

In an exclusive interview for FERREIRA PROJECTS, Lynn Wray and James R Ford meet over the internet to talk; critical acclaim, cranes and automobiles.

Lynn Wray:

Duchamp played chess; you make cranes; but why make cranes specifically? If you want something to occupy yourself with why not take up a more English pursuit like Morris dancing, embroidery or jam making?

James R Ford:

It wasn't really a conscious choice. I had been watching a lot of American TV shows like Heroes and Prison Break. Both these shows featured origami cranes in a number of episodes and sparked a memory from childhood – my inability to fold origami and in particular not being able to fold a Fortune Teller (I actually used this object in a work called Fortune Tower in 2002 and had to get a child to make it for me). The folding process in Origami can be so complex but produces such beautiful and simple objects. I wanted to know more about the origins of Japanese paper folding so I did some research and discovered the legend of making 1,000 cranes (which grants you a wish). I like tasks/challenges and frequently incorporate them in my work. At the time I wasn't thinking of making these cranes for an artwork - it was more of a distraction – a repetitive task to make me feel like I was achieving something – even if that was only a pile of paper cranes.

There are links between your work and obsessive drawing, which although often classed as outsider art has more recently been embraced as a valid contemporary art form. Although, given your art education, you could not really classify yourself as an outsider artist, do you think that your disenfranchisement from the contemporary art scene has encouraged the obsessive attributes of your practice?

In a way yes. When I was in my first year at Goldsmiths I was building the General Carbuncle piece. The academia hated it (and wanted me to stop working on it), but the builders, passers-by and kids loved it. I suppose that is the distinction between “contemporary art” and “outsider art” – the type of audience that it provokes. I've always said I want to make accessible work. I'm a conceptual artist at heart but that doesn't mean the work I produce has to be dry or confusing. With everything I do there is an emphasis on process; sometimes this is a repetitive act or obsession or the work could be based on the story/journey that went into making it. The manifestation can be anything from an accumulative sculpture, large drawing, short film or an online blog. My work may now be classed as contemporary because it is in a gallery and we are talking about it in a catalogue, but it got here without pretence. I didn't bluff my way in – the work is almost embarrassing in its honesty.

I'm sure the majority of people would find your honesty and lack of pretence very refreshing. Do you think that there is a pressure to over intellectualize artwork in general and is this actually symptomatic of a lack of confidence in the work and its ability to communicate with an audience?

I think you hit the nail on the head there! That is exactly how I feel. I went to a number of conceptually heavy institutions and it was constantly drummed in to you that your work should have meaning. I agree that work should have meaning but it should come naturally and be part of the making process. If the meaning is forced (or at worst completely unrelated) it causes the work to become contrived. And if there is a convoluted text to accompany the work that must be read to understand it, the over compensation becomes a barrier. The viewer should be able to take something from the work by just experiencing it, not reading about it.

A “side text” should add to the work, not explain it, or, how I use wall text, be part of the piece – to tell a story or define guidelines that were important in the production of the art. If an artist has a specific message to convey, I feel that the work should be simple and clear. I can't stand the kind of installations that use sand and empty oil drums and claim to be commenting on the war in Afghanistan – what exactly is the artist's comment/opinion?

Given that process is such an important part of your work, is there scope for involving members of the public in that process, or have you ever done so in the past?

I have involved the public and collaborated with other artists on a number of projects - General Carbuncle being one of the most recent. I was covering a 2nd hand Ford Capri in over 4,000 toy cars in order to transform it into a clunky British version of the General Lee (the car from the Dukes of Hazzard). I searched in numerous charity shops and car boot sales to source the cars but I knew I couldn't do it on my own. So I set up a website dedicated to the project and an appeal was started for people all over the world to send him their disused toy cars. The donator could leave a little message in the toy car, or mark it in some way, so they actually became part of the art whilst contributing to the sculpture and thus creating a global art collaboration.

When you involve people in the production of your work, do you think that affects your role as an artist or auteur? Is defining yourself as an artist as opposed to a curator, facilitator, provocateur or even ringmaster important to you?

