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Women, Ceramics, and Community

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FORMS-OF-LIFE

Marguerite Wildenhain's Pond Farm

From 1952 until 1980, Marguerite Wildenhain presided over a community entirely of her own making: a summer program devoted to the discipline of ceramics, admired for its uncompromising rigor in pursuit of the craftsman ideal. Yet her practice has been misconstrued as object oriented: Wildenhain's ideology was entirely process driven. Over eight or twelve weeks, students threw five or six hundred pots and left with nothing. By purging her students of the desire to produce finished pots, Wildenhain set her students on a course of non-object production. This is a radical reformulation of pottery, redirecting it away from its traditional object-based orientation in favor of process. Thus, at Pond Farm, ceramics became a *live form*, valued not as a commodity but as an experience.

Each summer, around twenty-five students would come to study pottery with her for about nine weeks at a time. Wildenhain did not accept beginners; students were routinely turned away or sent elsewhere to gain basic skills. Pond Farm, unlike Black Mountain College, willfully lacked institutional status. Without any kind of accreditation or degree structure, it had no credibility within the larger American educational system. As Wildenhain herself wrote, "Pond Farm is not a 'school'; it is actually a way of life."[4]

However, Wildenhain's history functions as an allegory of illegibility: she was misinterpreted again and again by her American colleagues, who rejected her Old World functionalism, even as they profited from her pedagogy. Wildenhain's career is a case study in the gender inequity and media hierarchies that plagued women artists, even those with the best training, at midcentury. She represents a series of exclusions: a Bauhaus-trained Jew, a French refugee/German émigré, a woman in the elite reaches of her male-dominated profession, and moreover, a pedagogical demagogue—a proclaimed, and self-proclaimed, master. But neither Wildenhain nor any other Bauhaus-affiliated woman (not even Anni Albers) ever attained an artistic stature equivalent to that of their male counterparts, in particular Josef Albers. Given that Josef Albers shunned her chosen medium as "not intellectual enough," no correspondence exists between Wildenhain and the Alberses, but surely they were well acquainted, as Wildenhain preceded Josef Albers at the Weimar Bauhaus by one year, training from its inception in 1919.[5] Yet Wildenhain's students were simultaneously endowed with, and differentiated from, her Bauhaus legacy. Her forgotten production is testimony to the limits of both assimilation and empathy in her new homeland.

Forms-of-Life

Wildenhain's pottery was functional, pragmatic, and domestically scaled: made with the intent to sell simultaneously in high-end department stores such as Gump's in San Francisco, in art galleries, and on-site in her showroom, the first

Figure 2.2 *Marguerite Wildenhain, Bauhaus potter, settled in Pond Farm, California,* ca. 1958. Photo by Otto Hagel. Collection Center for Creative Photography. ©1998 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation.

space visitors saw in the main building at Pond Farm. This undated image (figure 2.2), likely from the mid-1950s, casts her at as a lone but proud figure, foreshortened by a perspectival frame. She is smiling slightly, her head cocked toward the fruits of her labor: a series of worktables laden with pots, vessels, vases, candleholders, candelabras, and pitchers.

In the foreground, on the right, stands one of the few narrative works she created, one of a series of four vases, based upon the four acts of T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). Drawing in a purposefully naïve style, Wildenhain secures her affinity to modernism by flattening her figures and textures them with an incising technique known as sgraffito, made through scratching upon the surface to produce distinct surfaces and outlines. Yet the effect is not sculptural, offering the same flatness found in illuminated medieval manuscripts, in which the vase and its surface are one and the same. Raising their weapons, the grouping of knights depicted is one of the key moments of the play, which reenacts the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket of Cantebury, in 1170, but it is also an allegory for martyrdom and the problem of religious faith, both subjects that ostensibly plagued her as a Jew who had escaped the Holocaust. In her review of the play, the poet Marianne Moore wrote that Eliot's ". .austerity assumes the dignity of philosophy and the didacticism of the verities incorporated in the play . . ."[6] Austerity, dignity, and didacticism are a trio of descriptors that are applicable to Wildenhain, who performed her own austere philosophy of teaching through the strict methodology she applied to her students.

