



STATE OF CERAMICS

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Architectural Ceramics: Finding Solidarity in the Shape of a Roof Tile

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Topic

Ceramic artists and workers at ceramic manufacturing sites, despite obvious overlaps, have long been considered--by themselves and others--as fundamentally separate. In this State of Ceramics, we explore what it could mean to form solidarity across this divide by better understanding how “artists” and “workers” are connected through the material of clay, and particularly through the presence of ceramics in architecture.

The roof tile—a ceramic building material that references the human body (once made on the knee, across the thigh, or perhaps in the shape of the crafting hand?)—renders generations of labor legible in the built environment. Might the ceramic-built environment also preserve clues about our commonality or suggest paths to a future of solidarity? Can we find our shared experience or shared struggles in the curvature of a roof tile?

As part of this series about “Architectural Ceramics,” we will also consider the trajectory of labor organization in the fields of architecture and ceramics. Some architects have come to understand themselves as workers, attending to their own historical division from construction workers, and have begun, in recent years, to organize accordingly. Could artists and makers working in clay do the same?

Questions

Ceramics, art and labor

- Do we see our art practices/ceramics practices as work? As labor?
- How do we understand our genealogies within histories of ceramic production? Where does that genealogy point back to artists working in clay? To potters? To industrial ceramics workers? To others, maybe, too?

- In the introduction to his book, [Art and Labour](#), Dave Beech draws out two recent strains of the critique of labor in art—the first, the fight for art labor to be waged labor, and the second, the anti-work movement and its foundational relationship to art. Beech proposes that these strains of politics can be framed by an understanding of art as in a dialectical relation with labor—as emerging with and against labor. What do we think of this idea? Could it help us reckon with complicated feelings about art, work, and labor?

Solidarity and friendship

- What is solidarity? How does it operate over space and time?
- What is friendship? In what ways can friendship be political?
- In what ways are solidarity and friendship the same and different? How are they reliant on one another? And in what ways do they serve conflicting purposes?

Roof tile and the labor of its production

- What is our collective knowledge about the ways roof tile has been made over time? What do we know about the workers who made (and continue to make) roof tiles in different production environments, and in different times and places in the world? Where and from whom did we each learn about this?
- In broader terms, in what forms have knowledge about the labor and processes of roof tile making entered the historical record?

Organizing, and learning from architecture

- Looking at the recent organizing work of the Architecture Lobby and WBYA? as a model, what possibilities do we see for solidarity across artists working in clay, potters, and the workers of the ceramics industry?
- What political possibilities lie in the practice of reading the built environment for labor histories (ceramic and otherwise)?
- What first steps could we take toward solidarity organizing in ceramics? What futures do we envision this might lead to?

Readings and Selected Quotes

Gary Wilder, "[Solidarity](#)," in *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (2022)

"Solidarity is never a given. In contrast to how it is understood by Durkheimian sociology and certain currents of orthodox Marxism, solidarity is a political act, not a social fact. It does not flow naturally from primordial social groupings (whether figured as kinship, community, ethnicity, nationality, or class). Nor should it be conflated with the fiction of self-interested individuals entering social compacts to guarantee security and maximize material welfare. Solidarity presupposes and produces social subjects. Social groups are as much the effect of solidarity as its source. The concept points beyond the conventional opposition between natural communities (supposed to

precede politics) and transhistorical individuals (supposed to precede society). *Solidarity is a practice, not a sentiment*. The different motives that fuel solidarity practices are less important than the political, social, and ethical work that they pursue. Solidarity requires risk. In contrast to feelings of compassion or acts of charity from a safe distance, solidarity is a standing-with where something is at stake. It means renouncing safety and sharing risk, putting oneself on the line by propelling oneself over the line that is supposed to mark an outside. Relations of solidarity are forged in shared or common struggle. *Solidarity starts from entanglement*. The non-indifferent commitment to “stand with” flows from the fact of mutual implication, from actors’ recognition that they are already involved in each other’s situations, that they share a common world, and their future prospects are somehow bound together.” (118-119)

Hannah Arendt, “[The Public and the Private Realm](#),” in *The Human Condition* (1958)

“[T]he term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.” (52)

From Hannah Arendt, in a letter to her friend Gerhard Scholem on July 20, 1963:
“I have never in my life “loved” some nation or collective—not the German, French, or American nation, or the working class, or whatever else there might be in this price range of loyalties. The fact is that I love only my friends and am quite incapable of any other sort of love.”

