

Copies, doubles, and skeuomorphs

Tan-dem

Read any text about artist and researcher Neil Brownsword's practice and you'll be prompted to think about industrial histories, systems of labour, archaeological remnants of ceramic production, tacit knowledge, and intangible heritage: ideas that reverberate like an echo across multiple texts. This allusion to echoes – to the repetition or reflection or sounds – has an affinity with the 'dual movement', the *no longer* and the *not yet*, of hauntology.¹ The repetitions, utterances, and preoccupations of a time, as well as the 'unexplored potentials' of the past and 'the tantalising ache of a future just out of reach'.² The late radical thinker Mark Fisher wrote that: 'The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production.'³ A hovering between past and future.

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Brownsword's use of history is dynamic. Not confined to a symbolic or social register: the workers, technicians, factories, yards, and pits of Stoke-on-Trent that have been subject to the inexorable drama of boom and bust, invention, re-invention, opportunity, post-industrial real estate, and contemporary art. The compelling image or source of nostalgic reverie is only half the story. Brownsword's focus on the material intricacies of ceramic production and the uneven technological advances in North Staffordshire from the late-seventeenth century onwards throw us back to sites of invention such as Bradwell Wood, only to be wrested back to the present through the digital processes that constitute Brownsword's portal through time. Walter Benjamin used the term *jetztzeit* to describe moments from history that fall outside time's linear flow, which, once recognised, can be applied to the present and future to radical effect. Fashion scours history – its images, spectres, ghosts – to satisfy its audiences' quest for the new.⁴ Anchored by the failures, wasters, slips, evidence of trial and error, and the pockmarked topography of the Potteries, Brownsword's mining aims not for new commodities but expressions of material culture that finished objects conceal.

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It is no surprise that hauntology is of interest to Brownsword – in particular, its manifestations in the materials and technologies of our time. There is a resistance to change, an inertia, to be felt in ceramics production, by which past forms remain visible in new, digitally led designs. 3D-printed ceramics made using ceramic resin often rely on recognisable forms to foreground to their striated and 'scribbled' materiality. There is a ghosting here, too, in their return to an aesthetic past in the face of an as-yet-unexplored future. 3D printers have promised much, yet as design historian Tanya Harrod intuited back in 2012, the artistic possibilities of desktop rapid prototyping are, at best, a novelty.⁵

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A concept that can help us to navigate this complex hovering of past and future is the skeuomorph. The skeuomorph, which roughly translates as "structure-form", is a nineteenth-century formulation that acknowledges the formal interrelationship among material things. It denotes an object whose method of production corresponds to an altogether different material – such as basketry techniques assimilated into ceramics, or woodwork into masonry – and is described accordingly as "skeuomorphic". It was conceived within a newly industrialising context where the ideological role of objects,

as well as the impact of new fabrication methods and materials, was central to architectural and design discourse.⁶ The skeuomorph is an object whose form markedly differs from its constituent material, or vice versa, that its materials are at odds with its form. This owes to its method of production, to taking up, or experimenting with processes from across material practice. The skeuomorph exhibits the inventiveness that issues from the exchange of ideas, materials, and techniques across disciplines, and is very much in keeping with the contemporary mode of making.

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The skeuomorph also exhibits a hauntology of its own. What art historian Alice Donohue has keenly observed, in her critique of the role of description in the interpretation of ancient Greek sculpture, is that the skeuomorph simultaneously embodies the ‘formal histories’ of its making, the *before* and *after*, and *all events in-between*. This, she argues, is owing to ‘the capacity of clay and other materials to carry information about the formal history of artifacts.’⁷ A clay form, for example, bears witness to the circumstances of its making, and its life thereafter. It maintains those circumstances as form. *It is telling of its own making histories*. The temporal complexity of the skeuomorph is its most potent asset.

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Brownsword is equally astute. His recent exploration into the Elers brothers’ activities in Staffordshire is motivated by his fascination with the translation of skill, technical know-how, and histories across materials. The Dutch-born silversmiths, who relocated from London to Bradwell Wood in the 1680s, slip-cast wares using the Staffordshire red clays and used ‘carefully prepared metal profiles’ for the accurate arrangement of raised bands and handles with ‘machine-like precision’.⁸ Their success lay in the prudent translation of silversmithing techniques – of moulds, casting, and lathing – to the production of ceramics, in their ability to recognise the skeuomorphic potential of clay. Yet, this precision also gave rise to doubt: the ‘fineness and sharpness of detail evident in the Elers’ relief ornamentation’⁹ pointed to two different material contexts and the ambiguity of its origin. *The future experienced as a haunting*.

