

# Returns: Back Stitch Methodology as a Reflective Approach to Artistic Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ongoing investigation by the artist-researcher group Returns, revisiting the Spode ceramics factory in Stoke-on-Trent, England, and broader post-industrial settings. This paper describes and reflects upon the group's 'back stitch' methodology (derived from embroidery), valuing the hidden under-thread that reinforces and sustains the investigation. Through collaborative dialogue, the group uses the back stitch to produce momentum by returning 'backwards into the beneath'. The paper considers how the back stitch methodology can slow investigations to deepen understanding, enable rhizomatic complexity and support the critical potential for a community of artistic scholarship and research evidenced through the individual's practice.

## Introduction

The Returns artistic research group originated in an exploration of the abandoned Spode ceramics factory in Stoke-on-Trent, UK, which began as part of the University of Bergen's *Topographies of the Obsolete*, led by an international project through which artists investigated post-industrial landscapes and the global contexts for ceramics. Since 2012, four artists Andrew Brown, Joanne Lee, Danica Maier, and Christine Stevens have examined the site's history and its intersections with places, processes, and practices elsewhere, developing three exhibitions *Returns* (2015), *In Return* (2016), and *re-turning* (2018) to test and make visible ideas and findings. The project is continuing into a new phase connecting the original investigation further into a derelict Sheffield brickworks and on to a former metalworking site in South-western Finland.

The core of Returns (as a group) is the "back stitch" methodology, so named for its analogy to the technique of backstitching in embroidery, where stitches are made in reverse to secure and reinforce the thread's path. Here, much of the vital work goes on beneath, out of sight of the final visible surface.

In artistic research, this underneath and backwards movement involves returning to and reflecting on earlier stages or concepts, in order to engage the new perspective gained from subsequent experiences, insights and developments. By so doing, artists uncover emerging connections and patterns beyond those intended at the outset. The iterative process of the returning back stitch also enables research to sustain complexity and produce layered and interconnected understandings of the sites and subjects being explored, staying with states of becoming rather than hastening to a definitive conclusion.

Through the back stitch methodology, revisiting and re-examining sites and the previous stages or elements of a project encourages a dynamic and evolving approach, where reflection, revision, and recontextualization play pivotal roles in shaping the project's trajectory. The methodology fosters forms of connection and dialogue across different aesthetic, intellectual, spatial, and temporal registers. It offers an important opportunity for epistemological critique by disturbing institutional research agendas, which propel researchers towards the staking of claims to fresh intellectual territory. Rather, the



Figure 1. Group exhibition *Returns*, Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, 2015. Photo: Andrew Brown.

slow looping of the back stitch enables the research to stay with states of uncertainty, multiplicity, and the not yet definitively known (Firestein, 2012; Fisher & Fortnum, 2013). In valuing the capacity of artists for working creatively and critically with the overlooked and what is close at hand, it resists the grand assertions that can oversimplify and eradicate the nuanced responses necessary in our time of complex social and environmental challenges.

This paper will explore how each artist made use of the back stitch methodology within the broader context of the research project, outlining the strategies of attention, repetition, defamiliarization, imagination, and play that emerged through individual and collaborative practices. It will reflect on the conceptual framework for the group's ongoing relationship and evidence the processes that have threaded together understandings of the past, engagements with present realities, and the imagination of potential futures. It will argue that the method enables creative and critical entanglements which produce scholarship out of community.

## Returns

The Returns research began with an investigation of the former Spode ceramics factory in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, UK. This vast site lay empty for several years following its closure in 2008. Acquired by the Portmeirion Group in 2009, with production of the Spode brand relocated elsewhere, the site slid towards dereliction and a very uncertain future. The Returns artists first came to this place in 2012 via an invitation to join the international artistic research project *Topographies of the Obsolete*. Led by Professors Neil Brownsword and Anne-Helen Mydland of the University of Bergen, Norway. The project offered a series of residencies and workshops, bringing together artists from across Europe to investigate post-industrial landscapes, and the historical and contemporary global contexts for ceramics.

Working initially in relation to this broader project, the Returns group soon recognized a mutual interest in going back to the Spode site as a prompt for collective creative and critical investigation; we adopted the name Returns as a means of signifying our repeated revisiting. Through diverse investigative practices, we have worked with found materials and collected artefacts, used clay and sound, made drawings and photographs, and brought together words and images. Explorations of the factory site

eventually enlarged into its wider geographical and contextual environs of Stoke-on-Trent: The investigative threads have repeatedly led us elsewhere and back again.

During this last decade, we have found Spode itself no longer exists as it did at the beginning: some parts have decayed further whilst others have been renovated, regenerated, and put to fresh use. The project has clearly revealed how places are made and remade through the shifts and accretions of human and more-than-human activity, and how our investigation itself has been changed and re-informed by the continual return. Like Heraclitus' river, neither it nor we are the same. Group members developed independent outcomes across three group exhibitions: *Returns* in 2015, focused on the Spode site; *In Return* in 2016, expanding to incorporate domestic labor and historical ceramic patterns; and *re-turning* in 2018, exploring everyday materials and the interplay between nature, culture, and memory. A new phase of the project, initiated in 2023, extends the research thread from Spode to a post-industrial site in Finland via a Sheffield brickworks.

