



TOPOGRAPHIES OF THE OBSOLETE

CRITICAL TEXTS

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2013

Dixon  
Hauge  
Shales

## Topographies of the Obsolete: Critical Texts

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Øystein Hauge and Ezra Shales.

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**Topographies of the Obsolete: Vociferous Void**  
is a collaborative project between Bergen Academy of Art and Design and the British Ceramics Biennial.



British  
Ceramics  
Biennial

## Preface

**Topographies of the Obsolete:** Exploring the Site Specific and Associated Histories of Post-Industry

Topographies of the Obsolete is an artistic research project initiated by Neil Brownsword and Anne Helen Mydland at Bergen Academy of Art and Design (KHIB) in collaboration with partner universities/institutions in Denmark, Germany and the UK. Our main collaborative partner, the British Ceramics Biennial, invited KHIB to work at the original Spode factory site in Stoke-on-Trent, to develop a site specific artistic response as a core element of their 2013 exhibition programme. The project focus centres upon the landscape of post-industry, with a particular emphasis upon Stoke-on-Trent, a world renowned ceramic capital that bears evidence of fluctuations in global fortunes.

With the industrialisation of ceramics during the eighteenth century, systems of segregated labour brought about a phenomenal concentration of specialist skills and knowledge to specific regions of North Staffordshire. By 1800 the Six Towns of Stoke-on-Trent paralleled China as a world centre for ceramic production. Paradoxically, recent decades have seen centuries of this cultivated expertise being relocated to the Far East. Company investment in advanced production technology has further contributed to a massive reduction of an indigenous work force and the closure/demolition of once prevalent sites of historic manufacture. In 1948 around 79,000 were employed in the North Staffordshire ceramics industry; the figure now sits at just over 6000. In the current economic climate of rapid change, outsourcing, and innovation, the loss of traditional industry and skills is a matter of widespread public interest and concern.

The original Spode factory, situated in the heart of Stoke-on-Trent, was once a keystone of the city's industrial heritage which operated upon its original site for over 230 years. Amongst Spode's contributions to ceramic history include the perfection of under-glaze blue printing and fine bone china. The factory's industrial architecture dates from the 1760's to the late 1980's, with spaces associated with all aspects of design, manufacture, retail and administration in close geographical proximity. In 2008 Spode's Church Street site closed, with most of its production infrastructure and contents left intact. The site and its remnants has been the point of departure for the interdisciplinary artistic research of over 40 participating artists during three residencies. Through these intense periods investigation the core of the project has evolved. Its methodology draws upon the rhetorical method of identifying 'a landscape' and different 'topi' to ensure a multi-perspective approach<sup>1</sup>. This method is suited to the project's diversity and to identifying the 'rhizomic' relationship between the individual and the overriding project.

Topographies is a framework, formulating topics and research strands which are treated as questions and approaches that are addressed through artistic practice. By honing in on the particular history and the singularity of this site, Topographies questions what is, and how ceramic and clay can be understood as both material and subject in contemporary art practice. How can we perceive the material (clay/ceramics) to be or constitute a site? Moreover, how do ceramics and clay form and construct our understanding of the site?

This publication is the first in a series which documents responses and reflections to the original Spode site from both artists and theorists connected to the project. Research outcomes from 'Topographies of the Obsolete' will continue to inform a programme of seminars, publications and exhibitions.

<sup>1</sup> Nyrnes, A., *Lighting from the Side*, Sensuous Knowledge, Focus on Artistic Research and Development, no.03, 2006















## The Midst of Ruins: Thoughts on Signs and Matter in the Foregone Space

*"But how else can we live, these days, except in the midst of ruin?"*

Margaret Atwood, **The Blind Assassin**

There lies a historical schism marked out by the ideological topography of the ruin. Within the confrontation of the ruin in the premodern age the ruin became a connotative space where meaning and death conflated whilst in the modern age the ruin demarked a space for refusal and detachment. This breakage founded within the nexus of the modern capitalist circulations of the "new", improved and progressive grounded a succession by which meanings could be sliced from the bodies of materialities and processes to clarify meanings in a deadly surgery of meager insight.

### The Ruin Imaginary

*"In allegory the facies hippocratica of history lies before the eyes of the observer as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history which, from the beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful expresses itself in a countenance - no, in a death's head ... in this, the figure of man's most extreme subjection to nature, is pronounced the enigmatic question not only of the nature of human existence as such but of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the core of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular account of history as the passion of the world, a world that is meaningful only in the stations of its decay. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical being and significance."*

Walter Benjamin, **The Origins of German Tragic Drama**

The developed imaginary of the Ruin in the Baroque, that premodern era which sought a proliferation of meanings in the depths of the uninterrupted interlacing of signs and things, beckoned for a assignment of the shifting signifier to usurp the totalizing sight of the symbol. Suffused by death, the deafening silence of the sign in the manifestations towards which it could not speak, the Ruin pointed simultaneously to both to matter and significance. This intersection between a present materiality and the constructed meanings which could be read and experienced within the Ruin revealed a chaotic, generative collision which spoke of multiple interpretants of material and processes, and one which foreswore a settled signage for the Ruin indicating a fragmentary dynamic to meaning construction on the whole. As emblematic and substantive to the reading of the Ruin every meaning was exposed as being comprised in the conjunction of ontological material purposelessness and the epistemological spoken meaning, thusly creating within mental consciousness (and the systems formed there) the bounding of overproductive meaning with the emptiness of material significance. The Ruin exposed a continual fragment and incessant transience in the construction of meaning, bearing as it did the physical traces of time on its brute and empty surface as characters which scripted cultural history on the face of nature. This text scribbled on the natural by the Ruin inscribed for the age a call to austere motion in meanings and instability in the artificial constancy of significance.