Dave Beech, [Art and Labour: On the Hostility to Handicraft, Aesthetic Labour and the Politics of Work in Art](#) (2020)

“The qualities of art in general correspond to the imputed qualities of a particular type of producer – the artist. While prior to the eighteenth century, there was no such thing as artistic labour as such, only the specific skills of painting, carving, printing, drawing and so on, by the beginning of the nineteenth century the producer of art was no longer conceived of as a worker at all but as a special kind of subject. The artist comes to exemplify the fulfilment of a certain conception of the subject because he – rarely she – is increasingly understood during the eighteenth century to be engaged in artistic labour in general rather than one of the various Fine Arts. The disciplines of painting, sculpture, music and poetry continue to structure art in general but practitioners of each discipline now consider themselves to be artists rather than painters, sculptors,

musicians or poets. The difference between painting (or sculpting or composing) as an art and painting (or sculpting or composing) as art is codified in the concept of the artist, as distinct from the artisan, through a formulation of the labour of the production of art as an emblem of freedom. Artistic labour, or the labour of producing art in general rather than one of the several specific arts, is initially conceived of as an eruption of the individual subject through the crust of convention, tradition, academia, mastery and market demand. The artist is not modelled on conceptions of work but character. The escalation and abstraction necessary for the transition from questions of handicraft to questions of subjecthood itself reaches its peak in the notion of the genius but it is not eliminated by talking about the artist or the artist as producer instead." (49-50)

Meyer Schapiro, "[Public Use of Art](#)," *Art Front* 2, no. 10 (November 1936)

"It is the common sentiment that with the support of the organized working class [the New Deal arts projects] can be maintained. The art projects are parts of a larger government program which embraces many groups of workers, and the artists as workers can rely on the support of their fellow-workers, who will second their demands. But the interests of artists and industrial workers are not identical in this matter today.... The possibility of working class support depends on the recognition by the workers that this program of art has a real value for them. It depends further on a solidarity of artists and workers expressed in common economic and political demands. We can learn from the example of the architects. It is also in the interest of the architects to demand permanent government employment. But how can the government employ them? Chiefly by setting up permanent national housing projects, and projects for schools, hospitals, and places of recreation. Now such projects, if designed to reach the workers, will have the support not only of the building workers, but of all workers, since they are poorly housed, and feel the urgent need of such construction. The workers will therefore support the architects in their fight, since the demands of the architects are also important demands of the workers." (4)

Sérgio Ferro, [Concrete as Weapon](#) (1980/2018)

"To the early advocates of concrete, its appeal was that it offered an alternative to current methods of construction, and in the context of 19th century Britain, this 'alternative' meant something more radical than simply the deskilling of the existing trades. Concrete offered a chance to bypass the traditional trades altogether, to break their monopoly over construction, by making it possible to build without any need for them at all. Even more than iron, this artificial material requires calculation, precise technical details, exact quantification of components, and so on. It implies complex knowledge that has little relation to the empirical know-how and approximate methods of masons and carpenters; at least this is what experts say (although until 1906 'very few inventions sought to legitimize themselves by means of calculus or mathematical formula'). Such instruments were inevitably in the hands of engineers and technicians, who, following the customs of the industrial management that had by then invaded

every corner of society, were not willing to disclose them to the workers. 'No other means of construction allowed such a satisfactory separation of the mental from the manual elements of labour.' The weapon of workers' know-how gave way to the weapon of presumed prescriptive knowledge. A chiasmus: at the construction site the know-how declines, resulting in deskilling and deeper subordination of the workforce; knowing emigrates, distancing itself more and more from doing, and draws more power and aura into capital.... Little by little, wood and stone left the construction site along with traditionally trained carpenters and masons—hindrances to the new kind of domination—until a tacit prohibition of these materials came to prevail during the first period of modernism. They would no longer be the pivots of construction: the growing hegemony of industrial capital and its management put an end to a tradition of several centuries." (19-20)

María González Pendás, "[Fifty Cents a Foot, 14,500 Buckets: Concrete Numbers and the Illusory Shells of Mexican Economy](#)," *Grey Room* 71 (Spring 2018)

"The shells themselves, their refined abstraction notwithstanding, are where one can trace the workers' ghostly presence. For their surfaces hold the clues of the dynamics of labor and bodily technologies that provided the architecture with its surplus value. Workers marked the shells in at least three distinct ways. One pertains to the precise dimensions of the shells. As demonstrated in the construction of the Palmira Church, the specifics of the form were tested and determined on-site and by the workers. That is, the hypar was determined as much by the contextual conditions and the limits of construction as by the universal laws of geometry. The second signifier, a literal imprint of labor can be found on the inside surface of the concrete, where traces of manual labor remain on the bare surface. There one reads the exact size and disposition of the wooden planks of the formwork and feels their materiality through a textural effect that grounds the shell within the work of nailing the wood and pouring the *revoltura*. Finally, workers left tangible marks of the arduousness of their labor on the outside of the shells, specifically via the imperfections to the surface where one can still locate the wooden ladders they used to travel up and down the shell carrying buckets of cement, or the steel anchors around the edge on the Palmira Chapel from which they hung." (33)

