

DÉPÊCHES D'UN CORRESPONDANT DE GUERRE: REVIEW OF EXHIBITION, ROB CLOUGHLEY & PRUDENCE EDGE, *TUBE*, ANTEROOM, PORT CHALMERS, 2017.

Scott Flanagan



Figure 1: *Tube* Prudence Edge and Rob Cloughley. Installation at the Ante Room September 2017. Photograph: Alan Dove.

And down with all Kings but King Ludd.(Byron to Thomas Moore, 24 December 1816)

There is a history of Dunedin that is quite literally underground – it is the history of 274 kilometres of reticulated pipes.¹ The Dunedin Gas Light and Coke Company (Ltd), founded in 1862 by Stephen Hutchison, was given the remit to provide 50 street lights for Princes, George and Stuart Streets. Gold soon flowed into the city, and the number quickly increased to 150. The Dunedin City Council purchased the company in 1876. Hutchison built a new gasworks in Caversham in 1881, in direct competition with the council; during a heated debate in the council chambers, two councillors and one ratepayer were sent to court for assaulting the mayor!

The first commercial use of gas lamps was at the Salford Cotton Mills in 1804: providing 50 gas lamps allowing the mill to operate at night. Just eight years later – coincidentally the same year that a public gas supply was installed in London by the Gas, Light and Coke Company(!) – reports started to filter out of a violent insurrection in Nottinghamshire. These reports mentioned the destruction of technology by groups aligned to a certain Ned Ludd – soon to be known as Luddites.² This violence against technology quickly spread to Manchester and even made brief appearances in London.

Researching this period, I am surprised by the startling similarities to our own day – how the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution resemble the end, as post-industrialisation prepares to replace labour with automation. What if the Luddites were correct? What if Ned and his cohort of wreckers actually did sound a prophetic voice, one more real than the romantic flights that marked Byron's maiden speech in the House of Lords?

In September 2017, Rob Cloughley and Prudence Edge presented an engaging, subtle and incisive exhibition comprising both collaborative and individual works which came together to form a unified installation.³ The philosophical, social and humanistic themes evident in their collaboration responded to Paul Virilio's dromoscopic⁴ concerns of an imminent technological collapse, lending the completed installation an apocalyptic structure. Wonderfully human and a pleasure to see, on first viewing *Tube* I was surprised how quickly the name Ned Ludd came to mind.

In the exhibition, ceramics and textiles combine to generate an active field in support of a passive field. Cloughley has set up ceramic simulacra of pieces of machinery, turbines and pipes. Also arrayed are organic structures that resembles corals, or creatures feeding off thermophilic ocean vents – soft tubular organisms surviving and propagating inside rust-like ceramic matrices.

The interpenetration of the organic and the industrial with the history of ceramics is highly synergistic; it made complete sense that these simulacra of industry would be made from some of its basic components, the same materials that feed or house the organic.



Figure 2: *Tube* emerging from a rusted steel hull, actively knitted on gnarled ceramic teeth by Edge during the exhibition.