## Back Stich Methodology

In the craft of embroidery, the back stitch is defined by a double-length stitch on the underside of the work from which the thread emerges above in a visible loop back towards its origin. It then plunges beneath again, working out of sight on the reverse side of the fabric, in order to move forwards in the overall direction of travel; this completes the stitch just made and gains the ground necessary for the next one.

For the Returns group of artist-researchers, the back stitch methodology provides momentum in

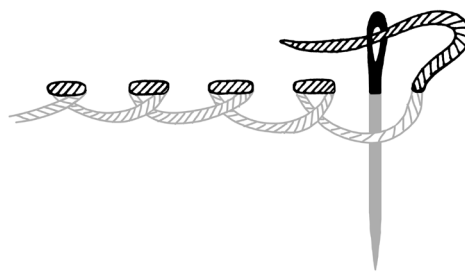


Figure 2. Diagram of back stitch in embroidery.  
Illustration by Danica Maier.

our work through a series of looping returns. We began in a specific site—the former Spode ceramics works—at which the initial research was anchored, then drew a conceptual thread from this single starting point that then extended and connected multiple lines of inquiry. After the first period of site investigation came the more hidden developmental research, often taking place away from the public gaze in private studios or offices. Then, the research thread’s movement forward was mostly unseen, concealed beneath the underside of the critical and conceptual fabric. This research phase involved making, unmaking, and remaking, forms of individual and collective reflection within the group and the pursuit of emerging concepts and ideas which the researchers each found compelling. The research thread moves above for public exhibitions and events and then below again, and at each stage the perspective shifts; what it is possible to think and know is changed by the experiences, insights, and developments that have previously taken place, and will change how we approach those that we are yet to encounter.

The Returns researchers note that in sewing a back stitch, the hand remains out of sight beneath the fabric, so that the gesture which seeks the needle’s point of re-emergence is largely made ‘blind’. Just as needleworkers gain the spatial awareness and tacit understanding through practice of how to find the appropriate place for their needle to come back above the fabric, the back stitch researchers’ creative and critical decisions are made possible through repeated investigations in which we make our way through, round, in and out of the particular sites. Knowing how to proceed comes about through feeling our way—together and apart—as a result of the subtle insights of ongoing practice.

We began from a ‘known’ point, but repeatedly loop along and back below into what is currently unseen and yet to be encountered, bringing up traces of what we have encountered on the journey beneath. During our exhibitions, the tethering thread of the back stitch draws together our separate investigations in such a way that, rather than retaining distinct artistic autonomy, the works on show deliberately trespass on each other. The exhibitions are artistic laboratories which consciously entangle the individual research strands we have developed, generating new patterns through which we notice emerging connections and recognize the insights we will take away and into the next hidden phase of investigation. Each public exhibition is a re-emergence of the thread, an explicit opportunity

to show what we have found and to engage in dialogue with one another and with others who know the place and ideas under investigation. When the research threads are made visible, and work is shown for exhibition and publication, this enables us to visualize and test what we have found and to recognize the patterns and connections that we may go on to pursue next. The back stitch methodology enables a recognition of what the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart considers to be the forms, rhythms and refrains emerging through engagement with interrelated phenomena, through which the world is made legible (Stewart 2010, pp. 339-354).

The exhibitions created opportunities for participation and dialogue, with the *Returns* exhibition in Nottingham (2015) featuring seminars on the archaeological perspective of artists, artistic exploration of ruins, and the role of creative practices in urban regeneration; *In Return* Sheffield (2016) involved a collective audio walk and discussions about the significance of place and artworks, while *re-turning* in Stoke-on-Trent (2018) included workshops with refugees and asylum seekers using clay for communication and sharing experiences of home. Additionally, artists’ residencies at Primary, Nottingham, and AirSpace Gallery, Hanley, provided valuable input for our continued exploration of these places. Returns is interested in the way the diverse investigative strands can be brought into proximity through artistic research and in the dialogue that occurs whilst working alongside one another and with project participants, gallery curators, exhibition visitors, and members of the public with whom discussion occurs in the city or exhibition space. This dialogue emerges, as in David Bohm’s conception, through a capacity for listening carefully (with ‘listening’ conceptually and critically expanded to include the diverse forms of intellectual and sensory attention pursued by the researchers) and “the ability to hold many points of view in suspension” (Bohm & Peat, 1987, p. 247). As Siún Hanrahan recognizes, “in the face of the multiplicities of contemporary culture” we must “develop our ability to explore conflict rather than simply seek consensus” (Hanrahan, 2013, p. 151). Hanrahan notes the “constellation of readings anchored by an artwork” and makes clear “the limits of what can be known from any given position” which “opens the possibility of exploring the relationship between the diverse perspectives anchored in a single entity” (Hanrahan, 2013).

The metaphor of the back stitch is useful as a way of understanding the coming together of

individual research approaches. Robin Nelson has recognized how “richly labyrinthine” practice as research can be and references the old form of the word clue—when *clue* literally denotes a thread—as a productive means of “holding on to the line of the research inquiry as it weaves through the overall process”, drawing attention to the thread of researchers’ doing-thinking (Nelson, 2013, pp. 10-11). In *Returns*, the back stitched threads entangle and divide, create directional lines of travel and loop back upon themselves. They secure different aspects of the project together and embroider ideas where enriched attention is needed.

