



## Valuing a Lost Work Culture

Posted on September 1, 2017 by Tim Strangleman

Late last fall I visited Stoke-on Trent, a city in the North-West of England which was once the epicentre of the UK's huge pottery industry, now fallen on [decidedly hard times](#). Local artist and academic Neil Brownsword, who had begun his working life in the pottery trade, acted as my guide around the city and the various sites of its industry – some newly established small workshops supplying niche markets, but mostly I saw the abandoned remnants of a [once great industry](#). The highlight of the trip was the call we made on Rita, a friend and collaborator of Neil's, who had worked as a china flower maker in the Potteries for thirty years. Over coffee in her kitchen, we talked about the pottery industry both in its heyday and through its decline and large scale closure in the late twentieth century. Rita had begun her working life at fifteen, in the early 1970s and was put to work training to make the delicate clay flowers used to decorate certain types of fine chinaware.

I grew up in a house where the 'best china' rarely if ever got used. My mum is still proud to keep it on show in a display cabinet. These ordinary functional china pieces were the closest my parents came to owning 'art'. I never gave much thought to those pieces, but in Rita's warm and inviting kitchen, but now I felt guilty for never considering the manufacturing process that created the pieces or the flowers that decorated them. Talking with Rita gave

me a glimpse into a strange but now lost world. It also started me thinking about how we underestimate the importance of art in everyday life, and the relationship between art and labour.



Rita, in the process  
of making clay  
flowers

During our visit, Rita asked if I would like to see her make some flowers, and she then started to roll and shape, poke and pull at small amounts of grey china clay. Using just the right amount of material every time, her hands became a blur of seemingly unconscious activity while Rita continued to talk to Neil and me. At the end of each process, Rita would casually drop the finished flower on top of a growing pile of others made earlier. The first couple of times she did this I was shocked. I didn't realize that they were part of an installation Neil had commissioned Rita to create, so I mistakenly assumed that these beautiful objects were simply being wasted. Rita's work and the pile of discards started me thinking about her craft and the extent to which what she did, and what she had done on the job, was 'art' or simply labour. What was the dividing line between these two social forms? Was there a clear line at all?

As Rita continued to work she told us more about her working life. She described her first day on the line, learning, by one failed attempt after another, how to make basic flower shapes, and, through practice, to ensure each was of a consistent size and shape. Rita reminisced about the female supervisor, who was at first deadly strict with her new charges, brutally discarding the multiple failed attempts at the specified flowers. Initially Rita had wanted to give up, but a mixture of family pressure and well-timed encouragement from her supervisor made her realise that she possessed the talent and ability to succeed in her new trade. Rita described beautifully her respect mixed with fear for the woman who taught her to make her first flowers. After a while, this changed to a far warmer relationship as the trainee proved herself capable, worthy of attention, and so the bond could form.

Rita's story of her early working life is at once unique to her but also shared. She described

the socialisation into economic life that many working-class people share. Of course, the material conditions vary enormously. The type of work clearly adds an important dimension, and the people we work with make a huge difference. However, there is a common experience of people socialised into work culture in traditional industries that transcends these differences. What Rita described, and what I have been lucky enough to record in my work and to read in the autobiographies of countless workers, is the process of being and becoming, of maturing in and through one's work. Fundamentally, though, this is a social activity, for what Rita and many others describe is the act of creating the social, of forming social bonds and relationships.

We often take these experiences for granted. They are, after all run of the mill encounters in the workplace. But in looking back at early work experience in later life, people are often more able and willing to reflect on the complexity of earlier interaction. It is perhaps only then that this early socialisation into work takes on a more complex hue. We may not have enjoyed the process of learning a new job. Indeed, we may have hated the work and loathed the people in charge of us. It is the passage of time that reveals a more rounded sense of what was at stake, what was of value.

Rita's story, like the countless examples from my own research, reminds us of the surprising commonality of working-class life across time and space, but it also reveals the positive values hidden not so deep in working-class culture. As I have written [here before](#), workers have good reason to feel nostalgia for these experiences. But what about contemporary workers? Will the jobs and industries that working-class people 'enjoy' in contemporary society provide contexts that will nurture a vibrant culture in the future? Work today is more likely to be described using words like *insecurity*, *precarity*, *fissuring* and *instability*, words that reflect poor soil on which to grow the kinds of bonds and relationships that people like Rita and millions of others long knew. Today's work culture seems distinctly different from what Rita recalls, and we should look at it critically, noting what working-class people have lost as work has changed. But this does not mean that people no longer seek meaning and connection at work. As scholars, we should look for evidence of how people humanise their lives now. It is worth asking, is there still an art to working-class labour?

## Author



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