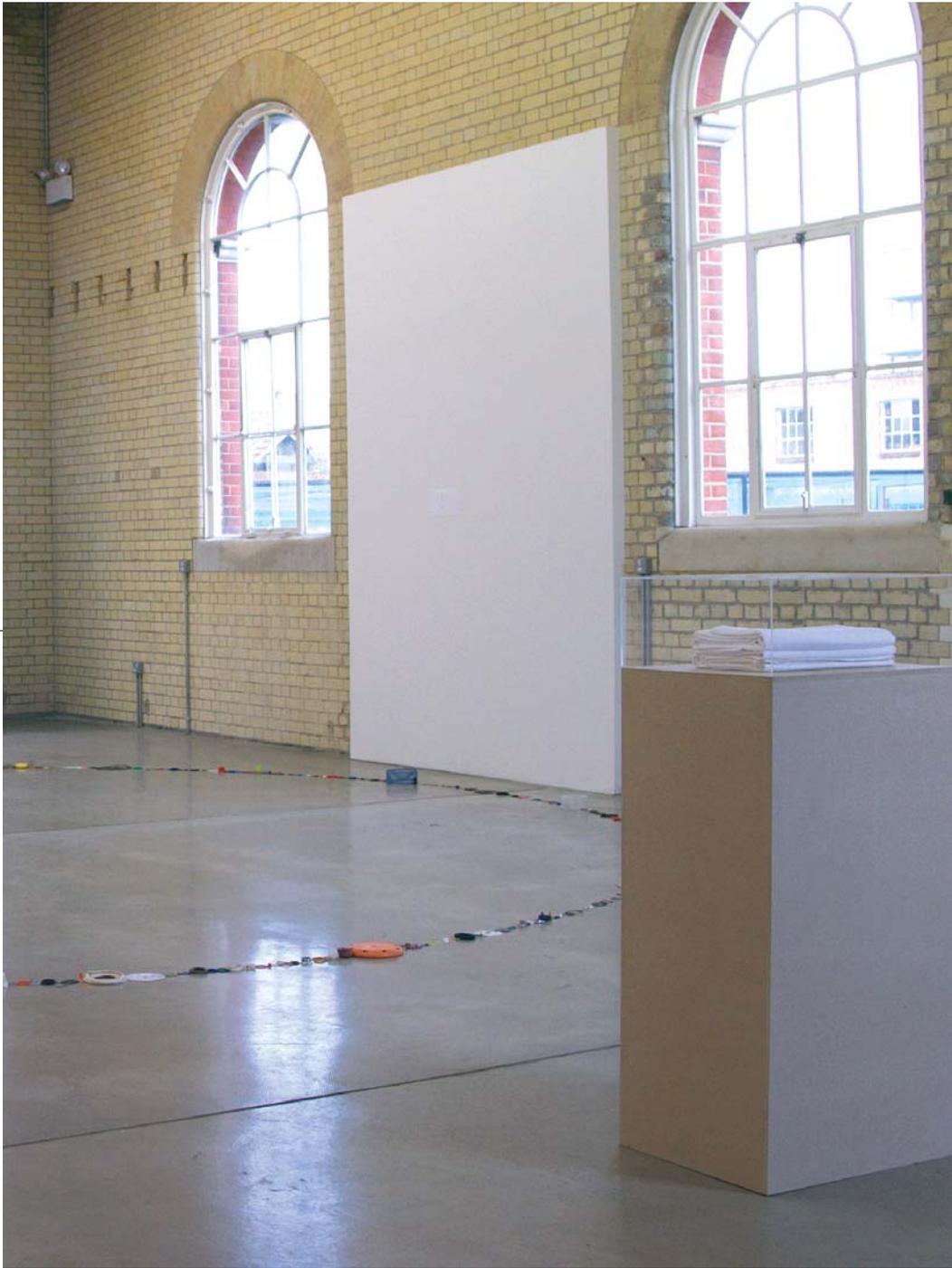
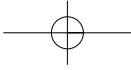


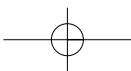
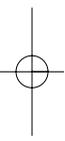
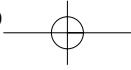


Above: Rob Smith, *Waterwheel* (2002), A rough stone was placed in the drum of the waterwheel (constructed by Smith) with some abrasive grit, and anchored in a river allowing the wheel to spin in the flow of the water. The apparatus was left for 55 days and the stone removed.

