

Report by Kate Wilson

SITE: Situating Ceramics

David Goldman Building Lecture Theatre

St Peter's Campus

University of Sunderland

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Billed as a colloquium, perhaps implying the subject matter to be more intellectually challenging than a common or garden symposium, and under the title of *SITE: Situating Ceramics*, the Ceramic Arts Research Centre based in the National Glass Centre at the University of Sunderland, played host to a number of speakers for whom *site* plays an integral role in their practice. The morning comprised of renowned guest speakers Neil Brownsword, Keith Harrison and Phoebe Cummings, succeeded in the afternoon by a number of current researchers from Sunderland University's practice led PhD cohort. The promise of the day was to examine how the situating of ceramics had become 'as diverse as the formats and presentation of the material itself' (Livingstone) and how *site* had become integral to contemporary practice and current discourse. Whilst *site* was the common factor among them, each speaker had their very individual take on the concept and its implications for their practice.

Keynote speaker Neil Brownsword discussed *Site as Raw Material*, for which *site* was the locality of Stoke-on-Trent and the impact of its industrial demise, not only on its landscape but also on the local community for whom pottery production had been its mainstay for centuries within which entire families were employed. This is a subject that has occupied Brownsword's practice and thinking for many years and responded to in a variety of formats both singularly and collaboratively, the most recent and ongoing project being *Topographies of the Obsolete*. His preoccupation with *site* in this context is highly emotive - his own family, including himself, having worked in the pottery industry in Stoke; the local community bereft of identity, skilled jobs replaced by minimum wage retail work and the physical 'removal' of factory sites from signage around the town, all have their consequences and demand sensitive handling by the intervening artist in such economically depressed areas.

Phoebe Cummings discussed *Site-Material-Process*. Her post-disciplinary approach to her practice has liberated the notion of *site* in the context of production. To her site, material and process are inseparable; utilizing residencies to facilitate her practice has led to outcomes that can either be utterly literal or completely abstract, dependent on where she is and what she is responding to. The most common factor in Cummings's practice (but not always) is the use of a buff clay body that is left unfired; implying the notion of *site* for her is temporary. This was evident in the work created for last year's BCB in the piece *Death of the Bear*, for which she reproduced in 3D and life sized, a scene printed on the surface of a Spode plate depicting a colonial hunting scene. The work was housed in a polythene tent, reminiscent of glass vitrines she has previously used for smaller pieces. For Cummings, as Dr Andrew Livingstone suggested, the lack of a studio is a freer environment in which to work. During her residency at the V&A rather than use the studio provided as a place to create objects, Cummings made it a site to respond to in itself; a process of familiarization where things emerged, accumulated and grew within a specific space.

Keith Harrison's aptly entitled presentation, *Bustleholme - Site and Sound*, focused on his recent collaborative work with the grind-core band Napalm Death. Bustleholme was the estate Harrison grew up on in West Bromwich, a blue and yellow tiled block of flats that he described as epitomising post war optimism. Harrison's practice reflects an experimental process, frequently creating a tension for himself as well as his audience as to what may or may not happen. The initial *site* he references was his father's laboratory as senior technician at Aston University-electrical wiring generally an integral part of the work. Context as *site* is important to Harrison, a tangible starting point, a collision of ideas drawn from music, literature, film, people and places and frequently possessing political undertones but all manifesting as anticipatory events. The nature of his work places Harrison in a very public and exposed arena giving it a very distinct edge.

The first of Sunderland's PhD cohort to present was Thomas Stoller talking about *Self as Site*, recording immaterial residue created by the self, referencing the dualism of Robert Smithson's 'site' and 'non-site'. Stoller's practice records his daily activities in a series of

responses reflecting the use of time, possessions and the cultural patterns that manifest, that being the material interaction between the ‘cultural self’ and the ‘cultural *site*’. In the process Stoller employs text and colour coding as an action of physically archiving the results of his research, such as porcelain clocking in cards depicting time spent in the studio in *A Day in the Life* (2012) and *168 Hours* in which categorized daily actions are recorded as blocks of coloured tiles. The action of archiving is primary, the resulting aesthetic seemingly incidental.

