



STATE OF CERAMICS | October 28, 2023

Rosa Glaessner Novak

Architectural Ceramics:

Finding Solidarity in the Shape of a Roof Tile

Portland, OR

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IN ATTENDANCE: Rosa Glaessner Novak, Nicole Seisler, Al Oliva, Emma Sher, Katrina Atkin, Lam Ho, Sara Jeffries, Ariel Gout, Samantha Albert, Sonya Bogdanova, E. Saffronia Downing, Sunh Lee, Jeana Blackert, Kate Roberts, Olga Olivares, Brendan Page, Teal Stannard, Sam Dodd, Zena Segre, Ella Scudder-Davis, Michelle Montjoy, Ec Comstock, Jasmine Baetz, Nancy Selvin, Alexis C. Brunkow, Kushala Vora, Radhika Vaidyanathan, Natalia Arbelaez, Delia Pelli-Walbert, Danielle Callahan, Garima Tripathi, Ashwini Bhat, Evgenia Ozerova, Alice Zerini, Corwyn Lund, Ruth Dittmar.

QUESTIONS FROM ROSA:

1. What would it mean to consider the makers of architectural ceramics—of tileries, brickyards and ceramic factories—as a part of our history and subjectivity as artists working in clay?
2. In terms of shaping our present, can we start to build back a solidarity across this division of labor—a solidarity that has been historically broken?
3. I wonder if looking to hand labor does something for us in terms of rebuilding this solidarity? If we find a common root of the labor of artists working in clay and the labor of ceramic factory workers in the hand processes of, for example, Loja's roof tile makers, what can looking to this hand production do in terms of rebuilding, or unearthing, a lost solidarity?
4. What can we learn from architectural workers seeing themselves as workers, unionizing, and undergoing collective action as workers—organizing themselves in solidarity with one another and with the workers of the building site? Can we envision what a “ceramics lobby” would look like?
5. But likewise, what about ceramics is different from architecture? Where architects and building workers work on the same projects, their labor is not the same kind of labor but ours is. Does the imprint of workers' bodies on clay leave more room, then, to locate solidarity in a more concrete material connection? In the way we would want to drag our fingertips down a slab? Or in the curve of each of our hands and the curve of every roof tile?

**INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT FROM ROSA GLAESSNER NOVAK
(SUMMARIZED BY PARTICIPANT AL OLIVA):**



As part of the *Architectural Ceramics* series Rosa Glaessner Novak presented her research *Every Roof Tile*. To set the stage Rosa introduced the artist space *Mutual Stores*, which she co-founded in 2017 with Brendan Page and Kate Pruitt. The artist space (which closed in 2019) consisted of 7 studio spaces, a project space, and a casual artists-in-residence program. One day artist Tracy Ren was working at *Mutual Stores* when a roof tile cracked and fell off the roof onto the outdoor deck. Rosa and Tracy examined this fragment together and Tracy shared an anecdote with Rosa that “at one time every roof tile was shaped to fit the shape of the hand of the worker who made it.” Rosa then thought about the small row of roof tiles above them as a collection of ceramic workers, each tile retaining traces of the individual who made it.

Since hearing this anecdote, Rosa has investigated how the built environment can reflect and record individual workers’ bodies, and specifically in the case of the roof tile, the curvature of the workers’ bodies. She has researched this over the last few years turning to different historical records in order to help uncover stories and visualize the production and processes of roof tile across space and time. A number of photographs found during this research showcase tile workers handling roof tiles in all stages of their production from San Fernando and Reseda, California to Loja, Spain and Zoar, Ohio. As part of this collection of research we see wetter clay in a trapezoidal wooden mold, and more highly mechanized and coordinated processes with different conveyor belts and trucks. Despite these advancements there is still a distinct “moment of familiar touch” that drew Rosa into all these photos in particular. During the presentation Rosa noted that tile workers are often absent from these historical records and are even reduced to their roles as “molders” in books like *Geological Survey of Ohio: The Manufacture of Roofing Tiles Fourth Series* written in 1910.



Rosa concludes by expressing that a division exists that is rarely addressed but can start to be traced through these photographs – a long rupture that is fundamentally based in the expropriation of the means of production from artisan laborers working in clay, and the emergence of the ceramic factory worker. Opposite that new figure of the factory worker another figure emerges that has come to take up the space of “modern ceramics history”: the artist, here encompassing both the artist-potter and the artist working in clay.

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION (WRITTEN BY PARTICIPANT AL OLIVA):

Rosa posed the following question to participants: Can we define the division of labor in ceramics, both from historical narratives and from our personal experiences? Many of us who work in clay have straddled social positions and roles within divisions of labor. Putting these divisions into words as a group is intended to help us locate where we are lacking in solidarity and how we could build more equitably.

Kohler (the residency and factory in Wisconsin), was mentioned in response to this question as an example of how divisions of labor are manifested. A temporary wall is used to literally divide the space – an artist works across the hall from the workers manufacturing toilets and sinks. The divisions run deeper when we think about the artist in this setting having space to themselves and being encouraged to think through clay in a very different way from those across the hall in service of making a very different kind of object. Still, at the end of the day the artist’s work goes into the kiln alongside the toilets and sinks.

Participants reflected on a number of residency programs that are seemingly complicit in these divisions of labor and noted how often artists take part in appropriating cultural methodologies for personal projects that are then taken elsewhere, to an exhibition setting for example. Here, participants started to consider one worker (the artist) participating in the exploitation of another (the local craftsperson/laborer). This brought up a series of questions: How can artists in these mediating positions not only allude to solidarity but offer (bigger and more powerful) seeds and form a stronger connective tissue? When and where do we consider ourselves workers? Is this an effect of when we consider ourselves in control of labor vs not?

In response to these questions the conversation turned to considering what we share in common. Shared needs, advantages, skills, knowledge, and shared risk were addressed in order to think through tensions and overlaps in an otherwise divided labor system. At different moments participants suggested that we do not necessarily have to be in community with each other to be in solidarity with each other. That said, the “1% for the arts” [public program that requires 1% of construction costs of new buildings be spent upon public art in or around that new building] served as an example where belonging to the same community can complicate these divisions productively, allowing for people to work more horizontally. Through these programs we see artists and designers aligned with builders, and the larger picture of the division of labor starts to dissolve. Exploitation can or does still exist in this work, but being relegated to a fixed repetitive task with a lack of individual agency does not define a person’s role.

The conversation concluded by thinking through why serving as an artist assistant (which can be argued as a laborer in many ways) might not feel like other production roles. Does a certain sense of individual agency counterbalance a broader lack of autonomy? An artist’s assistant can often identify themselves through their personal mark on a finished piece. If we leave space for choice and creativity for laborers what can happen? Conversely, what happens when an individual feels the need to assert themselves or claim some kind of territory when something is unrecognized about their individual work? Do people even desire solidarity, are we idealizing that this is even possible? Are there political actions that can make solidarity a reality?