Death and presence as two forms of presentation were elaborated in the matrix of the Ruin through the determined conjunction of emptiness and meaning. This conjunction within the realm of the Ruin became for the era a generative field while formulated two forms of a compromised and devious speech. These two forms of compromised speech formed a pairing by which an experiential placement and mental imaginary could construct a continually potential site for meaning construction.

The first of these compromised pairs, which we can title Silent Speech, was formulated within the realm of the possible combinations of meaning which could be implanted on the surface of the Ruin but are to be continually suspended yet simultaneously presented to (and by) the understanding faculty as mere virtual articulations. These virtual conjunctions of elements, and the meanings these amalgamations expounded, were erected through either language combinations which entailed the potential for elucidation but are suspended from becoming manifested as a articulated utterance (or thought) or experiential (emotional, affective, mental) responses which lie outside of possible linguistic, semantic or syntactic rendition. Because articulation is compromised by the unarticulated and the inarticulated, which is exposed on the surface of the Ruin, significations are detailed as fundamentally and formally tentative and provisional. Though all considerations and concepts reside within a present formulation of the linguistic of the Ruin, the experiential residue of the ruin, and the noted virtual potential articulations, underlines collapse of the singular and stable linguistic explanation of the Ruin specifying incessant directives towards reevaluation. Full realization of the placement and meaning of the Ruin lies always outside the semantic containment which is articulated.

The second direction of these positions indicated by Benjamin can be called Vociferous Void. The Vociferous Void occurs when the brute materiality and dead physicality of the Ruin intersects with the potential meaning constructions which are accrued around it. This form of compromised speech calls forth the Ruin as object and process where there is such a multitude of connections within memory, history, culture, nostalgia, etc., that the selection of meaning becomes impossible within the site due to the nonindicative presentation of brute existence to be subsumed completely into mental imagery and linguistic form. The plenitude of meanings which in actuality circulate continually around the Ruin are countermanded by the emptiness of meaning which brute matter displays.

The emptiness of indicative pathways of meaning inscribed both on the raw materiality of the world (called by Benjamin *Death*) and in the suspended articulations of spontaneous affective experience or semantic linguistic escape ruptures the affective systematization of meanings and brings into the fore the enlivening loss of determinate and stagnant meanings which the Ruin as site and sense entails.

With the Ruin, as the Baroque imaginary presents it, the twin processes of the Silent Speech and the Vociferous Void persistently instill a motion which disintegrates the polar

binaries of linguistic semantic constructions (and their mental residues) such as construction/destruction, culture/nature, past/present and impose a permanent potentiality of virtual conceptualizations which defers a totalizing symbolic regime upon the Ruin and puts in its stead a confluence of meanings as generated within the Ruin which yields a generative field of meaning and disruptive nothingness. This confluence of presence in absence and virtuality in construction as the field of the Ruin yields a imaginary within mental consciousness bounding overproductive meaning with the emptiness of material significance.

### The Marginalization of the Contemporary Ruin

Since the rise of modernism the cycles of mass production, consumption, and object obsolescence has reach a immense pace. Spurred on by a reflexive stance towards the "new" modernism, as social model in consumer capitalism and as standard ideology in communal regimes, an increasing number of processes, places and objects are continually and unremittingly being circumvented and abandoned in the trajectory of the contemporary. As this replacement of objects (which are now ideological entities indicating strict perimeters towards presentness and pastness, and closely tied to connection with the embrace of the new and the rejection of the old) reaches into the linguistic regime of the social a new construct is elaborated on the ideological nexus of productivity which entails a duality between the terms of Functionality and Waste. This recent binary places the Operability within the realm of the contemporary, the useful, the aesthetic, and the desired, whilst the waste-object is construed as past, the antiquated, the dirty, and the obsolete.

Like the waste-object itself the locales of process where these objects of obsolesce had been produced and formed are likewise abandoned as waste-spaces and become the sites of contemporary industrial ruin. Instigated within the ideology of progressive and continual consumption the objects which are created within a long process of production are severe from their totality of process into discrete packages of production and meaning which obliterates the processes by which the object is created (from raw materials extraction to the tools of manufacture and how these are social cost and meaning) and to which the object progresses to waste (how the useless object impacts on the social and natural after abandonment). In the pare down sign of the Operational-object the contemporary industrial regime for any product becomes isolated as meaning constructor and is ideologically shipwrecked from ideal consideration circulating around and within the object itself. However, as with a Operational-object, the industrial process will stay in place as long as the object produced is viable in the consumerist circulation, though and simultaneously the production process is not seen as intrinsic to the meaning of the object, just as the waste which it produces is secondary and not primary to the objects meaning (this is the discrete package of objects within the ideology of consumption).