Edward S. Morse, [On the Older Forms of Terra-Cotta Roofing Tiles](#) (1892)

"A few brief notes, concerning the making of tiles, are here appended to call attention to the simple appliances and the rude character of the labor employed in the manufacture, in the hopes of encouraging the industry. If we have brick-kilns everywhere we should be able to sustain tileries also.... Mr. Howard Walker informed me that in France he had seen a tiler at work first shaping a flat piece of clay into the proper dimensions and then bending it over the upper part of his leg, at the same time pushing up a nib of clay at the head of the tile with his thumb." (68)

Wolsey Garnet Worcester, *The Manufacture of Roofing Tiles* (Ohio, 1910)

"The tiles were all hand made ; the clay was dug in the nearby fields, hauled to the tile yards by oxen, dumped into soakpits, where water was added and the clay allowed to stand till soft. After soaking for a day and night, men tramped the clay with their bare feet until it was properly kneaded or pugged. It was then covered over with straw, weighted with rails or boards, thus keeping the clay plastic until needed by the molders. It was then spaded out , and carried by hand to the small workbenches of the molders. Wooden molds were used, which were previously wet and then sprinkled with sand. The molder first took up a lump of clay, which he rolled into a long tapered roll, similar in shape to a loaf of rye bread. This roll of clay was then thrown or slammed forcibly into the center of the mold, and the molder, using his forearm and hand, would hammer or manipulate the clay until it completely filled the mold. The excess clay was then scraped off with a straight edged stick. Ordinarily the tile would have been considered complete at this point, but by observing the tiles shown in the illustrations, it can be seen that their faces have been grooved with gutters, or lines running lengthwise of the tile. These grooves were produced by the fingers of the workmen, each finishing his tile with lines that seemed most appropriate to him." (15-16)

The Architecture Lobby, *Asymmetric Labors: The Economy of Architecture in Theory and Practice* (2016)

"Architectural history is traditionally constructed around narratives of dominant styles, important architects-authors, and canonical buildings. While in recent years there have been attempts to go beyond these narratives, the current pedagogy of architecture is deeply influenced by the notion that the production of architecture can be narrowed to the "architect + client = building" formula. What is missing in this representation of architecture is the whole complex that binds together builders, designers, social institutions, the organization of the profession, and the financial capital that is necessary to build architecture. If we take in account this complex, we realise how even strictly 'disciplinary' issues such as drawing, design composition, craftsmanship, are far from being the 'autonomous' domain of the architect. These themes have emerged in response to specific moments of the organization of labour in architecture. For example, the importance of drawing as the main architect's medium can be understood as a consequence of the division of labour that has split into two separate professional domains: builders and architects. While the former build, the latter draw... A close reading of architecture as form would allow us to understand how inventions such as the open plan, the use of concrete, and the reform of domestic space are also the result of those who were supposed to inhabit and live in those spaces—those who were, in their daily practices, resistant to such governance and forced public and private institutions to introduce new modes of production and reproduction. Such history would demand to go not beyond, but within architecture itself. I believe that by getting deep into architectural form and its history and theory, we can use architecture as one of the most tangible traces of how the history of labour and the conflicts that have arisen from its

exploitation by capital has defined the world in which we live. What I propose here is not a vision of architecture meant to frustrate the architect as a 'creator' and the possibility of his/her autonomy from the forces that have shaped our profession. The program briefly outlined above is intended as a possibility to better situate the architect's struggle for autonomy within a more collective struggle shared by all those involved in the labour of architecture." (Pier Vittorio Aureli, "History, Architecture and Labour: A Program for Research", 158-161)

"How, then, might we bridge this perceived split between the discipline of architecture and the global systems that shape the day-to-day conditions of the construction site? Over the past few years, Who Builds Your Architecture? has organized workshops and public forums, taken part in panels and lectures, developed visualizations and maps, and written essays to probe and understand a complex set of relationships of architects and architecture in the global construction industry. WBYA? has examined links between the labor of architects, contractors, subcontractors and construction workers in the context of the processes of building within the global supply chains of the construction industry. Forums such as biennials and publications have provided a platform for our research. These spaces have helped to advance the work, but have also made us aware of the need to initiate wider dialogue about the role of labor in architecture in schools, in architectural offices, and on construction sites. In what type of space might we imagine a conversation taking place between an architect, construction manager, construction worker, and historian? Would the conversation take place in an office, or a school, or an installation, or on a construction site? What sort of questions would be raised? And how could one conversation lead to other conversations that begin to make connections and transform hierarchies to become part of a collaborative process that recognizes and protects the dignity of all forms of labor?" (Laura Diamond Dixit, Kadambari Baxi, Jordan Carver, and Mabel O. Wilson, "Who Builds Your Architecture?", 39-40)