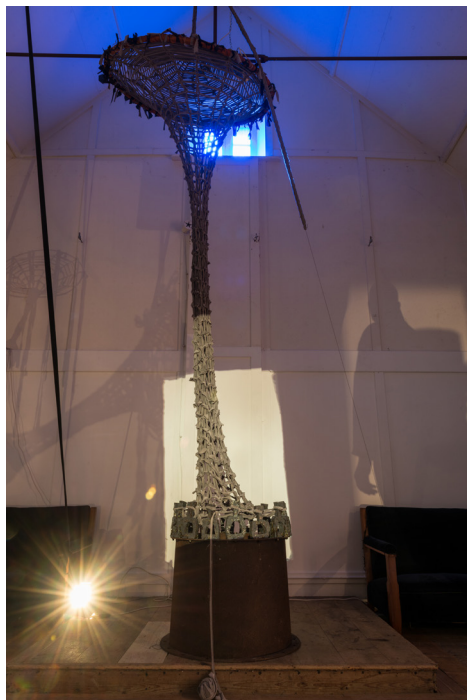
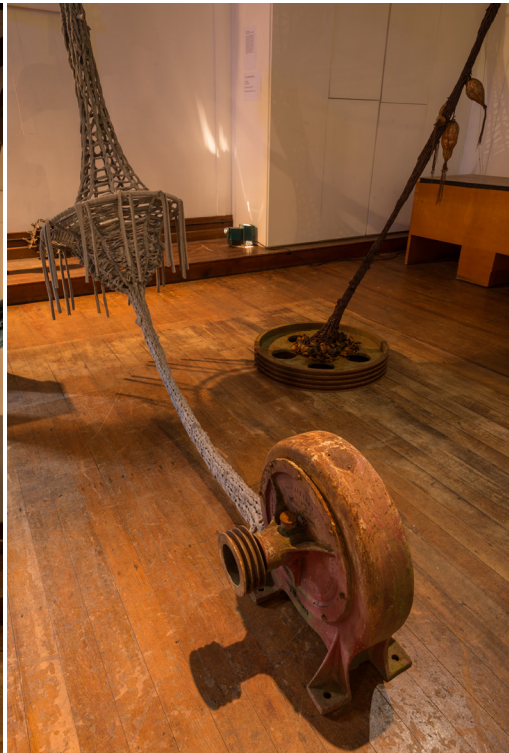


Figure 3: *Day Three*, the growth of the tube, lit by a small blue portal. Photograph: Alan Dove.



Previous page: Figure 4: "The combination of actively knitting primary mathematics, gravity and the elasticity of the fabric results in a remarkable fingerpost pointed in the direction of an Einstein – Rosen Bridge." from text. Figure 5: Cloughley' rustic ceramic cogs, stand aside as remnants of a post industrial age. Figure 6: Shadow play doubles the impact of the an Einstein – Rosen Bridge. Figure 7: Cloughley/Edge knitting and found objects suggesting "The equitable relationship with the machine." Figure 8: Cloughley' ceramic machine remnant. Figure 9: The special clamor of Cloughley/Edge math, science, light and industry. Photography: Alan Dove.

In a cluster on the floor of Port Chalmers's Anteroom – a rectangular Masonic lodge with a small raised perron at one end, one small window high up on the same gable end and a single door (side entrance) – Cloughley has placed a fulcrum (on which to prise my thoughts), a group of handmade units and a square with a T on the top side, about the size of a standing palm. It is open, it bespeaks fertility, it has a relationship to every ceramic piece arrayed around the gallery, as well as compelling intellectual connections – as if all Cloughley's work is informed by a single unit.

Deformation is also present, a natural outcome of gravity that appears to be pushed just past its limit. A cast turbine, solid and heavily impasto with engobe, weighs ponderously over a vigorously thumbled coil tube. Bent at the connecting point, it has a stupefying gravity. If you can imagine the news: A group of men around Sherwood forest are breaking machines, burning looms.

Today, the news is not quite as startling, though still utterly relevant – for what will be done with all the human units when industry conforms to automation?

Life on the edge of extremes, it adapts and grows and flourishes. In the same manner, Cloughley has dispersed among the simulacra the organic components carrying the fertility of the unit; they have become mounds branching anew from the evolutionary rhizome, growing confidently into the spatial field that Edge occupies. Industry is a force that makes life adapt its vitality.

On a hulking, rusted section of pipe, one of a number of actual mechanical parts in the gallery, Cloughley has attached to the circular flange (where the pipe would be bolted to another section of pipe) a series of his handmade units, and from this conjunction of metal and clay he has fashioned an over-large French knitting spool. Situated on the raised platform, it is elevated above the rest of Cloughley's works: rightly so. This work has an eminence, for it moves from the passive field into the active field as Edge knits from the very large spool.

It is a very smooth transition, confirming how the two fields rely on each other in order to function collaboratively. This just happens to assert what the so-called Luddites wished for – an equitable relationship with the machine.

Post-modernism was a curiously irascible hair shirt; it was wilfully difficult and obscurantist, but it has been useful to grab some of its tricks as we move towards something described more openly as soft modernism.⁵

Edge has affirmed that knitting, a form of weaving, is related to a group of primary mathematics disciplines dating back millennia, a history entirely consistent with clay. This explained why I understood her work as acknowledging something quite different from the shock I first experienced when I caught an intake of breath and thought, "Oh no, dreamcatchers," quickly followed by "Oh yes, Ada Lovelace!" Banded metal hoops bound with fibre, or remaining raw, rusted metal, have been given tassels and hang, or are suspended, at varying intervals from the roof of the gallery – thus compelling my initial shock.