When the totality of the discrete operational-objects becomes antiquated within a consumerist regime the suspension of the entirety of its process creates the industrial site as wastescape just as the objects it formerly produced become abject wasteobjects. The contemporary industrial ruin is always and continually severed from the meanings tightly contained within the object which it produced becomes a location with few meanings generated from within itself and detached from the meanings which even the object it produced entail.

The historicization of the Ruin as site which form a grounds for productive meaning in the premodern era is supplanted in contemporary era by the diverted gaze of the modern regarding the contemporary ruin which is continually and falsely shed of meanings even within the close proximity to its object-product. Abandonment and detachment imposed already on the factory by the consumerist regime of the Operational-object and its contained meaning becomes further exasperated in the decline of an Operational-object to waste object and deflects the industrial site from the gaze of intentional meaning.

For the contemporary ruin, due to its lack of embeddedness within the ideological circulations of modernism and capitalist consumptions (the culturation of the new, in so many words) the industrial ruin lies in secondary abandonment where the deflection of the gaze from the abject of waste becomes a second step from is severance from the "meaning" of the object which lay within its productive path. The obsolescence of the contemporary ruin becomes engulfed in an isolated and stranded space which forms a double unarticulation within both thought and the social. This dual deflection of meaning creates a Other of place for the site and obliterates both the past and future for the contemporary industrial ruin as well as the materialities of the produced objects. Commonly called waste and waste space, this unarticulation strips meanings which had accrued about objects and specifically disjoints the meanings of the many processes and spaces in which the entirety of the object existed. This topography of abandonment pinpoints a meager ideological position of the object outside of its processional existence (from raw material to decaying waste) and can be seen as merely a specific sign of the entirety of the processional object defined within a closed set of perimeters of consumerist exchange, and, as the industrial space gets little of the deflected meaning of the object even during its functional sign phase for the object, the industrial ruin further afield in the capitalist calculus of the objects self-contained signage becomes disenfranchised in a double distance from significance.

The social dilemma of this ignoring of the invasive past and future in the unfolding of these spaces and objects has deadly consequences for a social body as the Othering of these locales within the process means that consequences of the object (as waste and extraction)are excluded from consideration within the social and political. Production and process are subsumed in the diverted gaze and unarticulated space of the operational



object. Meanings are closed and deferred in abandonment and obsolescence cutting off the existence of the idea of the object and the material of its possibilities.

Whereas the Silent Speech and Vociferous Void of the Historical ruin creates a process in which the mental confronts possible elaborations outside of articulation in thought and speech, the imposed silence on the object of contemporary abandonment places obsolescence as unarticulation in order to ignore and displace the entirety of an object for the "clean and new". The abandoned becomes abjection in thought and possibility, and the obsolete becomes a restrictive site of the impossibility communication and endeavor (we cannot understand the devastation of lost jobs and vacated lives except as the old passing on, and we let the site of the factory stay as wastespace without meaning).

**Steven Dixon**

2013



China Halls Courtyard, the original Spode factory site, Stoke-on-Trent 2013



## Staging the Pottery – notes on art and topophilia

*The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there.*  
Calvin Coolidge (US President 1923–29)

What makes a factory a factory? Is it the factory workers, the building, the product, the machinery, the time clock, the production line... or is it the philosophy behind it that means we can call it a factory? And what about the offices and the warehouse, do these rooms also belong to the factory, or are they something that comes in addition? 'Industry is the root of all ugliness,' claimed Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). The romantics saw the factory as the opposite of art. The machine ideal that arose during early modernity became a physical manifestation of the modern rationality of purpose, distanced and with no affinity with the sensual. This attitude changed during the first decades of the 20th century. Machinery, mass production and standardised units, provided the basis for modern consumption. The factory crowned a 'futuristic' development linked to a dynamic and expansive society.

Anyhow, the factory is more than just a physical object. There is a perceptible connection between the factory (as a site, place, space and architecture) and the social and political life that goes on outside it. This is the 'relational' aspect of the factory. We all react affectively to it. The more unique it is as a building, as architecture, the greater the probability that we will perceive the factory as a strong mental image.

Social psychology uses the concept of 'topophilia'<sup>1</sup>. A productive combination of the Greek words *topo* (place) and *philia* (love) and a useful tool for analysing both art and place. Our material surroundings dictate a particular type of concealed norms that can be difficult to perceive or question, but that are nonetheless as effective as any other norms that regulate our behaviour. In brief, our material surroundings limit our possibilities of realising ourselves.

One of the many aspects of the factory is that it brings together many of the ideals of our modern society, such as efficiency and urbanisation, rational thinking, control and mechanisation. Today, we also find these ideas in various forms, for example in hospitals, the educational system, public administration, the culture sector and so on. The paradox is that, while the traditional factory has gradually removed itself from the fundamental ideas on which it was based, the rest of society has incorporated these same ideas. The factory has become a social institution and a cultural phenomenon.

