PMC Notes No. 17

Ceramics in Staffordshire and South Korea
Page 7

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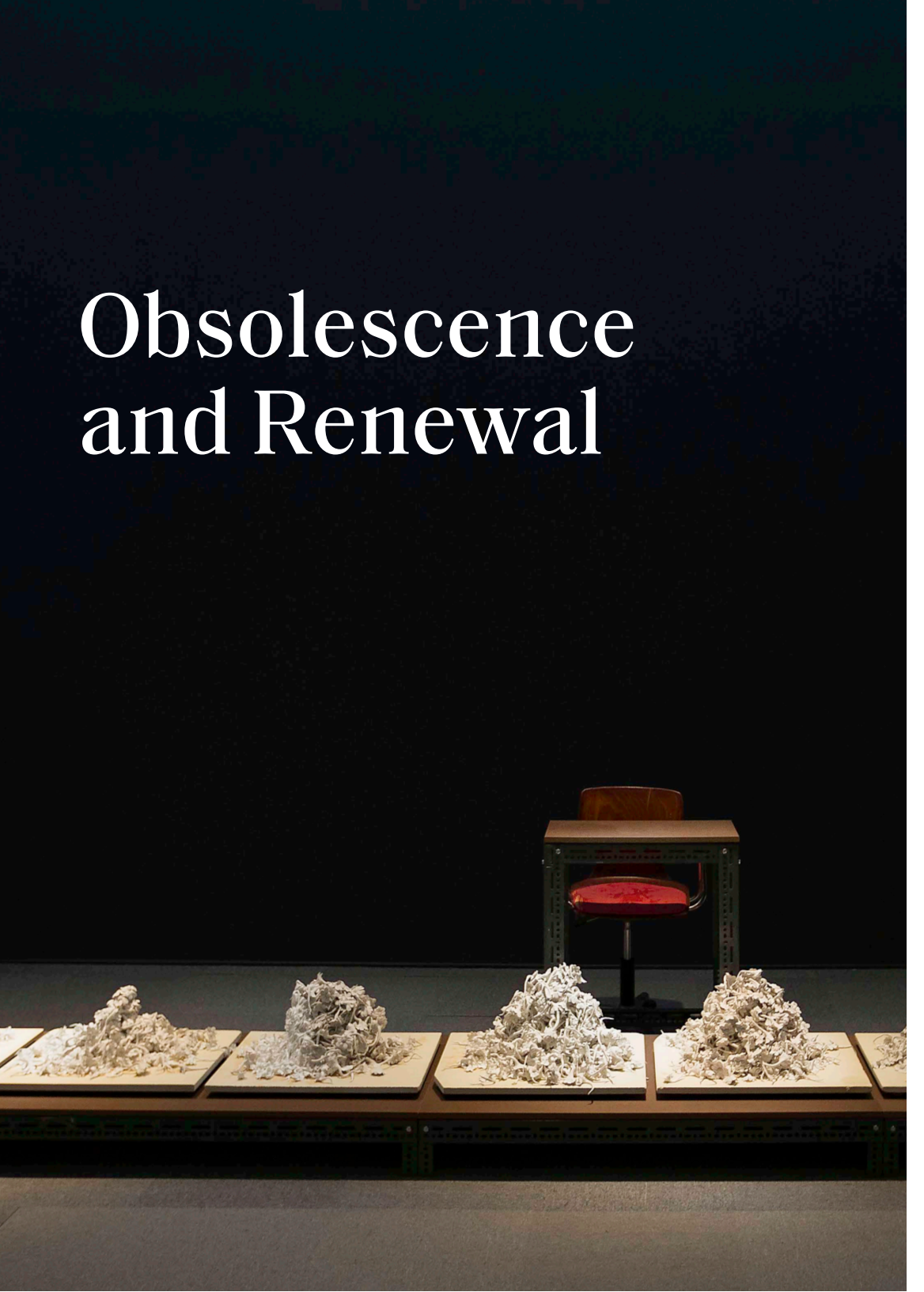
Obsolescence and Renewal



Neil Brownsword is an artist, researcher, and educator who holds professorial positions in ceramics at Staffordshire University and the University of Bergen. This essay is based on a lecture that he gave on 5 December 2020 as part of the Centre's Public Lecture Course, *Ceramics in Britain, 1750 to Now*.

