**Legacy and Continuity: Observations and reflections on the persistence of craft**

In recent decades cross-disciplinary perspectives have redefined the conventions of clay and ceramic practice beyond medium-specific parameters. As boundaries blur, ceramic materials and techniques are no longer confined to traditional discourse, technologies, and theories. New media, sound, and video offer alternative platforms that remediate site-specific contexts, human interactivity, and the transitory nature of clay. With the absence of the physical object, the sensory knowledge inherent in ceramic vocabulary is constantly repositioned in unfamiliar territory. Digital fabrication technologies and their intersections with AI and virtual reality offer new tools to realise previously impossible objects. Performative, participatory, and socially engaged strategies embrace the accessible and democratic nature of clay to address a broad range of environmental, political, and social concerns. The methodologies of ceramics remain ever porous and in constant flux.

The resurgence of material-based practices within contemporary art over the last decade has led to ‘non-specialists’ exploiting unfettered applications of clay as part of their broader practice. This post-disciplinary approach, (characterized by predominantly Western artists) tends to dismiss traditional constructs of ceramics and dogmatic preoccupations with craft. An apparent lack of formal training and technical expertise is navigated as a conceptual choice, which has both liberated perceptions of ceramics as well as stirring negative reactions. Described by historian and theorist Glenn Adamson as ‘sloppy craft’ (**1**), the genre rejects sophistications of skill and material knowledge in favour of ‘primal immediacy’.

However, the GICB24 International Competition shortlist indicates a prominent return to object-centred discourse, where accomplished know-how and material knowledge is not antithetical to progressive artistic aspirations. This may be due to the applicant demographic, with most of the successful entries originating from South Korea - a country whose education institutions still uphold medium-specific teaching intrinsic to the crafted object. This value system is rooted in Korea’s legacy of preserving its indigenous crafts

during a period of rapid industrialization during the 1960’s. At the forefront of UNESCO’s 1993 campaign that issued *Guidelines for the Establishment of National ‘Living Human Treasures’ Systems,* (**2**) South Korea grants the status of Living National Treasure to individuals with exceptional cultural ability to preserve and promote living heritage. UNESCO’s 2003 convention to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (**3**) further advocated support for the continuation and transmission of knowledge, skills, and practices to prevent them from being lost.

In 2017 I was fortunate to directly experience this legacy through *FACTORY -* a series of cross-cultural collaborative performances staged at Icheon World Ceramic Centre (**4**), that addressed the value systems culturally designated to two distinct ceramic traditions in Korea and Great Britain. The six towns that constitute the UK’s historic centre of ceramic production - Stoke-on-Trent, have been famed for their industrial-scale pottery manufacture since the early 18th century. However, during the last three decades increased global competition from East Asia has forced many factories to outsource production to ‘developing economies’ where energy and direct labour costs remain a fraction compared to those in Stoke-on-Trent. Coupled with advances in production technology, this strategy has been significantly detrimental to traditional practices that once fashioned material objects in particular ways. Many of these ‘outmoded’ skills are now at risk of being lost, as few apprenticeships exist to secure the effective transfer of this knowledge.

The marginalisation of practical knowledge associated with industrialisation can be traced back to the regressive utopianism of Ruskin and Morris and Anglo-Oriental doctrines of the

Studio Pottery Movement. The subsequent binaries established between craft and industry, tacit and explicit knowledge 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, romantically venerated the ‘humble beauty’ of ‘peasant’ pottery from the Korean peninsula ‘as an uncorrupted vision of innocence’. (**5**) As part of its process 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. (**6**) Ceramic industrialisation however repositioned skilled hands to a secondary role, governed by a hierarchy of value assigned to skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled practices. (**7**) Segregating labour to increase productivity for economic advantage minimised risk, resulting in experiential and practical know-how being denigrated as manual skill through which ‘limited’ intellectual or creative input was exercised. (**8**)

To question the hierarchies bestowed upon these distinct forms of cultural production, *FACTORY* collided the revered practices of Korean master artisans, with those held by former industry artisans from Stoke-on-Trent, china flower maker Rita Floyd and mould maker James Adams. A series of co-ordinated performances subverted the rhythms of procedural knowledge that inhabit notions of standardisation and workmanship inherent to both cultures. By foregrounding the complexities of explicit knowledge that lie separated within industrial production alongside Korean ceramic practices, *FACTORY* aimed to reveal parallel sophistications of experiential knowledge and ‘bodily-kinesthetic intelligence’ (**9**) irrespective of culturally assigned status (Fig. 1).

Performing labour through *FACTORY* aligned itself with what theorist Richard Schechner defines as ‘restored behaviour’ through its re-enactment of tacit and haptic knowledge extracted from lived experience, which is reconstructed as a raw material and assigned to new contexts. (**10**) In curating ‘restored behaviour’ *FACTORY*’s re-deployment of industrial artisans in a cultural setting considers notions of ‘performance’ in relation to labour. Here actions associated with productivity and the skills needed to successfully execute a task, are reframed through non-commercialised modes of production to emphasise knowledge production and tactile intelligences.