### The factory as a rhetorical place

Concepts such as manufacturing, production lines, time clocks and machinery have given rise to conceptions that artists have elaborated on, not least in the field of visual art. One well-known example is Andy Warhol's work from the early 1960s. It was in many ways a

malign parody of the glossy aura of mass culture. As most people know, he filled the exhibition space at the Stable Gallery in Manhattan with objects that were virtually indistinguishable from the mass-produced goods found in American supermarkets: series that took their motifs from Campbell soup tins, canned goods with the Del Monte label, Heinz tomato ketchup and boxes of Brillo scouring pads. Their execution was so machine-like that the illusion was almost perfect. It is not surprising that one of the visitors to this exhibition, professor of philosophy Arthur Danto, then 40 years old and with little expertise in the art field, commented with astonishment that '...whatever art is, it is no longer something primarily to be looked at. Stared at, perhaps, but not primarily looked at.'<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Danto's moment of insight reflects a debate that has made a strong mark on the art world for more than a generation, and it is still very much on the agenda. It concerns the value of a work of art, where it comes from and where it resides. Is the value essential or contextual, transcendental or concrete, formal or aesthetic? In our theoretical research or artistic investigations, should we give priority to the art object (the work, image) or the art space (the institution, language, location) as a field for analysis and reflection?

During my first stay in Stoke-on-Trent, I had the good fortune to stay at North Stafford Hotel, the old railway hotel in Winton Square. The atmosphere felt intimate and unique. Almost like a 'pottery memorial', with a statue of Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) outside the entrance and the remarkable toilets on the lower floor, which are generously decorated with locally produced tiles in the Art Nouveau style. Here, cultural history meets manufacturing history. As a guest, I felt like an insider and an outsider at one and the same time.

### In the air

In the corridors behind the reception desk hang a series of what are referred to as 'Smoky Postcards', old black and white motifs from the factory areas in and around the town. The immediate impression they give is that the whole district was once shrouded in dense smoke from hundreds of 'bottle ovens'. Their chimneys form a striking silhouette against a gunmetal sky, beneath which the factory buildings and houses seem to merge in a thick fog of soot and grimy darkness. How were images of this kind understood in their own time?

The English architect W.R. Lethaby (1857–1931) claimed in an article that, if the inner meaning of the architecture of former times was '*wonder, worship, magic, and symbolism*', then the motives behind modern architecture must be '*human service, intelligible structure, and verifiable science*'<sup>3</sup>. Early photographs from the industrialisation of Staffordshire reflect



this intermediate phase. They use techniques from two emerging art genres, primarily 'Straight Photography' (as this school refined both the formal and social aspects of art photography), but also what, not long after, developed into 'New Visions', a more subjective and experimental approach to new material surroundings.

Many of these photos are from the time around 1900, but they were given a new lease of life fifty years later when people began selling them as postcards with witty captions such as "The Change of Air Soots me well at Stoke-on-Trent" and "When Stoke Stokes". The images are the same, but the context is radically different. While the original photographs document the negative aspects of growing industrialisation, the postcards are ironical digs at industrial culture. That is what happens when rational technical thinking gains the upper hand at the expense of the human element - the individual disappears.

### Images of the factory

In terms of art history, the symbolism of industrial architecture has served many purposes. In pictorial art, the factory has been a favourite motif since the middle of the 18th century. In their book 'Fabrikken' <sup>4</sup>, culture scholars Terje Borgersen and Knut Ove Eliassen write about painting in particular as a 'seismograph' of our feelings with reference to precisely this kind of industrial architecture. The authors give us four epochal views of the factory as place and image: the picturesque, the sublime, the rational and the post-industrial factory.

In the late 18th century paintings of Humphry Repton (1752–1818), the factory became part of an idyllic rural landscape, open, bright and classically arranged, with no visible conflict between nature and culture. This simple and functional 'naturalness' was completely in tune with the predominant aesthetic ideal of the era, 'the picturesque'. It was about equilibrium and soft contours. In the same way that picturesque beauty was intended to please the eye, the factory was to be turned into an attractive visual element on a par with the landscape, the trees and the cattle that were also part of the landowner's and entrepreneur's portfolio.

### Holy smoke

As the 19th century progressed, the English Midlands saw an increasing concentration of industry, with mining operations, smelting furnaces, smithies and mile upon mile of bottle ovens. The oil painting 'Coalbrookdale by night' (1801) by the French immigrant Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740–1812) has come to represent the essence of how art viewed the new industrial England: 'the sublime factory' that confronts the viewer with a man-made nature that is so wonderful in all its violence as to appear to be beyond all control. Because there is always a certain ambiguity present in such pictures: visions of the impending end of the world, often with biblical overtones or a mythical mixture of unease and aesthetic fascination.

This religious view of the factory followed us into the modern age, when landscape painting encountered competition from photography. The photograph was itself the result of modern technology, and it appeared to enjoy a kind of familial relationship with other modern innovations until well into the 20th century. 'Photographers were interested in portraying the modern city and new feats of engineering, such as bridges, cranes and machines,' writes literary historian Per Thomas Andersen in his book about modernity.<sup>5</sup> The image of the factory became rational.