She never wrote about what the play represented, but it must have touched her deeply: she offered one of the four vases to the playwright himself and hoped to present it to him in person during the holiday season of 1952. T. S. Eliot was not in his office at Faber and Faber Publishers when she came calling, but upon her homecoming, she mailed it from California and received a warm response from him in return. As Eliot wrote: "It is more than kind of you to have given me such a magnificent present, and I am happy to say that the parcel arrived intact. The jar is at present standing on the mantelpiece of the Boardroom here, where it has been admired by my fellow directors."[7] Eliot's grateful acknowledgement and praise of her work must have meant a great deal to Wildenhain, whose career has gone largely unacknowledged in the literature on the Bauhaus tradition in America.

As an extreme form of living, Pond Farm exceeded any previous limits of labor and discomfort in relation to the production of studio pottery in mid-century America. Yet Pond Farm was also restorative, a way of beginning again, on all levels: for urban students unused to roughing it and for Wildenhain herself, in a new country and culture. In its initial years, Wildenhain provided basic barracks-type lodgings on her property, nearly replicating her experience at Dornburg; students were to learn to fend for themselves without a modern kitchen, pooling cookware and food to prepare common meals cooked in a fire pit.

For most of Pond Farm's existence, however, students rented rooms in Guerneville, an affluent summer resort town, or camped outside the town, which sat on the edge of a redwood forest. Roy Behrens, a former student who went on to teach graphic design at the University of Northern Iowa, authored a brief self-published memoir of his time at Pond Farm. Recalling the summer of 1964, he wrote:

> By way of Marguerite's fine map, we not only found the Ridenours [a local couple] that day, they also readily agreed that we could set up our two-person campsite (at no cost, I recall) in a deep ravine of redwood trees, adjacent to their hilltop house. What an exotic way to spend the summer, in a grove of these towering giants—one of which (thank goodness in terms of our bathroom needs) was wide and dead and hollowed out. It truly was primitive living: our only refrigerator was an ice-filled Styrofoam cooler, which was constantly coated with moisture. Among the most repugnant sights of the day (every morning) was to wake up to find the outside of the cooler crawling with dozens of huge green slimy slugs.[8]

The rudimentary nature of camp living would not have impressed Wildenhain, as she herself did not own a refrigerator until the early 1960s, one of the many American luxuries of which she disapproved—in her memoir, she disdained it as the "holy-holy of American life."[9] Compare this with the Alberses pride in suburban living. Nicholas Fox Weber reports that the couple enjoyed showing off their modern Sears Roebuck appliances to visitors and friends.[10] But this was in keeping with Wildenhain's distaste for convenience, which led to the laziness and shortcutting she found to be so pronounced in American students. The students who came to Pond Farm, however, were broken of these and other poor habits. The purposeful deprivations experienced at Pond Farm merged with the rigors of slowly, meticulously mastering the medium of pottery.

The distance between Guerneville and Pond Farm was a daily four-mile hike uphill on unpaved roads. Upon arrival, students gathered under the peach tree before 8 a.m. to observe a ritual silence. Afterward, students were expected to spend seven to eight hours per day at the pottery wheel, throwing forms dictated

by Wildenhain. While she herself was a studio potter, making singular objects for the art or luxury consumer market, her teaching methodology, like the Bauhaus, was geared toward industry, or what is known as production pottery, making dozens of wares to be sold as complete, handmade sets:

> Students were thoroughly instructed on wheel techniques and on how to develop a critical eye. The workshop was as demanding as one could find. Beginning students started with the infamous "doggie dish"—a shape that is somewhat troublesome of beginners. After making ten or twenty of these, permission was given to move on, and the students worked through about fifteen basic forms such as flower pots, bowls, bellied coffee pots, spouted pitchers, footed bowls, cups, plates, and eventually teapots.[11]

Students brought their lunch and ate together at long wooden picnic tables behind the work barn. Monday through Friday the workday ended at 4 p.m., and each Wednesday afternoon was devoted to drawing from nature. Wildenhain would frequently hold outdoor seminars and discussions, lecturing on various topics, showing her own work or that of other artists, and frequently read literature aloud, often poetry or from the journals of Van Gogh, Rodin, and Delacroix (figure 2.3).[12] At the end of the day, students trudged back down the hill into town, unless invited to drink sherry with Wildenhain in her garden. Three or four times a session, evening parties would be held at the beach.