I would always call myself an artist but that doesn't confine me to one role. The medium of my work varies depending on the idea that forms it, as does my role as creator. Artists have had assistants throughout documented history, even if they aren't credited for their efforts. In some of my collaborative works I have actively documented/publicised the people involved as I feel they enrich the project. As a "ringmaster" in 2002, along with Spencer Harrison, I accidentally invented a cult sport called House Gymnastics. It's a long story but, in a nut shell, we were unemployed, bored and literally climbing the walls. We took photos of ourselves in elevated/contorted positions around the house and gave the "moves" names such as One Handed Starfish and Jumping Jack Wedge. When we showed our friends they wanted to see more, so we set up a basic website to publish the photos. Our friends showed their friends who showed their friends and soon we were being sent photos of random people we didn't know climbing around their house. So we created a members area on the site where people could upload their own photos. Its popularity spiralled out of control and pictures from the site were popping up in newspapers and magazines all over the world. We also appeared in various TV programmes and even had a book published. None of this would have been possible without the input and enthusiasm of the people contributing to the project.

There is also an emphasis on play in your work; do you think that play is as important to adults as it can be for children in terms of their development?

Tess (my future wife) and I are addicted to playing Scrabble, both the board game and on Facebook. My vocabulary has improved immensely so you could say I was developing in my language skills! I suppose playing can help adults feel youthful and in some way unburdened, like you were as a child when you played all the time. I think that it is a necessity - it can be regressive and nostalgic, as well as fun and cathartic.

Your work has commanded the type of media attention both nationally and internationally that many artists' will never achieve in a lifetime, no matter how successful they are. Your work has appeared in such diverse publications as Vogue, The Daily Mirror and Chinese Reader's Digest. Have you deliberately cultivated this kind of media attention and how does it affect your work?

It was completely unexpected. My first media experience happened with House Gymnastics – initially it started with magazines and TV companies emailing me via the website but once one of them got my number it started to get passed around to all their journalist friends and reached a peak when I was rang at 2am by an Australian radio DJ! So I didn't aim for it but you start to feel empty when all the attention goes away. Artists are essentially egotists – we love attention and people viewing and talking about our work. When the House Gym hype calmed down I found myself wanting to recreate its success. That is a dangerous thing because you can start to make work purely to attract attention. This, of course, was the whole point of the YBAs but that time has passed. A one liner or piece of shock art no longer cuts the mustard. I feel honesty is the best policy. Try to be something you're not and you end up creating a vacuous spectacle.

There is a tradition of using random chance in artwork from Keith Tyson to Jackson Pollock to Marcel Duchamp which challenges the dictionary definition of art that it is a 'conscious' use of skill, taste, and creative imagination. Your work often involves an element of random chance: even your website has a 'randomiser' which selects a project page at random. This also provides a neat contrast to another part of your work, which is to do with obsession and concentration.

How do you think this contrast between chance and control works as part of the process of making your work?

I wouldn't say my work was purposefully random. It's not like I write down six disparate ideas at a time and roll a dice. I can be influenced by what's going on in my life, the news, art history, what book I'm reading, or a crap TV show I saw last night. My juvenile character and obsessive nature tend to bind these things together to form ideas for my practice. Once I'm happy with an idea, that is where the conscious use of skill and taste come in – I'm very methodical in the actual production of the work. There is a random page generator on my site because the projects are not linear. There is a coherent thread throughout but they need not be viewed in any order.

In previous works I have set up a controlled system of chance, with rules, and let it develop. As far back as *Memory Maps* (1999), *Fortune Tower* (2002) and *15625 Hybrids* (2002). A perfect example is *Number Plate Initials* (2002-2003). I set myself the following guidelines:

- I will photograph number plates containing the letters of my initials, either JF or JRF, but only when the letters are next to each other, in the correct order.
- JRF is rarer and therefore better luck.
- For the photograph to be valid the number plate has to be readable.
- The total number of number plates to be captured will be determined by the numbers present in the first number plate that I photograph.
- Within this given number of number plates to be photographed, the same number plate cannot be included more than once.
- The number plates containing my initials have to be found through chance (i.e. I can't walk around car parks purposefully searching for them).

Therefore I had allowed a chance outcome for the work but within a given structure. The resulting work was a regularly updated online project and, finally, a series of 124 photos (lucky that the first number plate I saw didn't start 999) which were taken over the period of a year in Nottingham, London and Yateley.

Now finally, back to the cranes. They seem to have migrated you back into the contemporary art scene. What are your plans for the future: are you now willing to embrace that scene and can you see yourself developing further as a gallery based artist?

I learnt a lot in my break from the scene. I relaxed and stopped trying to force the work out. Meeting Christian has also helped – he's a great gallerist. When we first met I showed him some unfinished work which he described as "the kind of thing you'd find in Spitalfields market". But he stuck with me. He's been honest from the start and I hope to work together with him in the future, be it in the gallery or for other projects. I'm not ready to fully embrace the scene but some of my faith has been restored. Fancy a game of chess on Facebook?

Lynn Wray is a visual artist and writer based in Glasgow.