Gavin Renwick has called for “research using procedures implicit to art and design” and asserts his interest in a “research methodology that understands and works with a complexity conveniently negated by most traditional specialized research methods” (Hanrahan, 2013, pp. 168-169). The back stitch methodology has developed through a decade-long collaborative and independent investigation pursued as a means of attending to the emerging entanglements of place and practice. Its looping reflective approach has led us to examine aspects that were entirely unexpected when we began. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome (1987) has allowed us, as other artist-researchers, to sustain multiple and complex inquiry. As Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge have suggested: “Art addresses the worlds in which we live, those spaces we inhabit as making sense for us; it is highly reflective, responsive, and mercurial. But it is not rootless: it is rhizomatic, spreading,

proliferating; it pulls into its forms many different modes of making sense to the point where we begin to question how we began to attempt the project in the first place” (Macleod & Holdridge, 2013, p. 189). Just as Vytautas Michelkevičius recognizes artistic research to be “a rhizomatic (roots and branch-based) dynamic network of animate and inanimate actors” (Michelkevičius, 2018, p. 9), the durational *Returns* research has focused on the human and more-than-human, the muddled matter and materials of the places in which we have spent time. The back stitch methodology has enabled what Donna Haraway has described as “the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come” (Haraway, 2016, p. 31). It is fitting that her articulation of what matters should mobilize a conceptual thread of *Returns*: “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie tie” (Haraway, 2016, p. 31).

These approaches to the practice of artistic research underpin the following examples from each of the four *Returns* artists. As we will go on to make clear, there is an open-endedness and connectivity to the back stitch methodology, which can make and reveal patterns and can sustain the necessary nuance, complexity, and changeability to be found in and between the sites, situations, and histories we are investigating.

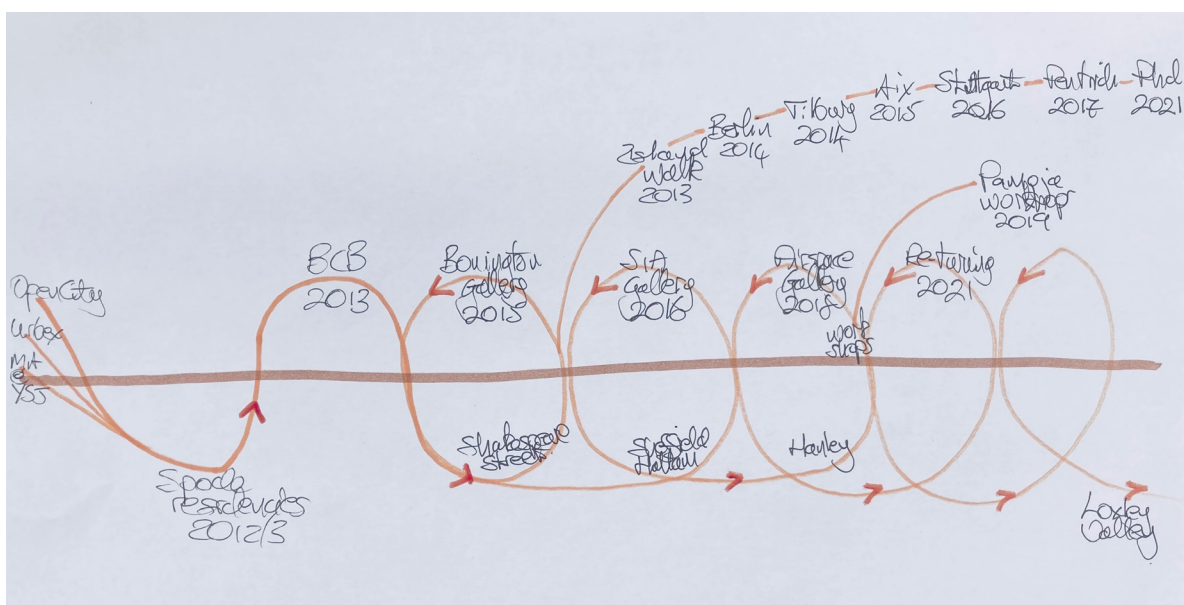


Figure 3. Andrew Brown’s back stitch diagram, 2023.

## Andrew Brown

The back stitch thread that runs through the body of work I have created as part of the artistic research project Returns is tethered firmly to the Spode factory site and its environs in the Potteries, an important entry point in the establishment of my personal methodology. All subsequent experiences I have had within industrial ruins are informed by the approaches that I employed there. Although I define myself as an interdisciplinary artist, and do occasionally work with found objects, the core of my practice involves soundwalking, which I apply in my investigations into contested space. Social geographer Doreen Massey describes space as imaginable as “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey, 2005, p. 9), and I attempt to occupy such fleeting confluences and to capture the resultant impressions.