Rita 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. Yet to avert passive spectacles of ‘authorised heritage discourse’, (**11**) Floyd’s re-enactments were subverted via instructions for her to continuously discard her manufacture onto a 6-meter production-line built within the gallery (Fig. 2). Re-enacting systems of rejection observed through quality control mechanisms within china flower making served as both a symbolic and political gesture to draw attention to the marginalised status of the bearers of such knowledge. Control relinquished by Floyd through her discarding gesture gave unprescribed form to each crafted component, with their random coalescence determined by the unpredictable forces of gravity and material plasticity. The intersections of chance and the inherent properties of the material ‘dictating the artworks themselves’. (**12**)

Appropriating ‘failure’ as a creative strategy was used on numerous levels – to symbolically equate to the human waste following the impact of deindustrialisation, but also open up the potentials of explicit knowledge beyond cultivated instruction. Through its foregrounding of ‘living heritage’ via arts-led collaboration, *FACTORY* challenged the notion that specialist knowledge becomes redundant once the support networks of the factory cease to exist. It demonstrates that such knowledge can remain open to active processes of change and transformation, and that its holders can act as dynamic cultural mediators between past and present.

Acknowledging South Korea’s geopolitical and colonial histories, and the importance of not imposing control upon expressions central to its cultural identity, was central to *FACTORY*’s collaborations with Korean ceramic masters. Within their performances, artisans had complete autonomy to impart knowledge grounded within their own cultural context upon objects directly indicative of North Staffordshire’s post-industrial situation. Salvaged from former sites of historic ceramic manufacture (Fig. 3), these production remnants were marked by a particular point in time, as prior to the factory’s closure such objects faced habitual defacement to deter subsequent reproduction (Fig. 4). Drawing parallels to acts of iconoclasm throughout art’s history, (**13**) these objects, stripped of their previously assigned use and context, were given venerable status via their presentation within the valorising mechanisms of the vitrine. As Tim Edensor suggests, objects,

*‘consigned to the status of waste, are not intended to be remembered, and they announce themselves as the objects of unfinished disposal. Yet the absent presences they raise up are vital signs of prior life’…. the erosion of singularity through which the object becomes ‘un-manufactured’ remembers the process by which it was assembled: the materials that were brought together for its fabrication, the skilled labour that routinely utilized an aptitude to make similar things, the machines and tools which were used to shape it’*. (**14**)

Rejecting the vitrines ‘historicising’ function that consigns objects to aestheticized stasis, these items were performatively remoulded by Korean master Sinhyun Cho (Fig. 5), and subsequently cast in porcelain - a material bestowed with high status. Master carver Yongjun Cho (Fig. 6) and painter Wonjeong Lee (Fig.7) applied traditional iconography to these fragmentary reproductions of post-industrial discard - continuing the western romantic tropes of aesthetic decay and revealing tensions between cultural notions of value and perfection inherited through both traditions.

A further collaboration with Living National Treasure Seo Kwang-su, renowned for his continuation of many archetypal forms of Korean ceramics, led to a series of moon jars being ‘arrested’ in their partially formed state (Fig. 8). These retained momentary traces of touch – gestures identified as an authentic register of the maker, often fetishised in craft history. Constructed by assembling two wheel-thrown bowls together, the irregularity of the visible seam was glorified historically by advocates of the Studio Pottery Movement as traces of an ‘enviable state of unconsciousness’, which Western culture had forgotten. (**15**) James Adams took these casually assembled components into a lesser revered mode of production - mould-making, which contrastingly eradicated traces of human touch through adopted modes of standardization. Revolutionising the industrialisation of ceramics in Britain in the 18th century, moulds are also characterised by their seams, but mass production from them was deemed by Leach and many of the cultured elite as the antithesis of what constitutes high craft. This blurring and integration of opposing hierarchies revealed how both tradition-bound systems conform to explicit actions reliant upon experiential knowledge, tactile mechanisms and sensory perception (Fig. 9).

*FACTORY’s* use of human interaction as a primary material, (**16**) counters ‘fixed in the past’ demonstrations of virtuosity packaged for heritage tourism that remains decontextualised from the complexities of social redundancy. With an awareness of South Korea’s colonial histories and the marginalised status of former artisans from North Staffordshire, *FACTORY* attempted to counter hegemony and the politics of ‘othering’ via collaborative modes of investigation. These stimulated reflexivity, 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 marginalised immaterial heritage could speak for themselves. They renegotiated their own value, in a context where such embodiments of knowledge are culturally revered, renewed and sustained for future generations.