Claire Todd’s *Transitional Objects and Landing Sites* offered a brief insight into her complex and multilayered research in which she draws upon psychology and the transitional object. Todd considers the passage from the internal to the external and the ambiguity of liminality and the cede, where the movement of an object merges with its environment. These in-between spaces were beautifully illustrated with the help of an acrobat back-flipping in a perfect circular motion from one end of the room to another. What results in Todd’s practice is a sense of the surreal, what she describes as re-mythologizing; the resulting imagery appears to slow down time and allows the viewer to unwittingly ‘pause’ in an appreciation of just being.

David Cushway’s *Museum as Site* considers the value of the museum object and how they function within that environment. Cushway’s multi-disciplinary practice has produced a diverse body of work that most recently has explored a dialogue with the museum object he would not have necessarily had through conventional museum culture. *The Last Supper*, at the Glynn Vivien Museum, involved thirteen of its employees choosing their favourite object from the permanent collection and to then physically engage with it. Cushway described the chosen objects as memory locators that create emotional attachments. *Tea at the Museum*, had Cushway and curator Andrew Renton sitting drinking tea from a ‘valuable’ tea set owned by the National Museum of Wales. A transgressive act but one through which Andrew Renton realised he had learnt more by drinking a cup of tea from than in twenty years of ‘studying’ the objects. These simple reminders of what the museum object’s original function was, as a personal possession or a functional object as in these two examples, have facilitated re-engagement on a level

previously forgotten. The resulting post-disciplinary practice from Cushway is a move away from the physical contact with clay as a material but his resulting film and video work is still very much embedded in ceramic discourse. The NMW have purchased Cushway's *Fragments*, a film of falling and smashing cups photographed by cameras used to capture bomb explosions-new technologies producing new points of view.

Sarah Gee's *Site Situating Ceramics* considers a place for impermanence within contemporary ceramics practice through specific artistic intervention in a particular place, with reference to Bill Aitcheson's *Collaboration with Location*. Gee seeks to work with local qualities, sensitively responding to a particular environment. The outcome is temporary evidence and records her presence in that place at that time-a moment of ownership before its reclamation by external factors. Working in mixed media but within a clay discourse, Gee's *sites* are global, from the Orkneys to Japan, some responses momentary and ephemeral, others taking time, facilitating interaction, but Gee consistently remains anonymous. The significance of *site* is very personal in this context, almost intimate, where outcomes only make fleeting sense in that specific location.

Megan Randell concluded the day's speakers discussing *Clay in Contingent Spaces*, places that for some reason or another are marginalised for being 'non-spaces' and/or 'non-emotional places' on the edge, or the margins of society. These non-spaces inform culture through its perceived antitheses to the conscious space and by executing ceramic interventions remediated through non-ceramic platforms; a form of graffiti manifests. Randell creates work that is gifted to the viewer; the artist remains anonymous but the incongruity of location demands a response. Venturing into derelict buildings in order to place the work in extreme 'show spaces', Randell encounters people who inhabit these marginal spaces, who live on the edge and who become an audience. Randell's practice could be described as random acts of intent, wilfully adorning public spaces with ceramic references. Most recently she played on the concept of the 'tag' by producing a screen print using clay slip, of a Spode plate that she reproduced on walls and pavements around Stoke-on-Trent. Removed from its familiar context of the domestic interior the marks become, as Randell describes, scars on the urban landscape.

Andrew Livingstone, leader of the research department at CARcous, summed up the day's discussion suggesting that the studio as *site* had been omitted, but perhaps in this era of the post-disciplinary the concept of studio could be considered within a much broader context.

Overall this was an interesting day bringing together a number of ceramic practitioners focusing on the implication of *site* on their practice, resulting in a very broad interpretation of the term. The event also gave current Practice Led PhD researchers at Sunderland University a great platform to discuss their progressing research. Dr Livingstone suggested there was plenty of scope for further discussion but across a wider range of disciplines, something to look forward to. As a Practice Led PhD researcher myself I would like to see more of these events across research institutions in the UK, sharing approaches and ideas related to practice as research.