### Sacred structures

A good example is Charles Sheeler's triptych 'Industry' from 1932, a secular 'altarpiece' featuring motifs from Ford Motor Company's huge factory complex outside Detroit. The central panel is composed of a diagonal cross formed by huge conveyors carrying coal into the big turbines. As in Loutherbourg's apocalyptic visions, the people in Sheeler's images are assigned the role of marginal elements in the machinery of society. The images were not intended to evoke associations with political issues such as the class struggle and social conditions. Instead, they aimed to address industry's artistic expression of progress and optimism about the future. 'Our factories are our substitute for religious expression,' Sheeler claimed.<sup>6</sup> The factory thereby became an icon and an aesthetic ideal for modernism.

Borgersen and Eliassen find a very different approach to late-industrial society in the work of the German artist Anselm Kiefer. In 'Pittsburgh' (1984/1985), a photo-based collage on wood fibre cardboard with painterly elements of melted lead, acrylic and shellac, the artist contrasts the historical (the photograph of the industrial landscape) with the mythological (the wood, the lead, the shellac and the acrylic paint). Kiefer's picture is complex, but not unambiguously negative. It has visual similarities with the series of images from North Stafford Hotel, which also address the past and "transitoriness", but Kiefer allows room for something more. Industrial culture is not nature. It is man-made, but has become fundamentally twisted as our relationship to its materials and metals has changed. Craftsmanship is enjoying a renaissance in art, which now offers new possibilities for the human element.

The status of the factory has changed in our post-industrial age, and the images of the factory have thereby changed in nature. What happens when the factories shut their gates and close down or are relocated? What happens to the community that grew up around that factory?

What is regarded as the world's first ever public film screening, Auguste and Louis Lumière's 'La sortie des usines Lumière', consists of a simple uncut scene from 1895 in which we see workers leaving a factory. The factory gate is opened, the workers pour



out and the gate closes. For the Lumière brothers, this is primarily about the technical aspect, about combining living images with projection, about documenting *movement* more than everyday life. The episode can equally well be interpreted symbolically, however, as a memory image with a class perspective or a vision of something yet to come.

### The factory abandons the workers

Today, the factories are disappearing, not just from the auto industry's USA, from Pittsburgh, Flint and Detroit, but just as much from Europe's peripheral regions. Where there once was dense, black smoke and thousands of jobs, there are now black holes, contemporary ruins and mass unemployment. At the end of the working day, the workers walk out the gates 'with death in their eyes', sings Bruce Springsteen in the song 'Factory' from the album 'Darkness on the Edge of Town' (1978). The factory gives the worker a living, while at the same time sapping his zest for life. But when the factory is gone, this ambiguous image of the factory implodes. Some nostalgia is left behind, and a new despair takes over.

A society cannot live with such black holes. Its core must be replaced, and this is often done in the American fashion by making the factory attractive in new ways, transforming it into a conference hotel, a theme park or a museum. The first person to clearly see this tendency was the German art historian Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984). In the book 'Verlust der Mitte' (1948), he blames the secular 'centre-less' societies for increasingly widespread "museumisation". Things, processes, ways of thinking, habits and lifestyles are becoming outdated at a faster and faster pace, and if they are not recorded, preserved and protected, they disappear. The same applies to the factory. When it no longer satisfies the requirements of social life, one of two things happens: the individual or group adapts to the new environment, or, the other way around, the group changes the material conditions to better suit new patterns of behaviour.

'I want to be a machine,' Andy Warhol said in a famous interview, as a comment on a fashion and consumer society in which a new kind of superficiality was in the process of supplanting interest in the deeper contexts of reality. It is a general rule in our culture that it is better to be 'deep' than 'superficial'. For Andy Warhol, it was depth that was the cliché, while the superficial had insight. In line with this attitude, he called his studio 'The Factory' – a cross-cultural melting pot that, in its heyday, continually produced new art models. The factory abandons the workers. Art moves in and creates a transformation factory for things in crisis.

### Artists leaving a tradition

The present belongs to entertainment, the past to contemplation. This social diagnosis has

wide-ranging application. From being the driving force in the manufacturing and consumer society, with an efficient division of labour, specialisation and standardisation as its fundamental success factors, the original factory has now become more of a symbol – a social institution and a cultural phenomenon. We find a similar tendency in art. During high modernism, it was all about 'the White Cube'. The dialogue between a work of art and the viewer presupposed an institutional space, an ideal space from which time and place were excluded. Or: 'Art is art. Everything else is everything else,' as Ad Reinhardt so concisely defined it in his 'Twelve Rules for a New Academy' in 1957. Art was one thing, reality something else. But what happens when these separate categories are mixed, when traditional values are on the way out and when our surroundings impinge in the form of social change and economic problems? In this kind of context, art must find new ways of positioning itself.

Perhaps it is meaningful to say that the project 'Topographies of the Obsolete' is endeavouring to unite the factory with the location, the location with the political and everything with the museum and with us? Or, to put it in another way, that, instead, the works acquire meaning in the social spaces outside the art context, as an expression of possibilities rather than as claims and statements?

The exhibition principle itself is an old one. For the surrealist avant-garde, from Breton and Duchamp to Kurt Schwitters, it became important to set things free or 'desymbolise' them, so that they could be incorporated into surprising new contexts. They sought something that was '...beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.' (Lautrèmont). The surrealists identified themselves with ethnographers, learned investigators of folklore with an eye for the thin line between dream and reality, the civilised and the untamed. The ideal museum should be based on placing things on an equal footing, not subordination and cultural hierarchies. The labyrinth was preferable to the pyramid. In museums, the fundamental homelessness of objects in the centre-less society should be turned into something positive, moved away from introspection and out towards the public.