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The conventional understanding of ghosts is that they draw their potency and power from the reservoir of the past: an ill perpetrated against the ghosted subject that necessitates their re-iteration in the present, usually as a warning. It is a device that regularly used in literature and film. Once the ghost has shocked the living and conveyed its story (the tragic truth of Hamlet’s father’s murder, for example), its temporal frame is resolved ushering in the denouement, whether that be peaceful or gory.

Outside the framework of Hollywood horror and page-turners, ghosts and ghosting are much more commonplace. Ghost writers exist everywhere (think J. R. Moehringer’s ghosting in Prince Harry’s *Spare* published early in 2023 as one notable example), and ghost sites – websites that can be viewed but have not been updated for years – pepper the Internet like fragments of old satellites in space. These are examples of ghostly activity-in-the-present; spectral entities that live rather than drift.

In attempting to frame an existence-in-the-present for ghosts and spectres we can look to the Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Double* published in 1846. The book follows the story of a St Petersburg civil servant called Golyadkin whose life is turned upside down by the appearance of a doppelganger at his workplace, who proceeds to steal his identity. The double becomes more respected, liked, and admired by colleagues and those higher up on the social scale. Golyadkin’s replica manages to convince the superior officers of his merits by claiming authorship of work completed by his twin in a cunning, deceiving trick. After this he proceeds to humiliate the original Golyadkin.¹⁰

Golyadkin's double is a ghost or spectre with limited historical baggage that flourishes in the present – what we might refer to as a very capable ghost. Deceitful maybe, but performing duties better than the original. It is no surprise that Dostoyevsky wrote this book as mechanical reproduction was taking hold of European countries in its various and uneven way. The precise, accurate and effectively functioning products of industry highlighted the frailty of the original, left 'shivering like a kitten drenched in cold water,' as Dostoyevsky describes the demise of the original Golyadkin.¹¹ We sympathise with the original, named as the book's 'hero,' and follow his journey to madness. But the modern, industrial world favoured the qualities of the capable ghost-in-the-present.

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In nineteenth-century industrial production, including the ceramics of North Staffordshire, the pre-eminence of the copy simultaneously cemented the power of the original as the ultimate authenticator. Out of reach objects stowed away in private collections and museums served as a barometer by which to judge all the clever copies. However, like Dostoyevsky's capable ghost in *The Double*, Brownsword challenges this entrenched faith in the power of originals and, at the very least, invites us to appraise the way in which the copy achieved its ascendancy.

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Far from being imitative, the skeuomorph emerges from an exploratory encounter with materials, from a productive merging of technologies, histories, and materialities. Skeuomorphic forms exhibit the specificity of their making, as a form of present-ness, as well as gesture towards their origin, as a form of past-ness. In other words, they are telling of their own history. This telling-ness of form is significant to the skeuomorph for two reasons. Firstly, the form objectifies the processes of its making – as cultural theorist Pierre Lévy declares, 'it traces the situation'.¹² This notion of artistic form as an act of disclosure enables makers and researchers to work backwards from the final object-form to learn about the specifics of its genesis. Secondly, form is telling of its own history, the time of its own making. Form is representative of "present-ness" and "past-ness," of "before" and "after": form is an aggregate of times. The no longer and the not yet, of hauntology.

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Brownsword pushes this idea of translation (after the Elers' brothers) in multiple ways in his new exhibition *Obsolescence and Renewal*. Having trained as a modeller for the ceramics industry, he is attuned to the limitless potential of the mould, its reproducibility. He sees the mould as 'a means to capture the memory of an object in another material form,'¹³ yet he plays with its faithfulness and precision, wilfully introducing glitches, fault-lines, and imperfections into the casting process. It's a deconstructive project, a way to destabilise the replica, but in doing so, Brownsword is also laying bare the systems of production embodied in the mould's fabrication. By casting the natches, feeds, and spares of a haul of defaced and discarded rubber moulds salvaged following the closure of numerous factories, he exposes their 'mechanics', how they function to form objects. This translation into other materials produces sliced and fragmentary forms, a hybrid of histories that pile up in the mould.