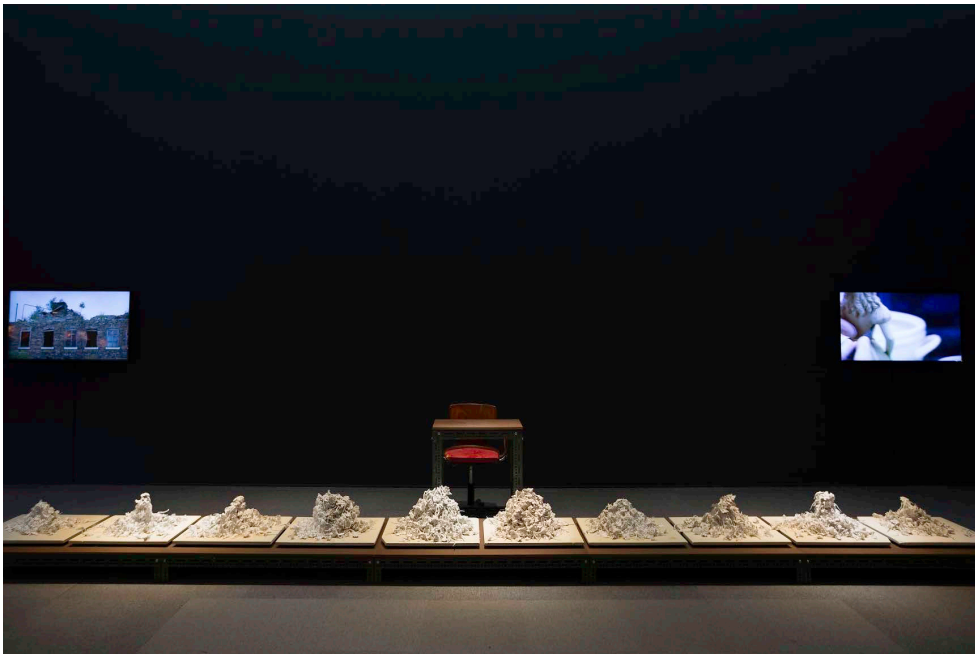
The six towns that constitute Stoke-on-Trent have been famed for their industrial-scale pottery manufacture since the early eighteenth century. By the 1720s, growing consumer demand for finer ceramics led to skill specialisation, and the local population's integration into an economy led by the manufacture of pottery. Alongside pioneers of the industrial revolution such as Wedgwood and Spode, the Staffordshire potteries were driven by hundreds of smaller factories with more than 2,000 kilns firing millions of products a year. By 1938, half the workforce of Stoke-on-Trent worked in the 'Potteries', with employment peaking in 1948 at an estimated 79,000 people. During the last three decades, however, many North Staffordshire-based companies have struggled to compete in both domestic and export markets. In the 1990s, many factories were forced to outsource production to East Asia, where energy and direct labour costs were a fraction of those in North Staffordshire. This strategy, coupled with advances in production technology, has been significantly detrimental to traditional practices that once fashioned material objects in particular ways – many of which are now endangered as few apprenticeships exist to effectively transfer this knowledge.

The displacement of much of Stoke-on-Trent's manufacturing capacity has accelerated regional decline. In such circumstances, a strategy of cultural regeneration has often been hailed by policymakers as a panacea to transform industrial ruins into aestheticised backdrops for artistic consumption. Yet within the

regeneration agenda of place there is often an unseemly haste for local government and cultural organisations to circumvent the human fallout of industrial change, in favour of a more 'managed' account of the recent past. Thus, the psychological and emotional dimensions of industrial history – the first-hand recollections surrounding networks, social bonds, and pride forged by collective skill, can be all too easily side-lined.