Highlighting North Staffordshire’s endangered intangible heritage through the development of *FACTORY* has since led to the re-evaluation of industrial ceramic skills, triggering their consideration as legitimate craft practices. (**17**) On June 7th 2024, the UK finally became the 183rd state to endorse UNESCO’s 2003 convention effectively making intangible heritage part of their cultural policy. (**18**) It is yet to be seen to what extent it will impact upon the safeguarding of bodily intelligences pertaining to the industrial crafts and how these can be sustained for cultural posterity.

**Notes**

# 1 Adamson, G., *Rise of the Hyper Pot*, ‘[Ceramic Momentum: Staging the Object,](https://claymuseum.dk/en/exhibition/ceramic-momentum-staging-the-object/)’ an exhibition at CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art Denmark in collaboration with Copenhagen Ceramics, 2019. <https://www.glennadamson.com/work/2018/hyperpot>

2. UNESCO, *Guidelines for the Establishment of National ‘Living Human Treasures’ Systems* (Paris: UNESCO, UNESCO Section of Intangible Heritage; Seoul, Korea: Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 1993), p. 3.

3. Intangible Cultural Heritage. <https://heritagecrafts.org.uk/intangible-cultural-heritage/>

4. *FACTORY* was a multimedia performative installation, developed initially for Neil Brownsword’s invited solo exhibition at the 9th Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale (GICB), South Korea in 2017. It was commissioned as part of the GICB Grand Prize which Brownsword was awarded in 2015.

5. Jones, D., (2017) *Heritage and Diversity*: Catalogue essay for European and Korean Ceramics. Hanyang University Museum and Art Gallery, Seoul, South Korea.

6. Sîntionean, C, A., (2017) ‘Erasing Difficult History: The Decolonization of Heritage In South Korea’, *Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies*, Volume: 2: 145–162. [http://journalofsociology.ro/2014/12/07/256/01-con<wbr></wbr>tents-3/](http://journalofsociology.ro/2014/12/07/256/01-con%3cwbr%3e%3c/wbr%3etents-3/)

7. Burnett. J., (1974) *The Annals of Labour: Autobiographies of British Working Class People, 1820-1920*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 249.

Social theorist John Burnett's *The Annals of Labour*, claims prior to the Industrial Revolution workers divided into two basic categories, skilled craftsmen, ‘who had learnt a specialized craft or ”mystery” by apprenticeship,’ and unskilled labourers, ‘who had only muscular strength to sell,’ but the arrival of the factory system ‘*vastly complicated this traditional distinction by virtually creating a new category of manual worker — the machine-minder, or factory operative who, though intimately familiar with the particular, sub-divided operation of his machine, was able to exercise only limited judgement or discretion over its performance*.’

8. Dormer, P. (1988), ‘The Ideal World of Vermeer's Little Lacemaker’, in *Design after Modernism: Beyond the Object*, Thackara, J., (ed) Thames & Hudson, London, p. 15.

9. Gardner, H. (1983), *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, 2nd ed, Fontana Press, London.

10. Schechner, R., (1985) *Between Theater and Anthropology ,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 35.

*Restored behaviour is living behaviour strips of behaviour can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behaviour may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while this truth or source is apparently being honoured and observed. How the strip of behaviour was made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition. Originating as a process, used in the process of rehearsal to make a new process, a performance, the strips of behaviour are not themselves process but things, items, ‘material.’*

11. Smith, L., (2006) *Uses of Heritage*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, p. 305.

Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), coined by Smith packages heritage as a ‘manageable’ asset.

12. Robert Morris. ‘Anti-Form’, *Artforum,* 6.4 (1968), <https://www.artforum.com/print/196804/anti-form-36618>

13. Boldrick, S., Barber, T., (2013) *Art under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm*, Tate Britain.

14. Edensor, T., (2005), ‘Waste Matter - The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World’, *Journal of Material Culture*10(3), pp. 320-330. [*https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237392712\_Waste\_Matter\_-\_The\_Debris\_of\_Industrial\_Ruins\_and\_the\_Disordering\_of\_the\_Material\_World*](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237392712_Waste_Matter_-_The_Debris_of_Industrial_Ruins_and_the_Disordering_of_the_Material_World)

15. Yanagi, S., ‘Mystery of Beauty,’ in Larsen, R., (ed) *A Potter’s Companion: Imagination, Originality and Craft* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1993), Original published 1957. pp. 76-78.

16. Bishop, C., (2006). ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents’. *Art Forum* XLVI (6) p.178-183

17. See Heritage Craft Association, Industrial Pottery <https://www.heritagecrafts.org.uk/craft/industrial-pottery/>

18. Scrutiny of international agreements: UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, *5th Report of Session 2023–24*

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43438/documents/216057/default/#:~:text=182%20countries%20have%20already%20ratified,generation%20to%20generation%20within%20communities>.