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And it's not just histories that are assembled, but also failures. Having been slashed and defaced by their manufacturers to sabotage future production, the moulds are rendered useless, stripped of their use-value and context. Yet, it is at exactly this fissure in economic reproduction that Brownsword

intervenes. The disfigured moulds are re-moulded as a regenerative act, cast in bone china – to replicate the “whiteness” of porcelain – and reactivated, destabilising notions of industrial perfection and material hierarchies. A conscious repetition of failures.

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Given the radical potential Walter Benjamin invested into the mechanically reproduced image, it is curious that he did not dwell on the dynamics of manual reproduction. Akin to forgery, Benjamin dismissed the ability of manual reproduction to challenge the authority of the original work.¹⁴ It was unlike the mechanical reproduction of photography and film that channel the aura of artwork out into new democratic artefacts that Benjamin saw revolutionising the experience of visual culture all around him.

Manual copying, forgery, attempting to replicate a technique, has medieval, pre-industrial connotations; suggestive of an age where technology had not achieved technological autonomy or a life force of its own. Forgery conjures up the image of skilled painters chancing their arm at deceiving museum authorities and collectors in accepting a copy as original. But the category of manual reproduction can be a much broader church and include the most commonplace practices of acquiring artistic skill that are far from the dubious morality of faking a signature. Medieval apprentices imitated and copied the work of their master as a pathway to their own accession to membership within a guild. Sure, the auratic qualities of the original were not threatened in this context; however perfect an imitation, the apprentice’s work was shackled to that of the master. In the period of nascent industrialisation manual reproduction started to pose a much greater challenge to the authority of the original, questioning Benjamin’s expectation of its quiescence.

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Staffordshire potteries vied with each other in the eighteenth century on two counts: to achieve as close an imitation as possible to Chinese porcelain, a European project of imitation that had lasted centuries, and to do so with repeatable precision. This was a very hands-on affair, with various materials stretched and tested to see whether they could match the fabled whiteness, thinness, and quality of Chinese ceramics. The Pomona works of Newcastle-under-Lyme led (probably) by William Steers, was one of these manufacturers, whose existence is proved only by scanty historical documentation and pot sherds found during a renovation of a car park. Brownsword has taken these fragments, digitally scanned, scaled up, and flipped them multiple times to produce almost-unrecognisable copies from which he has produced physical moulds. Recipes for the Pomona proto-porcelain paste are to be remixed and used to fill the moulds. The Pomona ware might exist again as chipped, handleless totems to the ingenuity of forgotten inventors.

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Cultural geographer Tim Edensor writes that ‘artefacts 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. [...] This 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.’¹⁵

