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Obsolescence and Renewal

The six towns that constitute Stoke-on-Trent have been famed for their industrial-scale pottery manufacture since the early 18th century. By the 1720s, growing consumer demand for finer ceramics led to skill specialisation through divisions of labour, and the integration of a local population 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 ceramic industry, with employment peaking in 1948 to an estimated 79000 people. To this day Stoke-on-Trent, continues to be affectionately known as the ‘Potteries’ - one of the few British cities with a distinctive regional identity that remains synonymous with a particular industry. However, during the last three decades global competition has resulted in many North Staffordshire based companies struggling to adapt or compete in both domestic and export markets. Increased global competition in the 1990’s from East Asia, forced many factories to outsource production to these developing economies where energy and direct labour costs were a fraction compared to those in North Staffordshire. This strategy coupled with advances in production technology has been detrimental to traditional practices that once fashioned material objects in particular ways - many of which are now endangered as few apprenticeships exist to secure the effective transfer of this knowledge.

The displacement of much of Stoke-on-Trent’s manufacturing capacity has since accelerated regional decline, with cultural regeneration hailed as a universal panacea to transform industrial ruination into aestheticized 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 associations with the human falloutof industrial change, in favour for 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 this politicised amnesia. Through a range of intersecting approaches that include collaborative performance, object installation and filmed re-enactment, the work has sought to raise greater critical attention to people and traditional knowledge displaced by the ensuing effects of global economics. Site-specific performative interventions staged at numerous post-industrial spaces and high-profile cultural venues, have sought to rejuvenate procedural and material knowledge embedded within skilled practices considered outmoded or economically unviable for contemporary production.

*FACTORY* staged in 2017 at Icheon World Ceramic Centre, South Korea, centred on six performances that addressed the hierarchies and value systems culturally designated to two distinct ceramic traditions. The regressive utopianism of Ruskin and Morris and Anglo-Oriental doctrines of the Studio Pottery Movement have continued to galvanise notions of spiritual/moral superiority associated with ‘handcraft’ and relegate industrial know-how to a position of inferiority. Both Bernard Leach and Soetsu Yanagi, during a period of British and Japanese imperialist power in the early 20th century venerated the ‘humble beauty’ of ‘peasant’ pottery from the Korean peninsula. Further to this, South Korea through its processes of decolonisation at the end of World War II adopted a nationalist historiographic discourse celebrating its Joseon legacy, that subsequently initiated laws to protect its heritage and reinforce its cultural identity. At the forefront of UNESCO’s 1993 campaign that issued *Guidelines for the Establishment of National ‘Living Human Treasures’ Systems,* South Korea now grants the status of Living National Treasure to individuals with exceptional cultural ability to preserve and promote living heritage. In 2003, UNESCO’s convention to safeguard intangible cultural heritage further advocated support for the continuation and transmission of tacit knowledge, skills and practices to prevent them from being lost. 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 practicing artisans who retain this knowledge. Floyd’s performance provided an intimate space for audiences to witness rhythmic intricacies of touch through pre-determined patterns of repetition, efficiency and uniformity achieved via the parameters of traditional knowledge (fig 1). Yet to avert passive spectacles of ‘authorised heritage discourse’, Floyds re-enactments were subverted via an instruction for her to continuously discard her manufacture onto a 6-meter production-line built within the gallery (fig 2). These symbolic gestures gave unprescribed form to each crafted component, dictated by the indeterminate forces of gravity and plasticity of the material. Floyd’s intermittent performances together with the linear deposits of waste that accumulated in the space, were flanked by two film loops that mediated points of industrial transition in Stoke-on-Trent (fig 3). The films juxtaposed detailed nuances of haptic knowledge archived during the restructuring of the Wedgwood’s factory in 2004, against a 2016 survey of former industrial sites reclaimed by the entropic forces of nature. Contrasting footage of once efficient regimes of ceramic production, and the physical disordering of former factories absorbed by invasive botanical interventions, converge with re-choreographed action and the entangled residues of live performance. Although these intersecting expressions through their mediation of presence and absence both signal the British government’s disregard for intangible heritage and the human consequences of globalisation. This re-activation of procedural knowledge considers industrial heritage as a ‘living process’ beyond the stasis of tradition and seeks conditions for its rejuvenation and continuation for the future.

Stripped of their previously assigned use and context, production remnants salvaged from former sites of historic ceramic manufacture, also claimed venerable status via the valorising mechanism of the vitrine (fig 4). Presented as a series of formal taxonomies, these artefacts were also marked by a particular point in time, as prior to the factories closure they were defaced and deconstruction to deter subsequent reproduction. Appropriated as performative objects, these were subsequently remoulded by Korean master Sinhyun Cho, cast in porcelain and decorated by other master artisans - carver Yongjun Cho and painter Wonjeong Lee (fig 5). Faced with these fragmentary reproductions of post-industrial discard, artisans were given free rein to apply iconography passed down through their own traditions, to create tension points between culturally inherited notions of value and perfection. In re-navigating the skills of Living National Treasure Kwangsu Seo, (renowned for the continuation of many archetypal forms of Korean ceramics), a series of partially formed moon jars were arrested in their intermediary stage of becoming to expose the raw immediacy of touch. James Adams took these casually assembled components into a lesser revered mode of production - mould-making, instrumental to the histories of ceramic manufacture in North Staffordshire, which eradicated traces of human touch through modes of standardization (fig 6). This blurring and integration of opposing hierarchies culturally assigned to haptic knowledge aimed to re-evaluate factory skills honed through labour specialisation, beyond the economic advantage of industry and stasis of authorised heritage discourse.

Thisuse of human interaction as a primary material, lay counter to ‘fixed in the past’ demonstrations of virtuosity packaged for heritage tourism that remain decontextualized from the complexities of social redundancy. *FACTORY* sought to counter hegemonic relationships and the politics of ‘othering’ via collaborative modes of investigation that stimulated reciprocal discourse and sensory understanding through the cultural exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge. Reactivating obsolescence through non-commercialised production, created a space where the actors of marginalized 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.