Edge's work moves through the space of the gallery, tunnelling through it actively as it is confidently knitted each day. Using a plain, utilitarian grey fabric, she employs a loose knit to connect the banded hoops. The combination of actively knitting primary mathematics, gravity and the elasticity of the fabric results in a remarkable fingerpost pointed in the direction of an Einstein-Rosen Bridge⁶ – a concept necessary to both popular culture and theoretical physics, as an insightful mathematical application has confirmed a cherished literary trope. Hone Tuwhare wrote of it, with pointed finger connected directly to incisive intellect, as drilling *Small Holes in the Silence*.

Edge knits together these small holes, opening tunnels to the past and the option to project a future. And, knitted directly from Cloughley's clay units on the French knitting spool, that hulking, rusted unit of industrial strength supports the idea that the relationship of craft and art is also fluid. Was that perhaps Duchamp's porcelain point before he escaped back to chess and installations?

Multiple Einstein-Rosen Bridges cross the space of the gallery, nearly always connecting to some piece of distressed, obsolete industry – but only one is actively knitted, and that is somehow very correct.

With only a single small window high on the gable end, the gallery is lit with incandescent slide projectors, lo-fi dystopian campfires that bevel and sharpen the apocalyptic edge of the work.

There is a subtext knitted within Edge's work and its relationships, both active and passive, with Cloughley's – it is a complex textuality, weaving together Lovelace, Byron, Mellor, gasworks, and the folding together of the early and late Industrial periods.

Ada Lovelace⁷ – prodigious mathematician, Byron's daughter – gilded with Manchester millinery money, proposed a way to code machines and enable them to advance from primary mathematics by adding a complexity that was so astonishingly simple that it could be replicated anywhere, completely and utterly utilitarian. The way all these threads join together, cohering complexity across a disciplined craft, tunnelling through ideas to create a symmetry we call Art, makes this an installation so vital, so necessarily modern to our day.

As we spiral towards another threshold similar to the one faced by Mellor and his cohort of Luddites, it is especially apposite to be thinking how the arts – humanity's one saving grace – remain a priority in the face of obsolescence. Edge and Cloughley have tempted out a refreshing guild within a sharp dystopia.

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Rob Cloughley is the Diploma in Ceramic Art programme coordinator / Ceramic Lecturer within the Dunedin School of Art. He has worked for Otago Polytechnic since 2002 and holds a Master of Fine Art. Rob's practice is in ceramic sculpture and he teaches a wide variety of ceramic-related topics.

Prudence Edge is an artist and businesswoman from Port Chalmers. She holds an Masters of Fine Art RMIT University.



Figure 10a and b: Cloughley's large ceramic and found steel sculpture at the entrance to the Anteroom in Wickliffe Terrace, Port Chalmers. Photograph: Alan Dove.

- 1 Dunedin Gasworks Museum Trust, *The Engine House, Dunedin Gasworks Museum: A Guide to the Museum's History and Displays* (Dunedin: The Museum, [200-?]).
- 2 Robert Reid, *Land of Lost Content: The Luddite Revolt, 1812* (London: William Heinemann, 1986); Nicols Fox, *Against the Machine: The Hidden Luddite Tradition in Literature, Art, and Individual Lives* (Washington: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2002).
- 3 "Tube," a multi-work installation by Prudence Edge and Rob Cloughley, was shown at the Anteroom, Port Chalmers, Dunedin, 16-22 September 2017.
- 4 Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 163-80.
- 5 Mike Grimshaw, "'Soft Modernism: The World of the Post-theoretical Designer,'" *Ctheory*, 8 April 2004, http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/soft-modernism-the-world-of-the-post-theoretical-designer/; Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1982).
- 6 There is as much hard science and communicative science on the subject of Einstein-Rosen Bridges as there is popular representation in cinema and literature.
- 7 On Ada Lovelace, see Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).