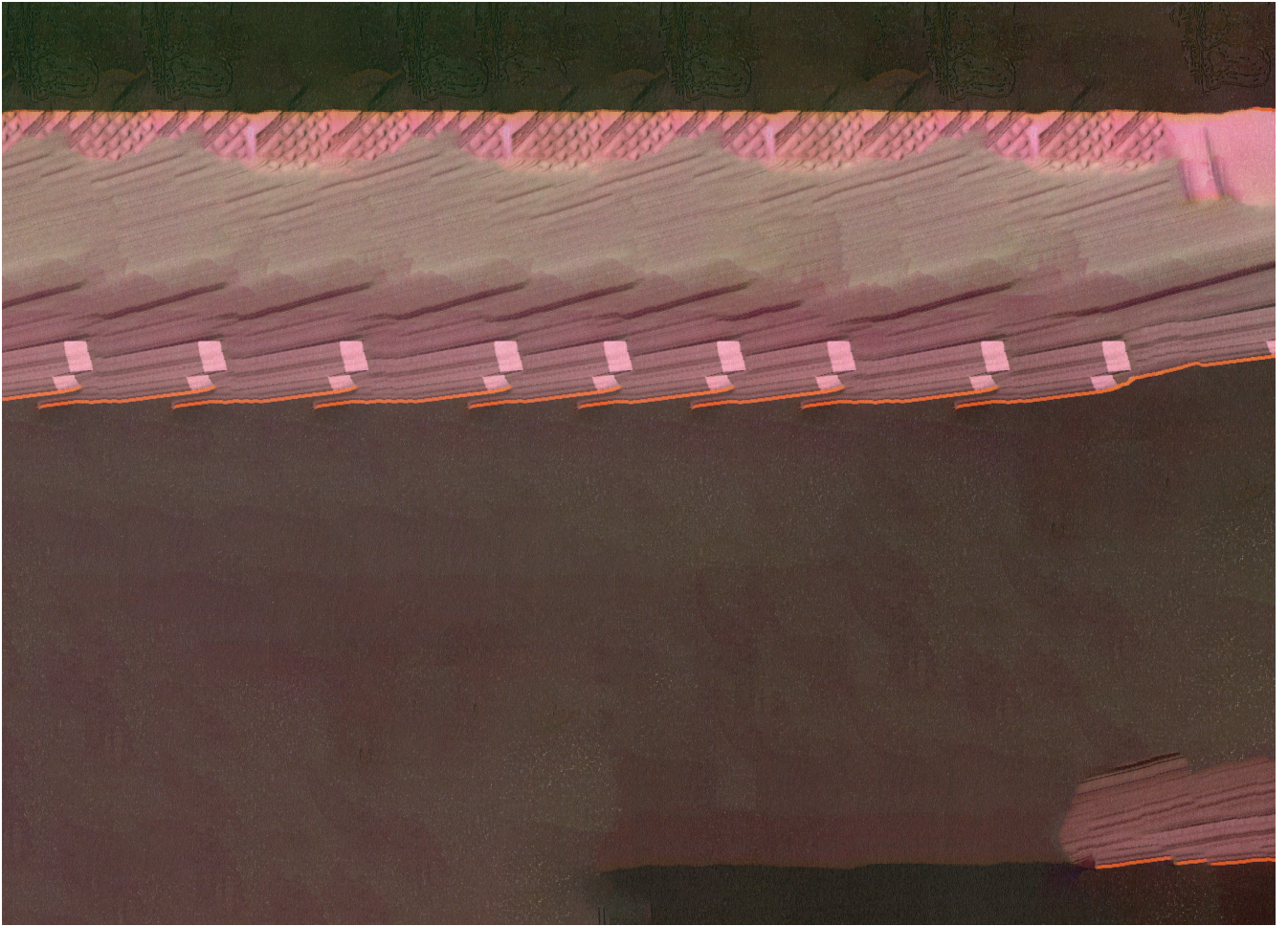
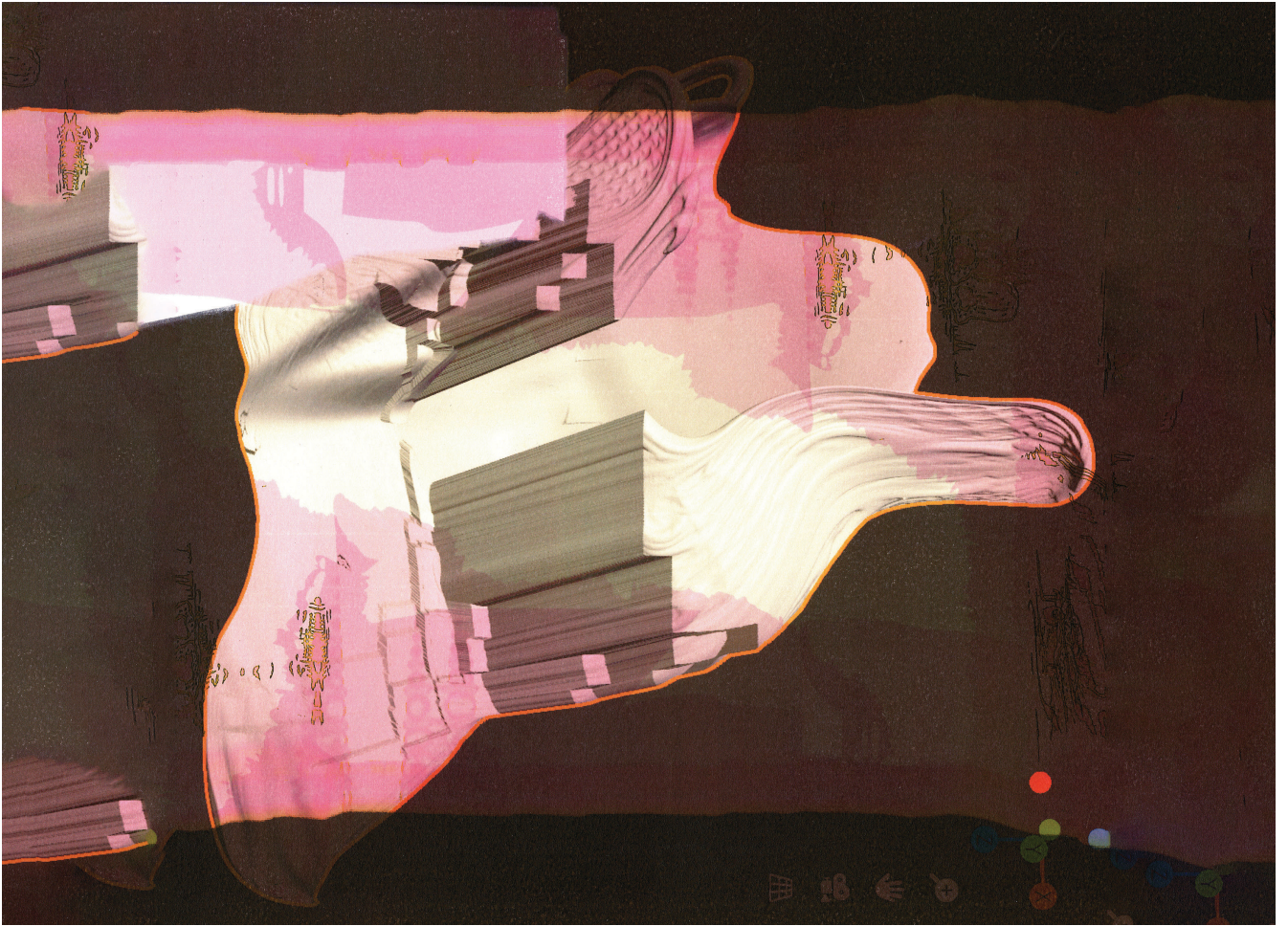