Working and living in the natural environment, with an aged Bauhäusler directing the experience, such meditative precision cultivated not only an intensity among her charges but also perhaps a kind of unspoken honor for the dead, for the fledging utopia that had been rudely crushed by Nazi culture, a moment of Wildenhain's own youth that could never have been fully explained but could indeed be imparted through process: the forms themselves could live on, made and remade by generations of rudimentary potters, eager students grasping and marveling at the complexity and variety of simple forms.

The disappearance of the potted object, and its subsequent passage into immateriality runs parallel to the greater avant-garde ethos of the 1960s. The anti-object stance of performance, video, and land art, and to a lesser degree minimalism, which rejected the hand-produced or individually wrought object, challenged the hegemony of the materialist tradition in artistic production. It also functioned as a critique of the market and its easy commodification of the art object. In doing so, artists were able to propose new relationships between objects and viewers, artists and audiences, and artists and institutions. Ceramics has been left out of this history. However, Pond Farm's anti-object stance troubles the dominant narrative, marking an important and overlooked moment in modern craft.

Figure 2.3 *Pond Farm, Marguerite Wildenhain*, 1952. Photo by Otto Hagel. Collection Center for Creative Photography. ©1998 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation.

Nathan McMahon, a student who first came to Pond Farm in 1954, described the destruction of the pots at Pond Farm as an act of submission, in which the objects and their makers were broken down—only to be rebuilt more robustly:

> More often the pots were destroyed while the clay was yet plastic, cut through with a wire to gauge the thickness of the walls and to evaluate the quality of our throwing technique. It was a sound practice, offering lessons that would otherwise have been impossible to learn, and they helped separate us from the tendency toward regarding every standing pot as worthy or precious. It helped to speed up the learning process by undermining the persistent ego.[18]

This ritualized destruction contained within it an exchange of power: students giving themselves over to the master, allowing themselves to be trained according to her will. Summer workshop participants came as seekers, looking for an encounter with craftsmanship through subordination. No doubt such a collective experience of discipline was also a means of undoing the excesses of individuality endemic to the abstract expressionist era: ego, personality, and free expression. The documentary photographer Otto Hagel, a close friend who made primary images of Wildenhain's work throughout the 1950s, captured the collectivity of the student enterprise at Pond Farm when he captioned this particular image with the following interpretation: "The problem for all students was to make a pitcher with a rim. Different personalities, different conceptions, different pots" (figure 2.4). But in a setting of noncompetition, students also had to learn to trust each other's skills and their communal ability to coax the most that they could out of the raw clay. In this way, the non-object pot became symbolic, the subject of a focused reading, or deconstruction, and then obliterated, smashed down and made anew, a *live form* engaged in an endless process of renewal, led by Wildenhain.

She herself modeled this resiliency through her own wartime narrative: making the best of what was and starting anew, loyal to the precepts of the Bauhaus, and continuing the modernist tradition without a crisis of faith. The intertwining of clay's elasticity and Wildenhain's own resilience functioned as a unique pedagogical model that remains unreplicated by other key pedagogues of her generation.

In his 1973 treatise on pedagogy, *Fellow Teachers*, the cultural sociologist Philip Rieff asks: "Would you like to know how to recreate authority? You would have to again begin outside yourself. A true interdictory authority must be taught to us; it cannot be thought up by us."[14] Rieff's quote is rhetorical, of course, establishing that authority itself is rooted in an established power dynamic, one that is implemented through the ideological apparatus that shapes a subject during his or her lifetime. For Wildenhain, Dornburg became the shape she mapped onto Pond Farm, an authoritative space inscribed by the intensities of exile and fear.

Weimar: The "Wrong" Bauhaus

Owing to the school's pervasive institutional sexism, Wildenhain, like other Bauhäusler women, was allowed to enroll in only one of three workshops: textiles, ceramics, or bookbinding.[15] The ceramics workshop was led by two artists, potter Max Krehan (1875–1925) and the figurative sculptor Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981). This was a conscious split in accordance with Bauhaus Rector Walter Gropius's ideas: Krehan was the master of craft, while Marcks was the