In articulating our collective methodology, we allude to the metaphor of the back stitch in relation to the artistic research thread’s looping progression in and out of visibility. During the public-facing phases of exhibition or publication the emphasis is upon consideration for the audience or reader. For me the thread becomes taut at these points, before slackening as it dips back into the relative invisibility of processing what has taken place and mulling over what might come next. This rising and falling of tension and visibility mimics that of the process of composing a soundwalk, looping back and forth in time and emerging in contested pasts and uncertain futures.

In the reflective piece I wrote for the Topographies of the Obsolete publication *Site Reflections* (Brown, 2015) I discussed the ‘adoption’ of post-industrial ruins and using soundwalking to interrogate such sites from both embedded and detached viewpoints. My research process tends towards solitary and immersive physical engagement with place, in which I perform numerous Situationist-inspired *dérives*, wandering, observing, and listening. In this exploratory mode I cover a lot of ground, following a variety of trails and conceptual threads. At points, my footsteps double back on themselves or, lured by promising terrain, veer off into shadowy spaces and the occasional dead end. My engagement with more traditional forms of research takes a similarly circuitous and speculative approach, one (mis)step leads to another, taking me further off-piste.

The temporal dislocation of a soundwalk overlays recordings with the present-day live soundscape,



Figure 4. Andrew Brown, *OpenCity Stoke*, 2018.  
Photo: Anna Francis.



Figure 5. Andrew Brown, *Ropelight (detail of work)*, 2015.  
Photo: Andrew Brown.

that merge in a mix with residual and contemporary sounds. This leads participants into an ambiguous relationship with time and a questioning of what is real and imagined. I created the ‘OpenCity Stoke’ soundtrack using original maps and photos to evoke the past scenes of the railway marshalling yards, the trams negotiating the street junction during a World War II patriotic parade of military hardware, now replaced by the Tesco car park.

The impulse behind my artistic practice is to tread lightly and to limit my use of raw materials. The majority of my work involves the immaterial yet tactile medium of sound. The assemblage of Christmas lights that I showed in the ‘Returns’ exhibition in Bonington Gallery was a reconfiguration of the piece ‘6/11/2008’ found on the walls around the Spode site for the British Ceramics Biennial at Spode in 2013.

### Joanne Lee

Walking the enormous site, I navigated the China Hall, now emptied of its production lines; investigated mold stores and workshops which had once specialized in particular processes; scrutinized paperwork evidencing the administration of finance and personnel; and I wandered acres of weed-colored concrete.

Whilst the scale of the site was huge, my camera recorded a more intimate view. As an artist-researcher, I take a consciously superficial approach, using a lens as a means to investigate—close up—my encounters with the world’s surface. In doing so, I draw upon the French writer Georges Perec’s suggestion that to encounter the everyday you must “force yourself to see more flatly” and that it is necessary to set about things “more slowly, more stupidly even” (Perec, 2008, pp. 50-51). I consider this a form of defamiliarization, which enables a move beyond habitual forms of attention and ways of framing.



Figure 7. Joanne Lee, from Spode Sequence, 2013. Photo: Joanne Lee.

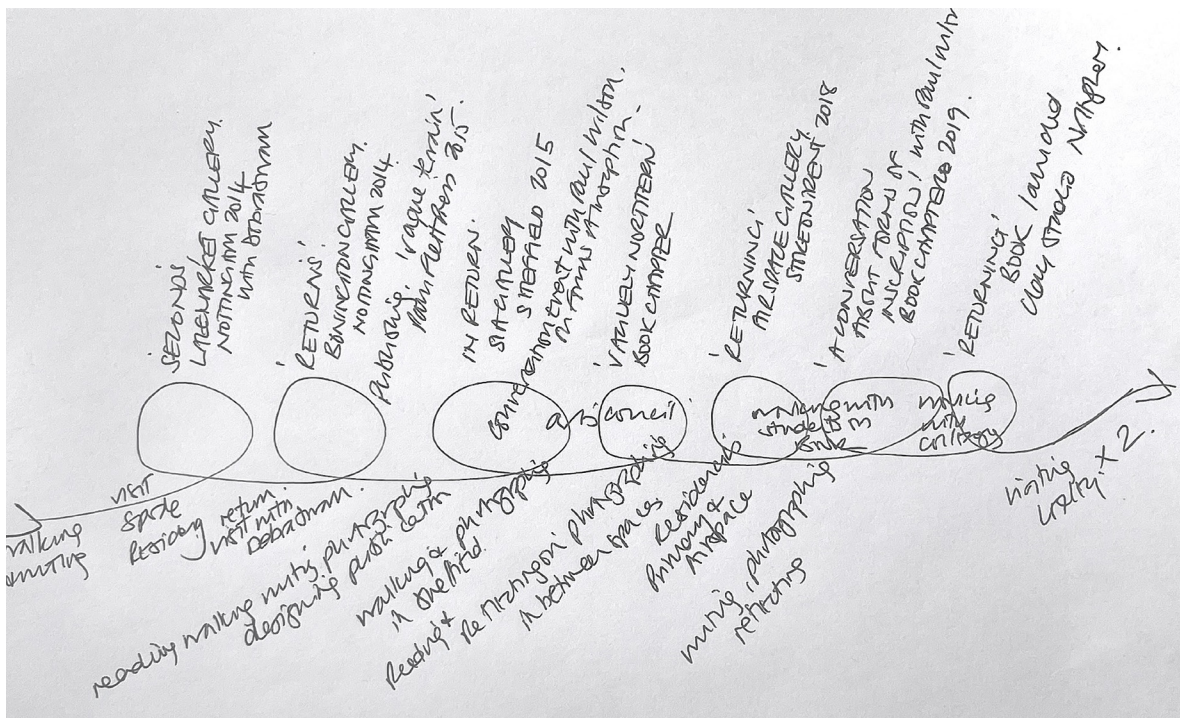


Figure 6. Joanne Lee’s back stitch diagram, 2023.