Fig. 1. Neil Brownsword, *Obfuscation Series*, archival print, 2023



This same process of disintegration is evident in Brownsword's large-scale tapestry pieces (Fig. 2), drawn out and marred across the coloured weft threads to resemble Chinese landscape paintings. They, too, are "un-manufactured" – the product of a 'rudimentary scanning process' explored by Brownsword.¹⁶ Taking his collection of early north Staffordshire chinoiserie (c. 1800), with their hand-painted motifs in magnificent reds, pinks, and yellows, Brownsword has developed a method for rotating, turning, and manipulating their imagery through his scanner, introducing slippages and repeating errors – a digital slur of their analogue precursors. Yet, what results is a spectacular unveiling of their fabrication, a detailed account of their inherent skill, as if on long pause. Like a fermata used in musical notation to signal a prolonged note or rest.

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In his last work, *Rythmanalysis* (1992), the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre made the startling, but simple, observation that absolute repetition could only exist in the world of logical and mathematical thought. In other arenas of life, and certainly in the realm of material culture, $A \neq A \neq A$. 'The second A differs from the first by the fact that it is second,'¹⁷ he writes, essentially providing a unique temporal dimension to otherwise entirely similar things. Following this, Lefebvre quickly asserts that rather than resulting in homogeneity as we might expect, repetition produces differences.

There is no equivalent extract that helps us park the idea that mass or industrial production was homogenous, repetitious, and effaced difference. Diversity in what was produced, to borrow terminology from furniture designer David Pye, certainly diminished as mechanical reproduction achieved a degree of certainty, each product churned out the factory looking like the one next to it.¹⁸ Nevertheless, verisimilitude need not signal the end of an object's uniqueness. Standardised products were produced by different workers in the factory whose mood and execution of skill changed day on day, similar objects ended up with completely different biographies, how technique was adopted varied.

Brownsword's work alerts us to the differences that arise in the context of producing ceramic copies destined for non-elite markets. For the work *FACTORY* (2017), he commissioned the skilled Stoke-on-Trent china flower-maker Rita Floyd to produce delicate flowers that would normally adorn plates, dishes, tea sets, but in this work accumulated in a pile on the floor. In the radical jettisoning of such delicate forms into the mound, the difference in the repetition is amplified, each flower taking on a slumped, disorderly form. Photographs have neatly captured this moment where the repeated motif is subverted. The work – like the squidgy kiln furniture that bears the imprint of the factory worker's hands, broken saggars, and kiln failures that featured in *Alchemy and Metamorphosis* (2021–22) at the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery – attest to the differences and material drama produced by a culture shaped by repetition and routine.

