

Dennis Brzek

An Example of Recent Work

If the recession, or precarious, is a prerequisite for artistic production, then 'recession' also connotes an ubiquity of work. There is surprisingly little written about 'recession' when it comes to art. Maybe, *because* it's always already there when work is being made. In a recession, there is a lack of work: unemployment figures rise, social security payments become an increasingly bigger chunk of a state's budget, and a general sense of schedule changes in an area. What is one work's vanishing seems to be another's point of creation. The work that springs from a recession of work might very well be where 'das Werk,' 'l'opera,' or 'the artwork' resides.¹

My personal research has felt like keeping a diary of recent recessions and imagining what experiencing them might have meant. While applying for the Montez Press Writer's Grant, I was hands deep in the research for my thesis on the work of artist Silvia Kolbowski. In 1990, Kolbowski found Harry Winston Inc., a jeweler in Manhattan, New York, and used the window display for 'an example of [her] recent work.'² Throughout her career, Kolbowski realized several works in which she took over shop windows, either exchanging their content in a variety of ways along different locales and object categories, or simply announcing a found display to be 'an example of recent work'.

In November of 1990, Kolbowski released an invite through the gallery she was showing with at the time, announcing that a work of hers would be on view in the window of Harry Winston Inc., adding a timeframe of 5:17 to 5:34 pm for specification. This slot roughly demarcated the moment when gloved hands would routinely appear from behind heavy curtains once the store closed for the day to exchange the six-figure sum diamonds on display with a photographic stand-in. During general operating time, the shop was only open by appointment, making Kolbowski's fingertip-grease-free appropriation of the scene become a form of personal access that allowed a way of looking that was curious instead of embarrassed. But that access did not just enable an audience's engagement with a shop that presented itself to be sealed off by virtue of affluence, it also created a situation in which the employee's hands, their labour of circulating the jewels, and opening the door to customers with approved appointments, became Kolbowski's own.³

Harry Winston Inc. only allowed Kolbowski to create and publicly circulate this work after she complied with minor changes to the title like giving the timeframe more prominence and adding the word 'approximately'; changes the company demanded in order to secure the distinction between the labor of the jeweler's craftsmen and of the artist herself. The only visual performance involving actual hands came from the service workers who operated the shop. Engaging with a New York that was increasingly battling a growing discrepancy in the resources of artists who either rode the wave of monetary success during the 1980s boom economy, or became increasingly marginalized within a gallery system that focused on the sheer unlimited potential of money to be made, Kolbowski stepped out of

¹ I owe this etymological haiku to the late Bernard Stiegler. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsGVN7UE0pw>.

² The full title being 'an example of recent work may be found in the windows of Harry Winston Inc., from approximately 5:17 to 5:34 pm'.

³ Jeffrey Stuker also explored this extensively and this text is highly indebted to his thoughts on Kolbowski's work. See: Stuker: *The Reign of the White Glove*, in: *Effects 1*, Los Angeles, 2018.

the former, and entered into a kind of practice where value and work became entrenched by a virtuality that demanded for access to be fictionalized. Kolbowski's work created a sculptural materiality via the existence of the object as a commodity, suspending it in the act of becoming her means of artistic production, therefore devising a form of credit by conceptual means. The concurrent lack of work due to the subsequently ensuing 1991-1992 recession, which the hands of the employee exchanging the jewels may or may not have suffered from, created the ominous urgency for Kolbowski to duplicate, reproduce and appropriate said work through her own 'work'. In a recession, appropriating the work of the white gloves exchanging the jewels meant also appropriating labour that suffered from a shortage. Kolbowski's appropriation is not a form of enrichment, but rather a becoming-store-clerk while technically out of a job – the conceptual artist in a time of high demand for luscious painting; a situation familiar to artists both in the 1980s while Neo Expressionism dominated the scene, as well as during the 1960s' heyday of the conceptual vocabulary Kolbowski is referencing which opposed more traditional forms of art making.

Like most everyone, my personal itinerary shrunk immensely during the most severe phase of COVID-19 lockdown, and it has continued to stay more or less that way ever since. When heading to the cheap supermarket in my neighborhood, I pass by an abandoned architectural colossus that formerly housed many a shop window, though none of which I could imagine Kolbowski's work to be reproduced in. In Neukölln's *Kindl-Boulevard*, empty storefronts of closed tailors, barber shops, and poster windows behind which legal services, car rental firms, and private job agencies did business line the way. The tiled hallway is cut through by a maze of buckets serving as potential beds for drops of rain that drip through the leaky glass roof of the 1996 building. The mental image of a recession in action is not only denoted by the closed shops I pass by, but seems to arise by an architecture at its breaking point. The way in which Kolbowski rendered access and participation in her work, both for an audience and for herself as an artist, feels implausible here.

The main reason why Kolbowski's work could not be performed again in these arcades is because the lack of work has already seeped in, even before the pandemic-induced recession took hold of it, and now, it is even more precarious. The restriction of access, the anonymity of the hands, and the ostentatious refusal of human contact between Harry Winston's employees and the audience on the street speak of a hermetic exchange of subjects and their desires, that has only been purported during a lockdown, both pandemic and economic. With no work left to be appropriated, the zero-sum fictional income is made more comfortable by actions like this funding grant, that would demand work again once more.

Dennis Brzek is a curator and writer based in Berlin.