The strategy is further amplified by time and repetition. I set aside photographs, distancing myself from the precise time they were taken and the ideas that I might then have carried with me: When I return to them, I see them afresh, viewing the images as they are, rather than as I had intended them to be. I often return to rephotograph, or to re-encounter a location at a different point, what I see is informed and transformed by what I have already pictured.

These collections form composite images and sequences, through which visual experience is patterned. A practice of non-fiction writing also essays ideas, some of which generate audio components; in each case the layering is intended to enrich and extend or contradict, rather than to clarify or conclude. It is a slow process of working and reworking, returning to ideas and images in order to move forward, starting *here* to get critically and conceptually *somewhere else*. My research is spatial and temporal; I examine ideas through moving around in places and time (Lee, 2017).

I eventually began to loop into the wider environment beyond the Spode factory, wandering between the Potteries towns. I walked repeatedly, reflecting on what was there before me, the slow pace allowing my mind/body an opportunity to become differently attentive. The philosopher Eric Anthamatten suggested that wandering facilitates

wondering and “the structure of thought is not a straight line, but a wandering, an ambling, a meandering, a walkabout” (Anthamatten, 2012, p. 13). Somewhere between a deliberate investigation and unexpected meandering, I found myself attending to Staffordshire’s intersecting traditions of non-conformist religion, radical politics, and trade unionism; its idealistic projects like the Workers’ Educational Association and societies promoting the universal language of Esperanto; the escapism of hedonistic club cultures; old myths and new age spirituality; energy and entropy; public transport and poor housing; community, refuge and sanctuary. None of this was in my mind as I made my first visit to the Spode works: It arrived via the surfaces I encountered as I walked and photographed, through ongoing dialogue with my fellow researchers and via conversations with those who visited the



Figure 9. Joanne Lee, from *In the midst of England*, 2018.  
Photo: Joanne Lee.



Figure 8. Joanne Lee, from *In the midst of England*, 2018.  
Photo: Joanne Lee.



series of exhibitions where works ‘trespassed’ upon one another to generate new resonance.

As a researcher, I do not seek definitive conclusions: The projects in which I engage are a means to go on, a way of generating the energy to keep thinking in motion through the messy territory of practice. Elsewhere, I have discussed research in terms of not staying put and crossing borders, of meandering and getting side-tracked, of oscillating and shimmering between positions (Lee, 2017), and it strikes me that this going between is also figured in the back stitch methodology. As I work, I do not follow a straightforward path, but repeatedly loop back on myself, loop out into the city, loop around and into the ideas of my fellow researchers.

### Danica Maier

The continual looping back, both literally and metaphorically, to the insolvent Spode factory forms the basis of my artistic research, encompassing a lush and diverse network of subjects that inform the artworks. Initial lines of interest have continued to grow, branching out into an ever-widening rhizome: histories, narratives, and autobiography; ornamentation and the decorative object; blurred boundaries and pluralities; perspective shifts; material and process exploration.

Initially, the Spode site offered a rich ground filled with left-over detritus ranging from historical molds to office paperwork. The unused transfer decals engrossed me, boxes filled with stacks of ornamentation ready for ceramic dishware that will never be. Playing with notions of macro and micro, details were hidden and revealed as a reinterpreting of appropriated materiality was explored. These early investigations fell within the umbrella title *Plinths and Frames*, playing with blurring boundaries between the intended focus and structures of display. Presented as part of the *British Ceramics Biennale* (2013) exhibition *Topographies of the Obsolete: Vociferous Void*, these artworks prompted a reconsideration of initial expectations and viewpoints. Through time and attention, hidden Spode animal figurines were revealed, connected decorative details interlocked with disparate yet playful networks of ornamentation, and titling alluded to changes of meaning and understanding.

As Returns developed and looped away from the Spode site, the city of Stoke-on-Trent became the location for foraging discarded, unloved, or abandoned ceramic objects in the Aladdin’s cave of second-hand shops. The decorated domestic ceramic object(s) continued to hold the forefront of my interest, with material starting points and appropriated objects having been found, though not always made, in Stoke-on-Trent. In my research, the meeting, blurring, and intermingling of boundaries