As I wrote in the introduction, 'Our material surroundings limit our possibilities of realising ourselves'. The ethnographic surrealist has acknowledged the random element in all classification. At the root of all ordering of things lies disorder and instability. This is one of the most important borderline experiences utilised in 'Topographies of the Obsolete'. Things are no longer placed together, they collide – because things are in crisis, and the crisis consists of them having become alien and mute. It is a 'change of air', all right, but it suits art well.

### Øystein Hauge

2013

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Asplund, J., *Tid, Rum; Individ och Kollektiv*, Stockholm, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Danto, A., *The A.W.Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Lethaby, W.R., *Collected Papers on Art and Labour*, England, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> Eliassen et al. *Fabrikken*, Scandinavian Academic Press, Oslo, 2004 and Johansen et al. *Techne - Technology and Modern Norway 1905-2005*, Faros, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Andersen, P., *Det moderne*, LNU / Fagbokforlaget, Bergen, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Stebbins, N.K and T. E., *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs*, Boston, 1987

## Tools Fit for the External Hard Drive



figure 1

Stepping onto the grounds of Josiah Spode's eighteenth-century factory "works" in 2013, when it has been closed for only a handful of years, it is self-evident that the one tool which is obsolete are the antediluvian computers stacked like logs of wood into closets (figure 1). The other large piles left in the Spode factory are plaster moulds, aside from these dead computers and piles of advertisements for Jamie Oliver tableware. These mountains of irretrievable data sitting in cavernous workrooms seem unable to communicate with each other or with our current zeitgeist. Were the computers antiquated or was the managerial brain trust that used them? Were the plaster moulds considered sacred intellectual property or archives of consumers' archaic desires? Both these traces of labour –and their preservation– seem unable to fit into linear narratives of invention or progressive obsolescence.



figure 2

Unlike the computers, the hundred-year-old plaster moulds could still be retrieved and redistributed as data, and might even seem fresh and novel, if only institutional systems could make sense of them. That is, if skilled hands are still available when the call comes. Otherwise, the moulds will wither away. How should one assess the hundreds of thousands of moulds lying in various corners of the factory mothballed in coal dust? (figure 2) Should we see them collectively as "Spode's Toolkit," or sort them by application –as useful wares or decoration, as Josiah himself might have? Should we tally them as hours of labour and thousands of workers in a tool graveyard? Should we see the lot of moulds as an inheritance worth protecting? The hundred year-old bell hanging in the yard, which had alerted Spode workers to the beginning and end of the workday through the 1980s, can still ring clearly and I wanted to touch it, even ring it, as it seemed to call out louder than I ever could for the factory to function once again. Instead of preserving his dilapidated beehive kiln for tourists, perhaps Spode's monument ought to be a library of three-dimensional scans of his moulds posted a terabyte deep in the cyber commons.



figure 3  
Creamware profiling tool,  
Leeds, late 18th Century.  
© Victoria and Albert  
Museum, London

To reconsider ceramics as a tool (and academic field) today, it is worth reflecting on the value of one of the few artisanal manufacturing tools that has been saved in one of the world's preeminent museum archives of design. A plate profile (figure 3), made in Leeds, illustrates one way that twentieth-century English potteries running at full-speed only a few years ago were engines reliant on manual skillsets (in addition to automation). Just a few decades ago, this sort of instrument was still in use to make special-order large platters –it was efficient to rely on a skilled hand and a manual tool for small-scale numbers of production. Is this tool obsolete or proof of our inability to value genuine craft skills? It is an instrument made to shape clay and is itself made of it. When framed in a photograph, its singularity hides its purpose. The form is designed to standardize tableware. It should imply multiplication and replication. It has an anthropomorphic quality and also a hard-edged geometric side.

The obsolescence of such a tool – one that is a beautiful work of art in its own right – illuminates the collective failure over the last hundred years to reconcile the gap between industrial and academic artistic production. While the Bauhaus articulated the need for a



closer and more dynamic relationship between the two, it never managed integration. Would practitioners in the art academy today value the moulds and profile as significant “data” or not? In contrast to the beauty of the plate profile and Spode’s moulds, it is noteworthy that few schools of art and design have produced any noteworthy tools for artistic production. Most schools, even the vaunted Bauhaus, utilize the tools that already exist on the factory shelf – “off the shelf” hardware. The invention of these tools has happened in the commercial sphere, and, perhaps a seeming contradiction, inside the factory that we condemn for its monotony. The struggle to reduce variation and to sustain consistency has been remarkably imaginative over the centuries. The tool in the V&A reveals this deeper temporal shape of craftsmanship and tools that is at risk today.