Since 2013, I have used my artistic profile to foreground the embodied knowledge of skilled personnel formerly employed in North Staffordshire's ceramic industry to challenge both this politicised amnesia, and the charge that I am being complicit in a 'retrospective idealisation' of the industrial past. Through collaborative performance, object installation, and filmed re-enactment, my work has sought to bring critical attention to people and traditional knowledge displaced by the effects of British economic policies that favour low regulation in global trade. I have staged site-specific performative interventions at numerous post-industrial spaces and high-profile cultural venues, to elucidate and rejuvenate skilled practices often considered outmoded or economically unviable for contemporary production.

FACTORY, staged in 2017 at Icheon World Ceramic Center, South Korea, centred on six performances that addressed the cultural hierarchies and value systems of two distinct ceramic traditions. Today, the regressive utopianism of John Ruskin and William Morris and Anglo-Oriental doctrines of the studio pottery movement continue to galvanise the notions of spiritual and moral superiority associated with 'handcraft', and to relegate industrial know-how to a position of inferiority. Both Bernard Leach and Yanagi Soetsu, during a period of British and Japanese imperialist power in the early twentieth century, romantically venerated the 'humble beauty' of 'peasant' pottery from the Korean peninsula. As part of its processes of decolonisation at the end of World War II, South Korea adopted a nationalist discourse surrounding the legacy of its Joseon dynastic past and subsequently introduced laws to protect its heritage and reinforce its cultural identity. Following UNESCO's 1993 campaign to preserve and promote "Living Human Treasures", South Korea now grants special status to individuals with exceptional cultural ability. In 2003, the UNESCO convention to safeguard 'intangible cultural heritage' further advocated support for the transmission of tacit knowledge, skills, and practices. A total of 178 countries have now ratified this convention, effectively making 'intangible heritage' part of their cultural policy – but unfortunately the UK is not one of them.



In response to this, *FACTORY* collided the ceramic practices of two ex-industry personnel from Stoke-on-Trent – china flower-maker Rita Floyd and mould-maker James Adams – with the culturally revered dexterity of Korean master artisans. China flower-making remains one of the few methods of mass production that relies completely upon the dexterity of the hand. With changing fashion, this industry in Stoke-on-Trent has all but disappeared, with Rita Floyd being one of a handful of still-practising artisans who retain this knowledge. Floyd's performance provided an intimate space for audiences to witness her rhythmic intricacies of touch through predetermined patterns of repetition, efficiency, and uniformity. Yet to avoid staging passive spectacles, typical of 'authorised heritage discourse', Floyd was instructed to continuously discard her manufacture onto a 6-metre production line built within the gallery. These symbolic gestures gave unprescribed form to each crafted component, with their distortion and random coalescence dictated by gravity and the material's plasticity.

Floyd's intermittent performances and the linear deposits of waste that accumulated in the space were flanked by two film loops that meditated on industrial transition in Stoke-on-Trent. The films juxtaposed haptic knowledge, documented during the restructuring of the Wedgwood factory in 2004, against a 2016 survey of abandoned industrial sites reclaimed by the forces of nature. These intersecting modes of expression both signal the British government's disregard for intangible heritage and the human consequences of globalisation, and challenge notions that specialist knowledge becomes 'redundant' once the support networks of the factory cease to exist. Instead, they consider industrial heritage as a 'living process' and seek its rejuvenation and continuation for the future.