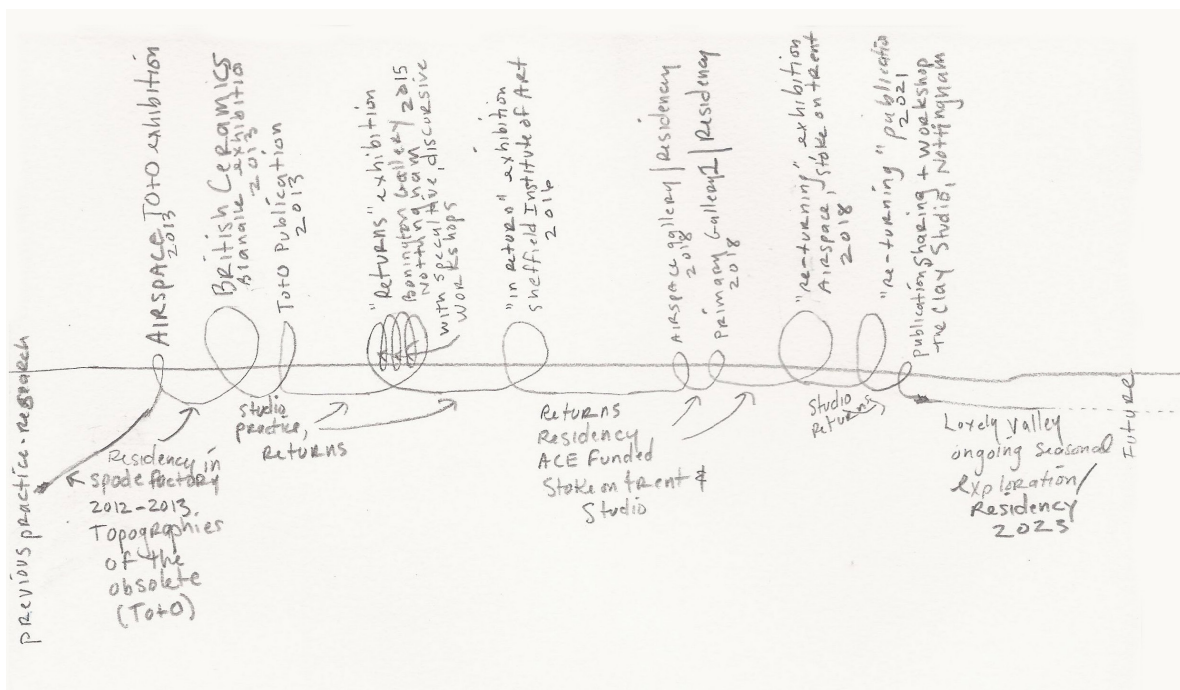


Figure 10. Danica Maier’s back stitch diagram, 2023.



Figure 11. Danica Maier, *Looking the Wrong Way with detail*, 2013. Photo: Danica Maier.

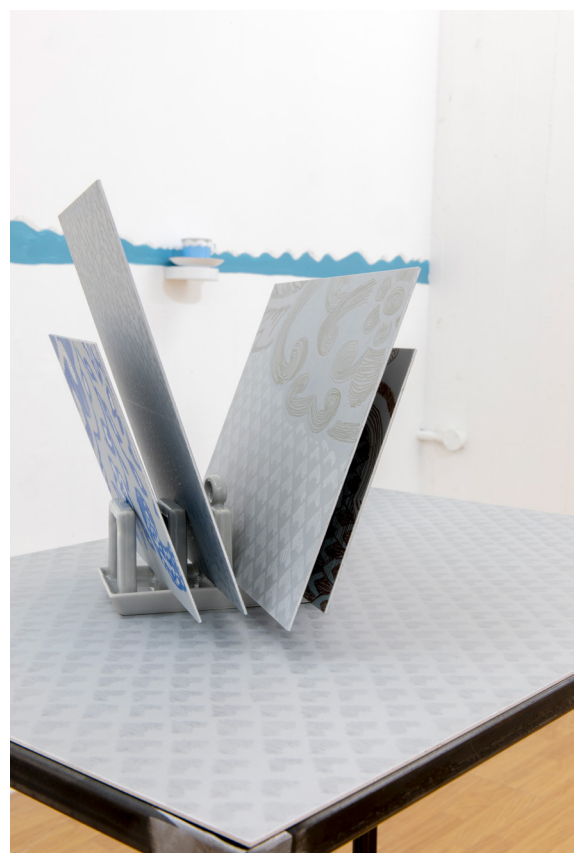


Figure 12. Danica Maier, *Nesting: Milker with Tit Bit (behind)*, 2018. Photo: Glen Stoker.

has been significant, exploring where the work begins and ends, what the structure (plinth/frame) is, and what is the art object. Craft and fine art adjoin, sharing a common plinth: A drawing becomes a table for a tea set and patterns spill from ceramic teacups onto the wall, the highly ornate contrasts its functional purpose (see the work *Tit Bit* in Figure 12). The journey of the back stitch is the thread that holds the related research together.

Within Returns, Spode has been the ongoing anchor for a line of exploration for the future, I am ready to cut the old and connect a new thread. I am curious to explore what will happen with a new thread of exploration while maintaining a connected trace to the origin point. As Returns (re)starts again in a new place, a process of open, explorative experimentation is needed, with a clear consideration and reflection on the core of my working process(s) through the connected line of the back stitch. I allow new sites to resonate and impact on me, while enacting a kind of slow filter: As in an archaeological dig, what is shifted through and what remains in the sieve? Which nuggets are productive starting points, and which will be explored and developed? Time will (re-)tell.

