

TAPE/TALK: ACTS OF ENGAGEMENT
EPISODE 1: DANA PRIETO AND KATIE LAWSON

Transcript

[Music swells: melancholic, mysterious, and trance-like.]

DANA PRIETO [DP]: I often think about what are the mechanisms that are in that containment and what is it keeping in and what is it keeping out or what is—how is that relationship between what it's inside of what it's outside the containment?

[Music rescinds. Low notes linger and pulse in the background.]

KATIE LAWSON [KL]: This is the 2022 Toronto Biennial of Art Podcast Series: "Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement".

My name is Katie Lawson. I'm one of the curators for the 2019 and 2022 editions of the Toronto Biennial of Art. This year, I've had the pleasure of working with Toronto-based artist and educator Dana Prieto, who was invited to produce a new work titled *Footnotes for an Arsenal*, a sculptural installation at the Small Arms Inspection Building.

Dana's practice lies in clay making and sensory based experiences. She reframes mundane objects and rituals in order to unsettle modes of relating, producing, exchanging, and consuming. Particularly, in an era dominated by extraction and exhaustion.

I joined Dana in her studio as she was developing *Footnotes for an Arsenal*. We sat on the floor together alongside the assembly of terracotta tiles and hand built or thrown clay vessels that have now made their way to the exhibition space of *What Water Knows, The Land Remembers*. We discussed her motivations and framework for creating site specific work for the Small Arms Inspection Building. Especially in relation to the rich history of the building, the site, and how humans have treated the land.

Formerly a munitions factory during the Second World War and up until 1974, the space was purchased by the city of Mississauga to be used as a cultural hub in 2017.

The Small Arms Inspection Building is a space like no other in the Greater Toronto Area. The industrial skeleton of the building has a dominating presence, with a breathtaking expanse of windows that stretches across three of the four sides of this 18,000 square foot space. Wide open with the exception of evenly spaced floor to ceiling historic wood

columns that grid the space. The boundary between indoor and outdoor feels permeable.

Dana works in a way that is sensitive to site—considering the ground below our feet—and in our conversation, she shared her first impressions of the space, as a visitor to the inaugural Biennial in 2019.

[Music swells again, breathy hums are heard. Music cuts off. Recording “on” beep plays. Clinking of terracotta tiles can be heard, together and independently, while music wells up in the background.]

DP: I came to the site knowing the name. I think I-I-I put a lot of attention in names and I knew that it was a site where they would have inspected, at some point, small arms.

KL: Mm-hmm mm-hmm

DP: [Laughs]

KL: The military history is, yeah, in the name—

DP: **It’s in the name! So, I was very curious** about how that would resonate with the works and how the works would speak to that, as well. And I have very strong, almost solid memories, sensory memories, of that time: the sun coming through the windows, and the movement of the trees, the leaves outside. **It was summer or spring, I’m not sure.** I think it was summer when I first came. Very sunny afternoon. And I remember the cold concrete and the industrial structures and infrastructures of the space. Very beautiful. **And kind of impose...an architecture that is imposing itself. It’s very difficult to miss.**

I was walking, doing some visits to the side of my own to try to learn more by-by walking around there. Very close to the lake—so there is a path that you can take and you **can...actually, the first time** that I took that path, I was impacted by these massive constructions—wooden constructions—that are, if you take the path—if anybody listening, take the path, if they’re on your right hand, on your right side, going to towards the lake on the path that is on the right of the building. And these structures are, right now, they’re all, they have a lot of growth of the woods that are around it, the plants that are around it.

And they were part of a shooting range. I found out later on—I think you told me actually that it was a shooting range. And then I learned more about that shooting range, which actually precedes the history of the building itself. So it was used before the Second World War. The building was built for the second world war construction and inspection of-of arms.

And it was a bit haunting—

KL: Yeah.

DP: —to walk around there and see these-these constructions that are in ruins, but they're still there, very monumental and very...like a very strong presence. And when I was looking more into the site, into the histories of the site, I learned that the site was purchased by the TRCA, the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority. And since the purchase that it was in the 1990s, they've been remediating the sites, because they found that it was severely contaminated by different, very heavy contaminants, like low level radioactive materials and PCB and many other things.

So when I learned that I immediately slowed down. I immediately started to think way more about my steps on that land and my interactions to the site. And I walked in my head many times to like, to think how I was kind of not paying attention to that, to the chemistry of the site, to the chem—my chemical interactions with the site as I was walking previously. So that was a very important piece of information and a realization of my time spent there and my connection with the site.

[Music wells, low chanting emerges.]

At the same time I was very recently pregnant. And so I knew that both PCBs and radioactive materials are particularly damaging for pregnant and breastfeeding people. So yeah, that piece of information literally made me slow down and-and contemplate a bit more my interaction with the site.

[Music and chanting grows louder]

KL: There is a lot hidden in plain sight along Toronto's waterfront, in the layering of complex and nuanced histories of its colonial, industrial, and military occupation. With the lands around the Small Arms Inspection Building, there are subtle clues about its past. For instance, the looming wooden baffles of the arsenal lands directly south of the building, now covered completely by overgrowth.

But there are also non-visible elements or characteristics of which you wouldn't inherently know from being on the land. When visiting the site, surrounding areas like the Waterfront Trail and Lakeshore Park are steps away, as are the sumacs plants, the water tower, and the hidden mound that Dana details finding.

[Music ceases.]

DP: One of the things that wasn't visible to me for instance, that I read about but I didn't see it until very purposely looking for it, was something called "consolidation mound" that the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority had built to contain 70,000 tonnes of

radioactive material that was extracted from the site in the process of remediation. And looking at the plans and the Google views I was thinking it was a containment facility, like an architectural building—

KL: Right.