\ EPILOGUE \

In an attempt to unveil more about Brownsword himself, the idea came to subject him to the same digital renderings as his ceramic works. When asking the open-source AI software ChatGPT to expand on how Brownsword's work relates to the copy, it replied that although 'he does not focus on "the copy" in the traditional sense, his work often delves into issues related to authenticity, heritage, and the impact of mass production on traditional craft.'

Within this series of vignettes, the intention has been to stretch our understanding of copies, doubles, and skeuomorphs, questioning their parameters and quasi-spiritual qualities in the context of industrial material culture. As with Brownsword (according to ChatGTP) our focus also has not been on "the copy" in the traditional sense.'

ChatGPT is a chatbot that also doesn't produce copies in 'the traditional sense', the words produced are completely new each time. When typing a question again and again, slightly different variations emerge. ChatGPT doesn't plagiarise 'in the traditional sense' in that the words produced are not stolen from others' writing. Instead, ChatGPT mines the vast wealth of data on the Internet to produce sentences that represent the most likely best response to the question being asked. The algorithm identifies which words best fit alongside each other and how they embed within a larger sentence.¹⁹

ChatGPT constitutes an amalgamated, conglomerated response to a question rather than lifting text directly. Yet, its ability to reproduce text can produce a moral panic and suspicion. Texts produced by AI can be copied by individuals and attributed to their own authorship (creating a headache for educators and assessors as plagiarism checkers don't work). As with the Elers' brothers developing moulds for slip-cast ceramics, the technological parameters of AI can easily be characterised as destabilising authorial authority, ushering in a period where craft – and its intimate connection to sentient humans – is threatened.

Like technological advances in ceramic manufacture, ChatGPT has been subject to inordinate amounts of testing to improve its efficacy. Still, quirks exist within the text where the flow of words is interrupted by an anomaly, like a deep pothole on a smooth road. These can be spotted by the astute reader who might want more from their text than a 'vanilla press release'.²⁰ ChatGPT, in its response to our question, frequently used the words 'delving' and 'in-depth' to articulate Brownsword's attention to detail. It reads as contrived (can you 'delve into the implication of copying'?) And the algorithm infuriatingly persisted – despite attempts to throw it off course – in presenting ideas about the copy (and Brownsword's work more generally) within the very linear historical narrative of craftsmanship being replaced by mass production. There was limited acknowledgement of how Brownsword's work complicates the idea of technological determinism, how he is drawn to instances of craft in mass production, and moments of technological failure.

Perhaps this is a message the computer just doesn't want to hear.



Fig. 2. *Obsolescence and Renewal*, Neil Brownsword, tapestry detail, 2023





Fig. 3. Neil Brownsword, *Obfuscation Series*, archival print, 2023

Tan-dem

Set up in 2018, Tan-dem is the collaborative writing and research partnership of Kimberley Chandler and Stephen Knott. Working alongside one another and in dialogue, their aim is to broaden our understanding of craft and materiality, through writing, teaching, and talking. To date, Tan-dem has presented an alternative history of British ceramics comprised of archival fragments (Centre of Ceramic Art, York, 2018); taken up residence in Camberwell College of Arts, London, for *On The Way To Language* (2018); and compiled an annotated list of global 'Useful Craft' initiatives as part of a research residency for Grizedale Arts (2020–21).