Now, it is the art and design school that resembles a miniature factory. Perhaps we have atomized the meaning of “research” and “technology” too quickly by proclaiming our economies post-industrial and our cultural predicament “Postproduction.”<sup>1</sup> The prevailing drive to cut out “antiquated” technologies and methodologies from our schools begs the question of whether material-enriched knowledge is well served by this winner-take-all definition of technology. Labour-intensive processes such as clay struggle to fit into the prevailing external hard drive model. Is that because the temperamental nature of the material still periodically thwarts automated production? Clay itself is mercurial. Its resistance might be an organizing principle that could be expanded into a truly constructivist and experiential academy: there, clay would be a proper tool to teach and study opposition to human control. The data of clay might very well be the state of slippage, of being unmanageable and simultaneously uniquely responsive to human touch. Collections of tools are object lessons that emphasize our interdependence better than isolated works of art. But we usually need to go into a factory or workshop (or the rare institution like the Gladstone Potteries Museum) to see such relationships in a visual constellation. These families demonstrate the contingency of tools and their temporal lifespans. The collaborative dimensions of tool invention are also benevolently accessible, certainly more so than in finished products. The musical instruments, armour, and majority of regal or middle-class household furnishings had multiple artists/artisans acting in coordination upon them. As William Lethaby noted, about a hundred years ago, “No art that is one-man-deep can be very much good.”<sup>2</sup> Tools illuminate the interdependence of media (such as the glassblower who rounds his molten gather in a cherry ladle (a block), and a modeller’s use of plaster, and a mason’s use of a steel chisel).

Western civilization’s long-term reliance on manufacturing to produce the majority of its aesthetic furnishings should also be another primary lesson. Our reliance on factories precedes our expectations that lone individuals could ever be so productive, too. Perhaps no factories should be judged as artificial if our hands require training and are not “naturally” accustomed to acting as tools. Both tools and factories are, as Richard Rolt noted in 1756, “artificial commodities” that give us benefits – and yet we seem to treat them as disposable, or at least intellectually lesser. Rolt wrote, “Of every artificial commodity the manner in which it is made is in some measure described, though it must be remembered, that manual operations are scarce to be conveyed by any words to him that has not seen them.”<sup>3</sup> Artifice rarely gets such respect today. In his *New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, Rolt asserted a basic respect for the mysteries of making that we might call tacit knowledge today, but without all the ridiculous touchy-feely nonsense of transcendence we have come to expect from art schools and sociologists like Richard

Sennett, who agree with this outlook but opt to phrase it in more individualized ways. To understand the shortcoming of “tacit knowledge” trace it back to Michael Polanyi’s initial description: “personal knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> Too many people in the craft world describe their tools in terms of their individual psyche. Few craft curricula embrace collective collaboration and the true condition of the “artificial commodity.” Watch any toddler making mud pies and see how easy they team up with another to stock a commonly owned shop. They have no problem with commodification, genius or participatory authorship, so maybe that mud-pie shop is a much healthier gambit to emulate in an academic curriculum than to quantify one individual’s transcendence.

If most schools “scarce convey” the proper handling of the hammer, axe or screwdriver, how many fewer tell the story of manufacturing pathways and emphasize that the glassworks, potworks and forge are essential bloodlines in civilization? Perhaps the only way to accept a tool as “natural” is to see if it has been naturalized. Does the tool define a human’s sense of their innate calling? Recognition of a tool might be the defining aspect of being a *specific* tradesman. We can look back to nineteenth-century banners held aloft by mechanics in their parades and witness affiliation sustained by and affection lavished upon the trowel, the hammer and even the banal paint brush. Each of these is a mechanical tool and can be a precision instrument in its own right. The general terms and honorifics discolour our appreciation of these things tossed into crates, closets and car trunks. See the bias in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Now usually distinguished from a *tool*, as being used for more delicate work or for artistic or scientific purposes: a workman or artisan has his *tools*, a draughtsman, surgeon, dentist, astronomical observer, his *instruments*.” In their attempt to democratize the playing field or raise their own level of self-respect, have academies cut themselves from factory knowledge and skills? What sort of toolkit an artist gets today is a crude but worthwhile question to consider. The last universal tool to gain currency was probably the 35mm Kodachrome slide from 1965 to 2000, but now what? Is it the creative commons as a space?

After a week spent in the Spode factory among artists working on building their own works, I wondered if the art world were a Tower of Babel because so few shared a common understanding of what was and was not a tool. When the work of art supposedly dematerialized in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Lucy Lippard’s testimony suggested, perhaps it was more the toolkit that really fell apart. Consensus around tools and materials evaporated across our society, both in terms of where to use marble and concrete in construction as well as in art. Today’s artists tend to visit a factory on tippy toes or in double-takes, shooting digital photos and recording immense amounts of data that they themselves can never digest. The artists scurrying around the bleak and empty Spode factory talked about “occupying” the factory but without a common set of tools their movements resembled rodents in a maze, each on their own, flecks of nervous movements in a cavernous space. There was no common physical movement to reveal the fundamental mechanics of the human anatomy in the way that an athletic event or a dance shows us all, fat or thin, big or small, to be in essence the same set of pivoting and rotating joints. That is another pivotal aspect of work: having a somatic relationship to the choreography of movement. When I watch someone lifting sheetrock and pegging it to the ceiling, I know the spots in their neck and back that strain. Here, in the echoing factory, there was little coordination – it was each individual for her or his self and the field might as well have been any number of abused and vacant pieces of real estate in Stoke.