DP: —that was on top of the land. And-and I-I thought all the time that I knew which one it was until later on that I gained some courage to go back to the site *[laughs]*. And I'm looking for this consolidation mound. I realize it's actually just a little mound that is right behind the gallery and it's covered in grass and some goldenrods. And there is a tiny sign that says "do not dig" on top of the mound.

KL: Okay. Yeah.

DP: And it's fenced with a very low fence.

KL: Yeah...yeah. *[laughs]*

DP: *[laughs]* But it wouldn't be hard for almost anybody to trespass. So that was definitely... hidden to me. Even when I was very purposely looking, it was hard to find.

[Echoing clinking of terracotta pieces, rhythmically and randomly to test the vibrations, loud, and then fading.]

KL: Dana digs below the foundations of institutional infrastructures—quite literally beneath the ground of museums, as a means to expose the limits and the possibilities of these spaces. But also metaphorically, what are the ideological beliefs beneath the desire for containment, for separation? Who or what is deserving of care and protection? Dana explores these questions and cultural narratives through an engagement with and study of soil. *Footnotes for an Arsenal* contains piles of soil that has been fired in a kiln, effectively eliminating all forms of microbial life. A transformation that was brought about out of necessity while working on a previous project, when met with restrictions from bringing any living matter into the space of a museum, with the collection in mind and its protection paramount.

DP: I often think about what are the mechanisms that are in that containment and what is it keeping in and what is it keeping out or what is—how is that relationship between what it's inside of what it's outside the containment?

I often like looking at the porosity or the leakage that can happen in these containers that often happens even in the most hermetic containment. But I didn't have to think about that. *[laughs]* with this one because it's actually...**breathing inside the land. It's actually a much more porous construction—**form of containment that I had initially thought it was.

[Twinkling sound rises.]

So that reminded me of my own porosity at the same time. As well as the porosity of the land, of the soil, the ground, the water and how, how all those materials are, are permitting and floating around us all.

[Twinkling sound fades.]

KL: Soil and clay are materials that return in Dana's work with a sense of ritual. From the firing soil to render it lifeless and inert, to reworking clay with water and giving it a new life as terracotta.

[Low synthetic warbling sound erupts.]

Dana recounts her first experience with being drawn to soil as a material, an accomplice, in her practice, and the connection that was formed.

DP: I remember when I came here. I was...impacted by how clean things looked. To me coming from Buenos Aires—again—the city of Toronto looks strikingly clean and organized. In first sight, at least. Also I think that people's treatment, like relationship to each other in public, to strangers, seem to be very organized with each other. There's this clean politeness of "I'll go through the right. You're gonna come through my left and we don't even need to touch."

KL: We don't need to even make eye contact.

DP: *[laughs]* Yes.

KL: We don't need to acknowledge each other's existence *[laughs]*. This is a fine tuned operation.

DP: We know how we go here. I noticed also that I was many times in the wrong...lane. So I was bumping into people, making them very uncomfortable or whatever, or-or very politely,—they-letting them very politely teach me where I should be going. Or show me my way *[laughs]*. So I was very curious about that cleanliness and organization, that form of organization. Actually one of my first projects with dirt or thinking through and with dirt was that project with the cloth at OCAD.

I was looking at this material, particularly kitchen cloth, but I was thinking any cloth really used in your life. It could be in your professional practice. It could be in—at home or whatever. In the car. And looking at the different layers of embedded action and modes of cleaning and like the cloth helps you deal with your mess, basically. Some kind of mess,—and how that is kind of written and rewritten in the cloth over and over. And the cloth tells those stories, even if you bleach it. Even if you're like super, super good at

cleaning it, like my grandma used to be. Her cloths were still greying. And having stains and layers of use marked on them. Right? So I was really interested in these cloths, also as sorts of transitional objects. Of objects that we hold onto in moments that we are transitioning from different moments in-in our lives. Because they really help us transition through a moment of mess, whatever that is.

[Light clicking of terracotta tiles.]

DP: Yeah, became very attracted to that, I guess. And then it translated into..aha! Permeated and leaked into many parts of my practice in different ways. I was thinking about soil and dirt in relation to extractive industries and practices. In relation to learning and about our relationship to the land where we stand and how we relate to that ground.

KL: Dana shared with me how the idea of mess and dirt was deeply rooted in the act of holding or holding on to. Especially when she arrived in Toronto from Argentina, these ideas were confronted in new and curious ways as she observed many mechanisms of separation and control in public space, a denial of the porousness and entanglement that exists in our world between bodies, matter, and environments.

She cites a quote from “What We All Long For” by Dionne Brand as means to mediate and describe this notion of “spillage” which we both find so interesting. And I quote:

And on the sidewalks, after they've emerged from the stations, after being sandpapered by the jostling and scraping that a city like this does, all the lives they've hoarded, all the ghosts they've carried, all the inversions they've made for protection, all the scars and marks and records for recognition—the whole heterogeneous baggage falls out with each step on the pavement. There's so much spillage.

[Scraping sounds of terracotta tiles. Clinking together.]

TBA: Thank you for tuning into this episode of Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement. To learn more about the artists, works, and sites mentioned in this episode, and to access a transcript, visit torontobiennial.org.

Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement was produced for the Toronto Biennial of Art by Roxanne Fernandes in collaboration with Katie Jensen and Ren Bangert of Vocal Fry Studios. Music is by Rosina Kazi and Nicolas Murray of LAL.

[Musical chanting and clinking of terracotta tiles mix together, erupt, and end.]