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Keynote: Beyond Preservation: Re-evaluating Intangible Cultural Heritage in the UK Ceramic Industry

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ABSTRACT

Global economics and advances in automation technology have radically transformed the landscape of the UK's ceramic industry in recent decades. Whilst these transitions have facilitated greater productivity, once commonplace skills associated with ceramic manufacture have been displaced, threatening the continuation of traditional know-how. Should such practices, deemed outmoded or economically unviable for contemporary ceramic production be simply relegated to history or the trails of heritage tourism? What value is there in safeguarding this knowledge for the future? How can traditional practices be revived through new modes of thinking and creativity in a digital age?

Since 2013, Neil Brownsword has explored these questions through his artistic practice by foregrounding the embodied knowledge of personnel formerly employed in North Staffordshire's ceramic industry. Using a range of intersecting approaches that include social practice, collaborative performance, object installation and re-enactment, his works have drawn greater critical attention to people and traditional knowledge displaced by regional industrial change. Site-specific interventions staged at numerous post-industrial spaces and high-profile cultural venues, have aimed to rejuvenate procedural and material knowledge embedded within marginalised industrial practices. This presentation elucidates Brownsword's projects which re-evaluate intangible cultural heritage within Stoke-on-Trent's ceramic sector.