## Christine Stevens

My point of origin was taking part as a student in an international residency in an abandoned ceramics factory. The site was full of the detritus of three hundred years of the interface between the human and material worlds organized around clay deposits

and coal seams, domestic lives, waged labor, waterways, and international trade.

I took an unfinished object from the factory and reproduced the shape, making my own mold, casting multiples in a parody of obsolete industrial processes. Pouring, setting, birthing from the womb-mold, I touched these new entities and the soft material responded, touching me back, revealing the impact of my agency. There were limits and consequences; ruptures and attempted repairs and, if I persisted, total collapse.

Learning from this experience, working with clay has become for me a way of exploring interfaces between organism and environment. In my trans-disciplinary practice as artist and Gestalt psychotherapist, clay is a way of meeting at the contact boundary, becoming open to knowing through touch before thought becomes language. In my work as a trainer and supervisor of psychotherapists, clay enables people to get in touch with the immediacy of their present experience, rather than remaining stuck in explanations. Clay is a therapeutic assistant, helping people to get in touch with their feelings, even if they cannot describe them. Working as an artist with community groups, clay evokes personal history, a vehicle for storytelling, a wordless method for in-depth communication. In its deceptive simplicity, it becomes the grounds for playfulness, invention, and discovery. It becomes a container for objects, for memory, for feelings.

In the work leading to the *Asylum* sculpture in Liverpool, refugee women and their children made

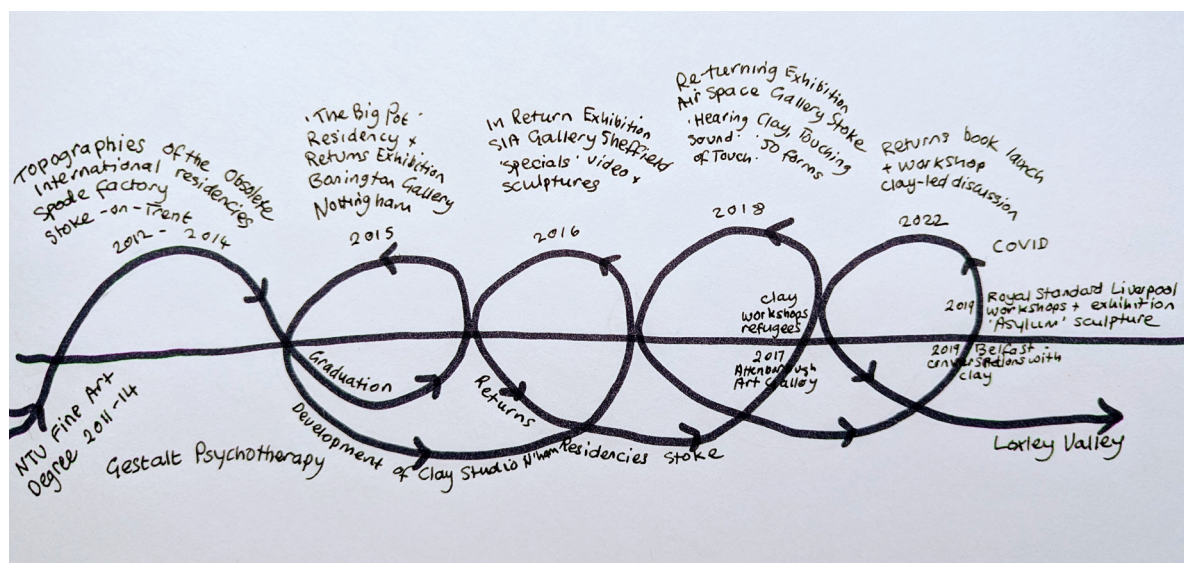


Figure 13. Christine Stevens' back stitch diagram, 2023.

clay models relating to their daily lives as they talked about their experiences. In the gallery these works were held within a life-sized sealed clay vessel with viewing holes.

Andrew Brown and I worked with asylum-seekers and refugees using clay as a way of telling stories about familiar objects from their countries of origin. Stories in their mother-tongues were collected in the *Whispering Pot* as sound recordings. In the exhibition, the qualities of the sound from the pot and the display of the models on the gallery shelf were evocative of the specificity and dislocation of the migration experience.

The back stitch methodology is a way of re-engaging, reassessing, and realizing. The connecting thread is the (re)visiting of sites of material interest to which we respond individually and collaboratively. Sometimes our investigations involve participatory events organized with others. Our practices become entangled, at times unraveled. There are loose ends, tie-ins, and knots. Our publication and public exhibitions involve deliberate acts of trespass. The methodology provides a coherent frame: the common point of origin, the identification of sites of material interest, and the process of (re)visiting experimentally. In this way, the integrity of individual practice enquiry is preserved in the under-thread. The emergence to the surface provides opportunities to explore the effects of re-connection and for reflecting on similarities and differences.

The texture of my back stitched thread over this period has been informed by my experience of art school as a mature student, finding my own way as an independent artist, developing a clay-based studio practice within an artist-led group at Primary, Nottingham. The back stitch methodology enables me to hold art and psychotherapy in an enquiry that is fed by both disciplines but does not sit discretely in either.

