



National Treasure, film stills, featuring Anthony Challinor (right and overleaf)

For centuries, the transmission of manual dexterity in North Staffordshire's ceramics industry has remained an intergenerational practice. However, the continuity of skill supply to this sector has been severely disrupted over the last three decades, as tens of thousands of employees have been displaced following its subsequent contraction¹. Rapid advances in design and manufacturing technologies have without doubt revolutionized production, but they have also led to the simplification and substitution of the people embodied skills once needed to sustain product leadership. Companies that survived the impact of global competition, have in recent years embraced factory tourism as a means to capitalise on profit. Communities of labour that once coexisted in spaces devised to accommodate the flow of manual production have radically downsized, succumbing to the veneer of the visitor centre experience. In these situations, the reality of mass automation and cheap outsourcing is obscured by clever marketing strategies that heighten the hand made/hand decorated to strengthen sales². Many high-end skills that were once the flagship of renowned manufactories are nowadays deemed as outmoded, or economically unviable in terms of accommodating rapid shifts in consumer buying trends. As older tiers of highly specialised labour gradually diminish, there remain few apprenticeships to secure the effective transfer of this knowledge for the future³. The acquisition of these skills is such that they can only be transmitted via tacit exchange from expert to novice through a process of immersed observation, imitation and repetition⁴.

In an attempt to elevate the status of these threatened practices, the primary objective of *National Treasure* has been to restage the performance of high-end ceramic skill at a variety of loaded locations. The work has involved the hire of a small group of china painters – Peter and Marie Graves and Anthony Challinor, once employed by renowned manufactories that included Spode, Royal Doulton and Coalport. These remain amongst the last generation of china painters in Stoke-on-Trent, whose profession has gradually been displaced by the changing tide of fashion, and by ceramic print technologies for mass production⁵. Although *National Treasure* parodies museological and factory tourist models of the 'artisan on display', there are numerous factors that distinguish this work from these traditional formats.

To amplify tension points that subvert passive spectatorial consumption, the painters were set to work in a post-industrial context amongst the wreckage and disorder of the former Spode Factory. Separated behind glass as they ply their skills, the viewer is confronted with an ethical burden that evokes both admiration and discomfort. Objectified as 'exhibits' themselves, against a backdrop of abandonment and destruction, this situation serves a poignant reminder to the human fallout from the industry's recent economic downturn. Whilst in residence, the artisans were instructed to paint on the backs of damaged and discarded plates found on-site at the Spode factory, with imagery that aped 18th century ceramics' romanticization of British ruins⁶, though depicting picturesque decay was not the objective. The spaces within the foot of the plates, where a painter would traditionally indicate a pride in their workmanship with their personal insignia, were instead graced with images documenting the ruination⁷ and post-industrial wastelands of Stoke-on-Trent. Apart from my request for a monochromatic or full colour painted facsimile of the supplied photographic imagery, it remained key that the painters were free from interference to retain their aesthetic identity. Working within their own time structures for as much or as little as they liked, each artisan would occupy the space intermittently, dissolving the hierarchical relationship between employer and employee. In their absence, each vacant but illuminated workspace, together with the residues of half completed vignettes and palettes of mixed colour, only added to the works metaphoric 'presence'.

Paradoxically the delegation of this work itself became a form of outsourcing. However with the appropriation of people and their skill as 'raw material', the ethical implications of this process remained paramount. Artisans were employed at their indicated rate of pay and informed explicitly of the ideas and their role, and their role within that. Full recognition of their identity was credited in the installation during their activation of it⁸. As they were the very people immediately affected by the issues raised by the work, their willingness to participate in it only strengthened its realisation.

The status given to individuals with exceptional artistic ability has long been a concern of many Asian, Arabic and African countries as a means to preserve and cultivate cultural heritage, but apparently this value system remains alien to Britain⁹. *National Treasure* attempts to raise greater awareness of an intangible cultural heritage that is in dire need for greater recognition and protection, not from the point of nostalgia, but as a means of preserving a sense of identity and continuity to be shared and passed on. This performative installation is a collective strategy to invite eulogy, and to heighten public awareness of what are frequently overlooked forms of human intelligence from a rapidly disappearing culture of labour. The work attempts to highlight what is going and what has gone, with the hope to sustain and repurpose what remains of these cultural assets for future generations.