Within the gallery space, production remnants salvaged from historic sites of ceramic manufacture were also stripped of their previously assigned use and presented inside vitrines. These artefacts had been marked by a particular point in time, as prior to the factories' closure they were deconstructed to deter their use in subsequent reproduction. To avoid their display becoming mere objectification, these items were performatively remoulded by Korean master Sinhyun Cho, and subsequently cast in porcelain and decorated by other master artisans – carver Yongjun Cho and painter Wonjeong Lee. Faced with these fragmentary reproductions of post-industrial discard, the artisans were given free rein to use traditional

iconography, creating tension between culturally inherited notions of value and perfection. A further collaboration began with a series of partially formed moon jars, created by Living National Treasure Seo Kwang-su, who is renowned for continuing many archetypical forms of Korean ceramics. James Adams then took these casually assembled components into a less-revered craft – production mould-making – which was instrumental to ceramic manufacture in North Staffordshire, and paradoxically eradicated human touch through modes of standardisation.

This use of human interaction lay counter to 'fixed in the past' demonstrations of skill and virtuosity, which heritage tourism deploys minus the complexities of social redundancy. *FACTORY* sought to counter such tropes, and practices of 'othering' more generally – whether experienced by marginalised groups in Britain or between British and South Korean artists – via collaborative modes of investigation that stimulated discourse, interactivity, and sensory understanding through the cultural exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge. Reactivating 'obsolescence' through non-commercial production created a space where people with marginalised immaterial heritage could speak for themselves and renegotiate their value, in a context where such embodiments of knowledge are culturally revered, renewed, and sustained for future generations.

Page 6
Neil Brownsword, installation shot of *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.

Page 9
Neil Brownsword, Rita Floyd making china flowers, *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.

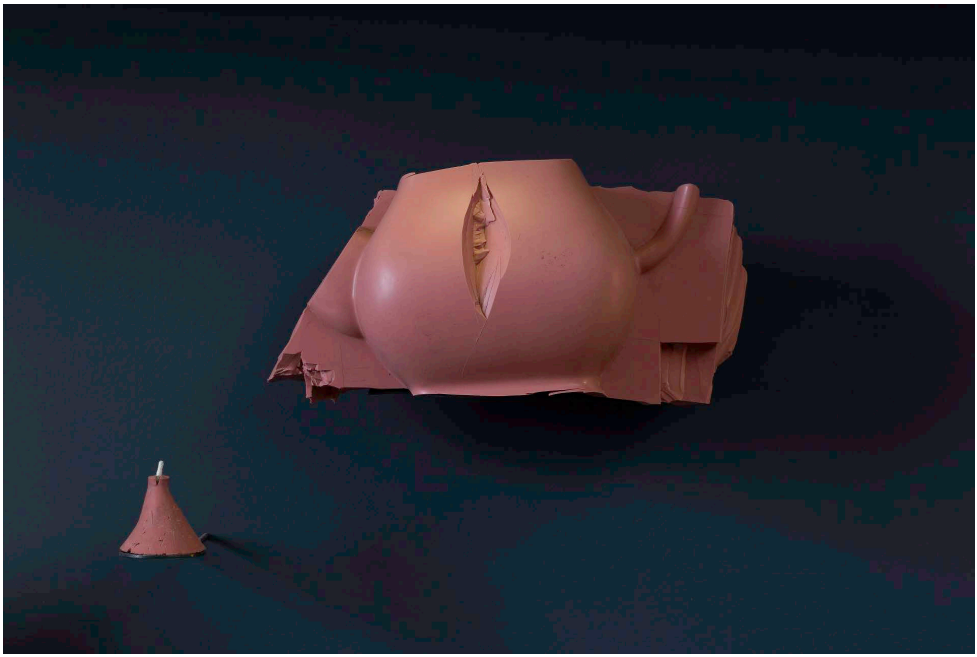
Page 10
Top: Neil Brownsword, installation shot of *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.

Left: Neil Brownsword, Rita Floyd discarding china flowers, *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.

Right: Neil Brownsword, discarded china flowers, *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.

Page 13
Neil Brownsword, post-industrial discard, *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.

Neil Brownsword, Yongjun Cho at work, *FACTORY*, Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, 2017. Image courtesy of Korea Ceramic Foundation.



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