## Conclusion

In this decade-long collaborative research project, the four group members have pursued diverse practices and interests using a back stitch methodology. This project has made clear how much of the momentum needed for artistic research which takes place out of sight and through a returning to ideas that occurs via recurrent acts of reflection, each from a slightly different position. In research terms,



Figure 14. Christine Stevens, *Entity*, 2014.  
Photo: Christine Stevens.



Figure 15. Christine Stevens, *Asylum* (detail of work in progress), 2019. Photo: Christine Stevens.

the back stitch methodology accords equal importance to the moments hidden beneath as to those of public presentation, and it recognizes the attention to “the ways of doing and making that emerge from a reverse glance”. By employing the knowledge and experience, questioning, and uncertainty to be gained from repeatedly going back *and* yet starting anew, when we return to take another look, it is always from a different point, so the threads can emerge differently each time and change what it will be possible to understand. Research ideas and practice purposefully meander.

The different types of reflection and dialogue—individually and together, in private and in public, with one another and with the others encountered enroute have generated multiple and originally unanticipated lines of inquiry. When the Returns research began in the unique context of the Spode ceramics factory and its surroundings, there was no explicit intention to draw out its various threads to connect further post-industrial sites, wider ideas of home and belonging or any of the other matters which have emerged to preoccupy the group. Of course, as Rachel Jones makes clear in her contribution to the book *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, to “work without knowing where one is going or might end up is a condition of creation” (Jones, 2013, p. 16). But like Jones, this not yet knowing is a state the Returns group has sought to sustain since it allows artistic researchers to remain “open to the strange in its strangeness” rather than too quickly reducing the unknown to the known and the strange to the familiar (Jones, 2013, p. 16). Rebecca Fortnum, in her Preface to the same book,

notes how artists especially value “the liminal space where not knowing is sought, explored and savoured” (Fortnum, 2013, p. 7), and Macleod and Holdridge have asked if art “offers a potent space for unknowing and [...] this might be useful to advanced thought?” (Macleod & Holdridge, 2013, p. 91). The Returns researchers have found that the practice of a back stitch methodology has been essential for staying with the uncertainties of contemporary place, for recognizing its rising and dissipating tensions, its patterns, and entanglements, as they emerge across time, and for tying in the multiple threads of collaborative inquiry.

Stefan Collini has argued against the idea of knowledge as an accumulated stock and for a space in which researchers are “nurturing, animating, revising and extending our understanding”, rather than delivering definitive findings (Collini, 1999, p. 238). As the back stitch repeatedly turns away and beneath, it allows the artistic researchers time to stay with the nuances and complexities of what we



Figure 16. Christine Stevens & Andrew Brown, *Touching clay, hearing sound workshop*, 2018.  
Photo: Christine Stevens.

have encountered, and to bring into proximity our individual and collective understandings. The back stitch offers an implicit epistemological critique, its going away and back beneath having the effect of slowing coming to a final conclusion: The back stitch creates a means of remaining in the state of not yet definitively knowing, keeping our thinking in motion. Macleod and Holdridge have proposed that,

Research as art does not close down thought; thought through art opens non-predictive spaces for further thought because the artwork is still tantalizingly present and its presence hits against any potential closure in the summaries or conclusions prescribed by research cultures for [...] written texts. (Macleod & Holdridge, 2013, p. 91)

In the increasingly corporatized contexts of academic research, to spend time “conversing with”, “contemplating”, and “in joyful pursuit of”, as Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber put it in their manifesto for *The Slow Professor*, is to take a stance against output driven findings, to which we are too quickly hastened by a drive to publish or perish (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 57). The back stitching artistic research shifts the current model of a commoditized, entrepreneurial academy valuing individuals to a more collective, creative form of scholarship. It is a way of pursuing Anna Tsing’s suggestion for the need to design “playgroups and collaborative clusters: not congeries of individuals calculating costs and benefits” so that ‘scholarship [...] emerges through its collaborations’ (Tsing, 2021, p. 285).

As we reach the conclusion of this article, it is fitting that the back stitch is generating new momentum: The four artistic researchers have just joined a new thread to the decade-long investigation. Tethering our collaborative independent investigations of post-industrial contexts to another anchor point, we are beginning a further stitched loop back beneath the cloth. A former brickworks site in the north of Sheffield, derelict for almost forty years, forms the basis for current inquiry and dialogue. This place, in a valley whose waterpower, coal, and iron reserves placed it at the heart of the first industrial revolution, brings opportunities to examine a variety of complex and contradictory materials and practices. Enormous sheds, some still housing their conveyor line brick kilns, now form a site for illegal raves and graffiti, as well as the dumping of cannabis-growing operations or household and building

waste. At the same time, the built environment and wider site shelters bat colonies, barn owls and badgers, forests of saplings erupt from undisturbed leaf litter and almost-meadows of ox-eye daisies flourish amidst cracked concrete. Here again, our research thread is beginning to figure the critical rhizomes of the natural-cultural, of human lives and post-industry, of aesthetic encounter and sensory intensity, of order and entropy, and of the potential for returning creatively and critically to discarded matter and the left-behind, all the time informed by the previous investigative practices we have developed.

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## Endnotes

- 1** The University of Bergen website presents four downloadable publications on the project <https://kmd.uib.no/no/forskning/prosjekter/topographies-of-the-obsolete>