One problem with working in an empty factory is that their histories largely leave with the employees. One artist asked me “What is the tool fundamental to the ceramics factory?,” as if the factory’s tool kit did not develop (and does not still change) every other decade with fluctuating tastes, shifting pressures and supplies. Most celebrations of ceramics or any craft medium start with the hand, while most historians of technology try to complicate the picture by suggesting the importance of the clock and the division of labour in addition to the steam engine. All such reductive isolation of causes tends toward the absurd, perhaps making all the more relevant Lethaby’s idea about the one-man-deep thing or the one-tool-deep refinement. All clay is of a different body and consistency. Ceramicists tend to have distinct clay bodies as do people methods of brewing coffee. The minute variations of sand, ball clay, and water can result in immense frustration for anyone, whether they are seasoned artists or factory workers. It is a dynamic material and we ought not to really think of clay as clay, making it an “artificial commodity” after all. Clay is not dirt but levigated, refined, drained of iron impurities, and then sized with so many other components that have been mined and quarried and screened. Perhaps a bag of store bought clay is as “natural” as a can of Campbell’s Tomato soup.

To return to the plate profile in the V&A with which this essay began, in discussing the artifact with a room of forty artists, it was apparent that only a few saw more than a surreal form reminiscent of a doorknob. The utility was lost largely because medium specific lore has depreciated in value. The academic ceramic toolkit is far removed from the factory, having been throttled in the pug mill of Bernard Leach’s agenda and then blown-dry into resembling art. Now, the toolkit has atomized into resembling every fashion of conceptual strategy, when all along it had identity-politics and environmental issues built into its profile and material constitution. The plate profile is surely part of no curriculum today, but it is still not as much of an unimaginable dinosaur as the computers stacked in the main offices. Its use will be difficult to resuscitate if the option to do so arises. It is a bone-like fragment of our industrial past –not of the entirety of our past but a distinct two-hundred-year-long phase– that is sentient in that it asks us to grab it, both manually, materially and conceptually.

The profile epitomizes what Josiah Spode would have called the “arts and mysteries” of his trade, perhaps even more than Spode would expect. Several of the artists to whom I showed the profile felt a kinship with me, and many asked specific questions about it later on. What was it made of? When was it made? Would I share the picture of the profile? Was their curiosity an indictment of our collective failure to educate artists and citizens about how things were once made, and the general demise of ceramics? Or was their curiosity a sign that it is an eternal tool in that it can trigger the same basic wonder we feel as children when we first gain the manual dexterity to match a bolt to a nut and feel the snug fit. There is no way to explain that sweet-spot between friction and tension of catching a thread which has a specific as-yet-unexperienced tolerance. This ceramic tool is a tangible connection to an imaginary collective.

Jeroen Verhoeven’s *Cinderella* (2005), a table milled with the aid of computers, has often been cited as a zeitgeist for the digital bridge between time and space in sculpture. If Verhoeven connects the two-dimensional silhouettes of a commode with a sewing table, seemingly joining a male to a female form, the plate profile does the same and then arguably leaves more to the imagination. It engages our ability to imagine the sequence of

giving form to the world. Even if Verhoeven’s table speaks of transformation and metamorphosis, as implied in its name, it is not a tool that will give us a sense of language or form or culture evolving in time. We learn little of historical furniture –we need to be ‘in the know.’ The historic development of furniture is schematic, a cartoon, in his hands. The beauty of a genuine tool, as opposed to a finished art work such as a plate, teacup or any other piece of tableware, is that it can communicate a truly complex temporal space and social history. It suggests a diachronic relation through time, and makes us feel ourselves stacking our plates in our kitchen cabinets, fitting them together to save space, fitting a teacup to a saucer to steady it as we carry it across the room.

The enduring manual tool also seems to articulate both views of modernization, neither of which is satisfying or complete. “*I know what industry is. I was made by hand tenderly,*” is one testimonial. The other is a more plaintive cry: “*I can’t wait for the industrial revolution. I hate making shit by hand.*” A tool is an awfully potent thing to struggle to define. Is it only something useful sometimes or is it sometimes something useful? It cannot be “personal knowledge” but can be personalized. Rita Floyd, making flowers in the Gladstone Museum, uses one such oddity: a plastic comb from which alternate teeth have been removed to aid in the production of making realistic leaves and petals. Her tool reminds me that a toolkit is always a surprising and worthwhile place to look, especially to see how tools get customized. Her broken purple comb might not be as beautiful as the plate profile but it suggests the tenacity and wily ur-toolmaker. The gap-toothed comb also points up the degree to which each generation must invent its own tools, and the always-present danger of disposing of a useful tool too soon.

## Ezra Shales

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<sup>1</sup> Bourriaud, N., *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Frayling, C., *On Craftsmanship, Towards a New Bauhaus*, Oberon Masters, 2011, p.95

<sup>3</sup> Preface in *Richard Rolt, A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* 1756

<sup>4</sup> Sennett, R., *The Craftsman*, Penguin, 2009; Polanyi, M., *Personal Knowledge* 1958



## Biographies

### Steven Dixon

Professor in Art Theory, Bergen Academy of Art and Design, and visual artist.

### Øystein Hauge

Assistant Professor in Art Theory, Bergen Academy of Art and Design, and independent art critic.

### Ezra Shales

Associate Professor of Art History, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and independent curator

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