¹ thepotteries.org - the local history of Stoke-on-Trent <http://thepotteries.org/timeline/index.htm>
Since 1991 regional employment in North Staffordshire's ceramic sector shrank by 69% to the current figure of approximately 7000 largely as a result to policies of global outsourcing and other factors.

² King, A., 'Wedgwood Announces Major Expansion in China', *Sentinel newspaper*, 19 January 2015, <http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/Wedgwood-announces-major-expansion-China/story-25887930-detail/story.html> accessed 20 June 2015. A prime example of this is the World of Wedgwood visitor centre. VWRD continues to outsource around 50% of its production output.

³ <http://www.ceramicskillsacademy.co.uk/news/> accessed 22 August 2015
In September 2013 the Ceramic Skills Academy was established, 'as a virtual academy highlighting the ceramics opportunities in the Staffordshire Pottery industry and beyond, helping to grow and support ceramic entrepreneurs and investing in skills and training for the workforce so the ceramics sector can be sustained as a world class industry'. The CSA's mission is to 'ensure that those skills that set UK ceramics apart from the rest of the world do not become lost'. Its 2015 evaluation indicated a successful introduction of 64 apprenticeships in the sector which included IT, engineering, although the published literature does little to indicate the transfer of traditional artisanal knowledge/craft skills.

⁴ Procedures that follow the structure of a traditional apprenticeship system.

⁵ Lee, M., 'Ceramic Painters Fear Traditional Skills Could Die Out', *BBC News Online*, 9 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-20177913>. accessed 15 June 2014.
Peter Graves comments, 'It's shrunk to about 25 people in the UK doing completely freehand painting, because everything else is done with the aid of a transfer. There used to be an army of us in factories across the city and now we've been reduced to almost living museum pieces. The couple... fear their trade will not survive beyond the next 20 years because the skills are not being passed down to future generations'.

⁶ These followed the tradition of polychrome enameled painting evident in Caughley and Wedgwood ceramics inspired by topographical drawings and engravings by the picturesque movement. The Frog Service made for Catherine the Great of Russia, c1773 by the Wedgwood and Bentley partnership entailed some 1244 views of British country houses and gardens, landscapes and picturesque ruins.

⁷ The use of the term ruination rather than ruins draws upon urban sociologist Dr Alice Mah's definition as it is one which examines a process of constant states of change of places and spaces across time, alongside the aesthetics of disorder.

⁸ Printed name panels were assigned to each window space of the installation to clearly indicate the identity of each painter.

⁹ UNESCO and Intangible Cultural Heritage, Heritage Crafts Association, <http://heritagecrafts.org.uk/index.php/heritagecrafts/intangible-cultural-heritage> accessed 15 July 2015.
'In 2003, UNESCO adopted a Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, including 'traditional craftsmanship'. It stated:
'Any efforts to safeguard traditional craftsmanship must focus not on preserving craft objects - no matter how beautiful, precious, rare or important they might be - but on creating conditions that will encourage artisans to continue to produce crafts of all kinds, and to transmit their skills and knowledge to others.' 127 countries from Albania and Algeria to Zambia and Zimbabwe have signed up to the convention, effectively making Intangible Cultural Heritage part of their cultural policy. Unfortunately, the UK is not one of them'.



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Royal Doulton Factory, Nile Street, Burslem in the process of demolition. Neil Brownsword, 2008.



Residue of performative installation *National Treasure*. Discarded (Spode) plate, found and painted at the former Spode Factory by Anthony Challinor during *Vociferous Void* (exhibition 27.09.13 - 10.11.13).



Abandoned employees canteen, former Spode factory, Church Street, Stoke-on-Trent.
Neil Brownsword, 2011.



Residue of performative installation *National Treasure*. Discarded (Spode) plate, found and painted at the former Spode Factory by Anthony Challinor during *Vociferous Void* (exhibition 27.09.13 - 10.11.13).



Derelict terraced housing, Middleport, Stoke-on-Trent. Neil Brownsword, 2011.



Residue of performative installation *National Treasure*. Discarded (Spode) plate, found and painted at the former Spode Factory by Anthony Challinor during *Vociferous Void* (exhibition 27.09.13 - 10.11.13).



Derelict part of the former Spode Factory, where *National Treasure* was performed.