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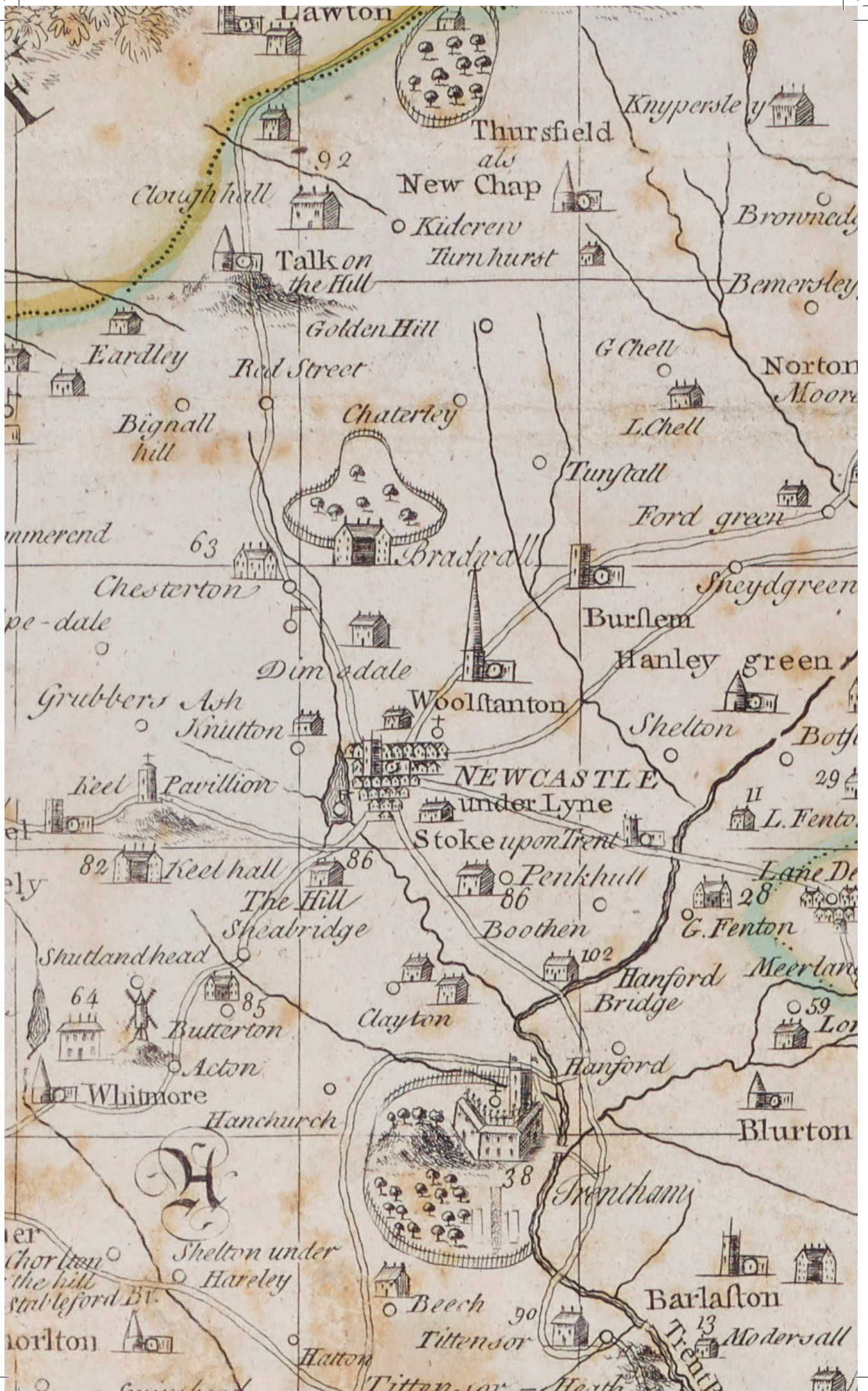
Dr Stephen Knott is a writer, researcher and educator in craft theory and history, and, in June 2023, he was appointed director of the Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, part of the University for the Creative Arts. He is author of *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2015), a book that derived from his AHRC-funded PhD at the Royal College of Art/Victoria and Albert Museum. He is one of the editors of *The Journal of Modern Craft* and has written articles for *Design and Culture* and *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History and Material Culture, and Crafts*.

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- ¹⁴ Benjamin, W., 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 214.
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Lawton

Thursfield

New Chap

Kidcrew

Turnhurst

Talk on the Hill

Golden Hill

Eardley

Red Street

Chaterley

Bignall hill

G Chell

L.Chell

Tunstall

Ford green

63

Bradwall

Chesterton

Burlem

Hanley green

Dimadale

Woolstanton

Shelton

Grubbers Ash

Sinulton

NEWCASTLE
under Lyne

Stoke upon Trent

L. Fenton

82 Keel hall

86 The Hill

86 Penkhull

Boothen

28 G. Fenton

Shutland head

85 Butterton

Clayton

102 Hanford
Bridge

Meerlane

59 Lon

Whitmore

Hanchurch

Hanford

Blurton

H

38

Trentham

Chorlton
the hill
Stableford B.V.

Shelton under
Hareley

90 Beech

Barlaston

13 Modersall

Norton

Halton

Tittensor

Trent