Overleaf: Installation view, Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey
Clockwise from left, *Air Drawings* (2006), *Air Key* (2002), *Inhaled Cliffs* (1996), *Circumference* (2006)









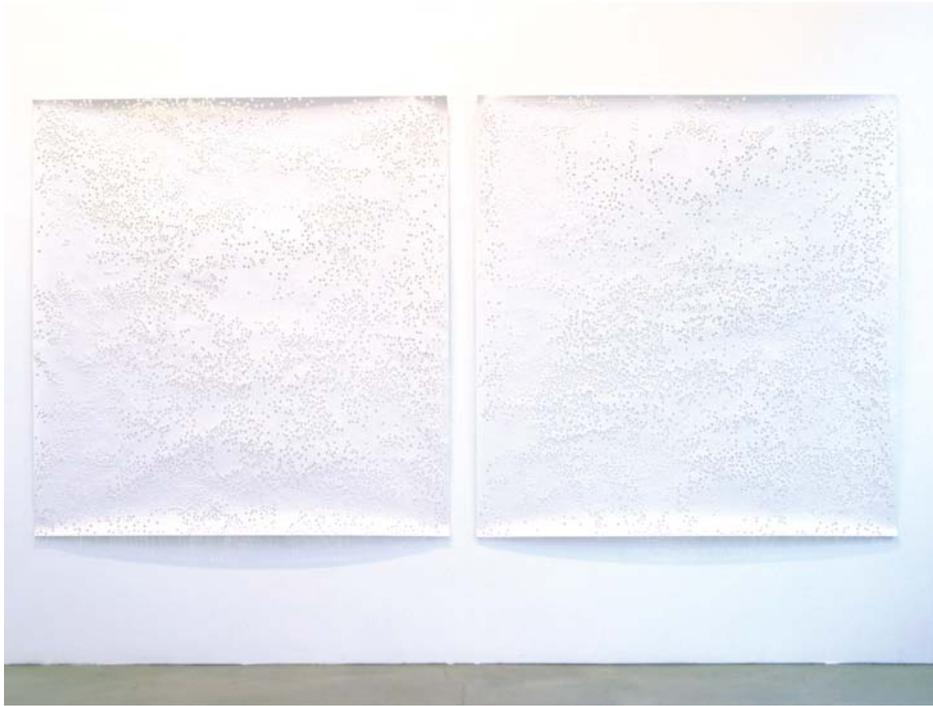
Above: Rob Smith, *Circumference* (2006), The diameter of each object in the piece is measured and added together. This total is then used as the circumference of a large chalk circle drawn directly onto the floor. The round objects are then placed edge to edge around this circle fitting the circumference exactly.

Left: Rob Smith, *Circumference* (2006), detail



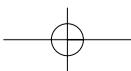
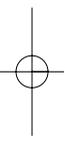
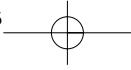
Above: Rob Smith, *Carousel* (2006), Installation view

Right: Rob Smith, *Carousel* (2006), Smith collects found round objects with a hole in the middle. The circles are scanned into a computer, modified to a standard size and then transferred to 35mm slides. These 80 circles are arranged in a chromatic order filling the projector's carousel.
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Above: Rob Smith, *Air Drawings* (2006), This pair of drawings is each made up of 10,000 hand punched holes in a single sheet of paper. Both images are identical except for the random arrangement of the holes. There are five round shapes corresponding in size to the relative size of the five main gases in air (Nitrogen, Oxygen, Argon, water and carbon dioxide). On each sheet, different holes are punched corresponding to the percentage of air which that gas constitutes i.e. 21% of air is Oxygen so 21% of the holes punched are the size that corresponds to oxygen.

Right: Rob Smith, *Air Drawings* (2006), Detail
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First published to accompany the exhibition

BREATHLESS

Cornelia Parker & Rob Smith

Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey

April 2 - May 28, 2006

Rob Smith would like to thank: Sophie Buxton, David Cotterrell, Dave Beech, Jeffrey Ty Lee

The Royal Academy Schools Gallery would like to thank: Cornelia Parker, Rob Smith, The Frith Street Gallery, Charlotte Schepke, Samantha Swan, the Royal Academy of Arts, and the RA Magazine.

Cover image: Rob Smith, *Air Drawings* (2006), Detail

Inside front cover: Rob Smith, *Air Samples* (2005), These relief prints are formed from the residue of the process of making the air drawings. The holes are punched out onto wooden boards that bare the marks of tens of thousands of hammer punches. A mask is used to select a random square (sample) on these boards and the marks printed onto paper.

Inside back cover: Rob Smith, *Air Key* (2002), This embossed and perforated work describes the five main constituent gases in air, the relative sizes of those molecules, and the percentage of the air that the gas occupies. This information is used as a template for the Air Drawings where holes are punched and counted to form a representation of the air.



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