

Ewa Sadowska: Claywork
by Kendra Place

Abstract:

The writer discusses the theme of labour in the process-based and performative ceramics work of Warsaw-based artist Ewa Sadowska, with reference to contexts of neoliberal austerity.

If within a neoliberal capitalist economy we are expected to quantify art's value on the basis of its proximity to or distance from 'real' work, or to justify it on the basis of the work that has or has not gone into making it, art might seem inherently, industrially, or historically to betray a work ethic or (on the other hand?) a solidarity with workers. Perhaps the artist is forever indulging in romantic escapism, competing for cultural capital, aligning with the elite, or erasing labour in the form of the so-called readymade. Even cultural workers, such as Ewa Sadowsky and myself, might empathize with the prevalent attitude that directs suspicion toward an artist who thematizes labour. Sadowska's artwork is not convincing us of her commitments one way or another, and yet the question of commitment (to work or to art) motivates her practice; this aesthetic ambivalence constitutes its solidarity-value.

Sadowska often returns to ceramics, seeming to favour clay specifically for its capacity to pose questions about labour. She engages different techniques and materials in terms of craft traditions as well as dematerialized Conceptual process while retaining some skepticism for current rematerializations that would reconcile craft and concept: product-teleology can persist even in search of artisanal things, where an emphasis on making, usefulness, and physicality can sometimes be a reactionary and ablist abandonment of other forms of labour, supposedly immaterial.

Sadowska intervenes by literalizing work in the form of a diagrammatic sculpture, a project somewhat exemplary of her concerns: a technician (Richard Noury, also an artist) has drilled a hole into a rock from which a metal arrow arches outward, pointing elsewhere. This sculpture instructs or demonstrates (as diagrams and conceptual art will do) that to work is to move something — an object, paper, words, people, ideas — from one location to another. The rock is invested with potential value; it is targetted for surplus extraction or intransigent, insubordinate, depressed, or on strike. Through Sadowska's practice, work itself becomes the concept and the process, whether the artist is pretending to relax, performatively associating herself with someone else's (art)work, or crafting vases.

The artist centres a self-reflexivity that extends to her relationships — lovers, family, friends, colleagues, or her Polish culture — less an example of Relational Aesthetics than an intersubjective, phenomenological approach and a critique of authorial genius that find an analogy, perhaps somewhat brutal, in processes of casting and molding. With *Nepotism* (2017), for example, Sadowska has decided that she will display a cast of her teeth as art. Rather than claiming the plaster jaw as a found object, she reveals that the dentist is in fact her brother, the cast made by his assistants; her sister is an art instructor associated with the exhibiting gallery. While this project evokes certain privileges, it also offers a satirizing honesty and self-awareness, the humour of which is quickly evacuated when we consider the inaccessibility of both dental or health benefits and paid

art opportunities that pervade the structures of her insular field, indifferent as it is to her relatively weak, uncanny connections. The teeth are, after all, her own.

If the artist as worker would prefer not to be alienated from what she makes nor reified for the sake of greed, she is nonetheless embracing poor technique, accident, and being stuck, bored, lazy, ill, injured, or distracted at certain stages of manufacturing. Sadowska interrupts the production process, avoiding and introducing particular challenges to convey something other than a dish, such as the two small spaces defined by her nose-as-mold (*The insides of my nose* (2017)). The humour generated by her process conjures a Chaplin-esque sense of absurdity — relatable rather than condescending or ironic. In redirecting the purpose of ceramics, effective as vessels or decor, she honours the vulnerability of bodies, whether human or clay — their susceptibility to break or to stop breathing forever. With *1 Impasse Duplex* (2017), she repeats a process, emulating mass production to create a series of porcelain keys that cannot work on the very basis of their materiality. Molded from the key to an apartment she once rented and to which she no longer has access, the multiples are a relic of her past life and a foil to the *roman à clef*.

Finding a title in the French homonym for mud and vase, for *La vase (Ideal Work)* (2017) Sadowska structured her time at a two-month art residency as a performance. She gathered and prepared clay from the shores of the St Lawrence River. Everyday she spent a number of random or scheduled hours preparing and throwing the clay, training herself to make different vase forms with the wheel and invoking her possible future as a ceramicist by trade. As a self-employed freelancer, she conforms to a work schedule and productivity level while also taking time for leisure, rest, and counter-productivity, all for which, she has decided, neither she nor the vases will be fired (a process which would permanently alter the constitution of the material): at the end of the residency, she and Noury transported the more-or-less well-made vases back to the shore, where the tide dissolved their forms and began returning the clay to the river bank, thus concluding the performance with only documentation left to show. As mud on the shore, perhaps the vases are now serving their purpose.

As states obliterate the “public realm” or privatize Indigenous lands, promoting ideologies of choice while eroding social services under the abstracted guise of market freedom, thus displacing responsibilities for human well-being onto every single person fantasized as a self-sufficient, unbreakable individual — a molded cast form to which few have access, Sadowska’s claywork addresses a subjective experience of austerity regimes. As a register of the international meaning or nonsense of artwork in these times, questioning who works and who creates, her practice could be associated with those of Claire Fontaine and Artivistic. Claire Fontaine performs the artist as readymade, materializing as neon or brick to struggle sincerely through the tyranny of the commodity form and theorizing a human strike, while Artivistic collectively performs an antidote (their notion of postlife) to the intersecting oppressions experienced by the cultural precariat. Sadowska’s performative sculpture, insofar as its effect might undermine those solidarities preserved only for Eurocentrism, compels us to ask how different and similar vulnerabilities could be a strong basis for association, as borrowed mud or a broken vase become an index of shared desire to infuse life into precarious life through claywork.

Writer bio and acknowledgment:

Kendra Place is a writer and artist based in Tio'tia:ke (Montréal). She would like thank the team at Est-Nord-Est, Résidence d'artistes and the community of St Jean Port Joli, QC, for supporting this research through a 2017 summer residency.