

A Place to Work

There is an etiquette to the place and perhaps to all factory settings that is steeped in respect for work and efficiency. The physical presence of all the action was at first alienating and then became a companionable vibe that defined for me a place to work and to forget about the other demands that time makes. — Juliellen Byrne

Every morning, the Pottery is an endless expanse of plaster molds topped by cones, a field of industrial row crops that recede into the distant horizon. Casters walk down the aisles, moving from cone to cone like bees, filling each funnel with slip from overhead lines. The air is thick with heat and humidity; the men are shirtless, their bare skin glistening. Across open shelving, artists pour slip into their banded plaster molds, synchronized by materials and processes. Circling back, they release the bands and remove the leather-hard casts: hand-finishing, cutting, joining, carving, sanding, painting or spraying stains and glazes, and finally carting the day's work to the drying room. The kiln technicians watch for breaks in the line and help the artists load their sculptures onto the cars between toilets, sinks, and urinals, ensuring that everything is secure, vented, and dry, to protect the artists' work as well as the sanitary ware. An FM radio blares throughout the day, alternating between country and classic rock, and blending with the rhythmic hissing and dull thumps of mechanized production. An ambient blend of droning motors is punctuated by the beeping of passing carts. During the afternoon "respirator hour," everyone dons masks, while the residue of the day's production is swept away. At night, the plaster forms resemble rows of white headstones, and the sounds are subdued to a gentle hum beneath harsh fluorescent lights.

The misty white heat of the Pottery stands in stark contrast to the blackness of the Foundry, its sooty caverns illuminated by the orange glow of molten iron and shooting sparks from grinding wheels. There, the artists must venture out on the production floor to make molds from resin-bonded sand and have them filled with liquid iron or brass. They gauge the rhythms of the factory and strategize with the technician over whether to slip into small gaps in production during the busy third shift or to work independently while most of the Foundry sleeps. The din of grinding and clanging metal drowns out all but essential communication. A constant stream of forklifts flows by the entrance to the artists' studio,

blasting their horns as they round the corner, with individual voices that beep, honk, or ring. Without warning, the cacophony of industrial grinding ensues in an adjoining work area and a load of miscast parts clatters into a waste bin. The artists absorb the rhythms of the factory, adjusting their internal clocks to its relentless pace and slipping into the endless cycle of production.

By 1990 the residency program was fully established in the Foundry as well as the Pottery and began gaining recognition not only in the crafts community, but in the larger art world. However, the collaboration's inherent fragility was suddenly revealed after an economic recession and housing slump led to reduced production and layoffs. In early January 1991, the Kohler Co. leadership announced that the program had been slated for cancellation. As Chairman/CEO Herbert V. Kohler, Jr. explained, "The factory's management did not want the appearance of being excessive when associates had to be laid off."

Ultimately, Kohler Co. decided to honor the 1991 contracts of the three artists already in residence. Before their three-month residencies ended, orders picked up, the economy improved, the company began rehiring, and these artists were invited to stay through the end of the year. Arnie Zimmerman had other obligations and was unable to remain, but Ann Agee and Lia Zulalian each spent the full year in residence and then stayed on as studio technicians in 1992, expanding their own bodies of work while helping other artists-in-residence with their projects.

Agee engaged deeply with the local culture during her two years in the factory, using drawing as an investigative tool. She sketched the rows of machinery and product in the factory, Kohler Co. associates, the city of Sheboygan, and the surrounding rural communities. Using a cobalt blue and white palette deliberately reminiscent of Delft ceramics, she transferred deadpan sketches of local scenes and portraits of people engaged in their daily lives onto teapots, tureens, portrait platters, bathroom fixtures, wall tiles, and murals. Although she spent her first month making complex molded forms, she pronounced them "dead on arrival" and began casting simple platters and tiles to use as supports. Her

drawings allowed her to connect with the life of the factory, breaking the ice and providing “a reason to communicate and to laugh and to share” with the associates.

Agee’s 1991 untitled work known as the Kohler Workers Mural, permanently installed in the casting area of the Pottery, consists of twenty-five portraits painted with cobalt glaze on setters (the large tiles used by the company as kiln supports). Each worker’s likeness is bordered by a plain or decorative painted frame, and is surrounded by textured white tiles. Casters, administrative associates, supervisors, engineers, and kiln technicians are depicted either seated in the break room or standing at their workstations in the factory. A photograph taken to celebrate the installation shows the artist and the mural’s subjects beneath the rows of portraits, many dressed in the same clothing, and striking the poses of their likenesses.

Breaking from the usual application process, the curatorial staff at the Arts Center reached outside the world of craft and selected two conceptual artists from New York for the 1992 residencies. Nancy Dwyer and Joel Otterson brought a different aesthetic and way of thinking to the factory. Dwyer later described the experience as “the hardest physical labor I have ever undertaken and also one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.” Known for making sculpture that incorporates the written word, she increased the physicality of her work by casting it in iron. Otterson cast *Iron Maiden*—a life-size fashion doll—along with many other components that he used in surreal installations. Dwyer and Otterson proved that experience in the craft of metal or ceramics was unnecessary, and subsequently, Arts/Industry began its current practice of welcoming artists working in any discipline.

The reach of the program extended even further in the mid-1990s, in response to a suggestion from the Wisconsin Arts Board that Arts/Industry begin inviting at least one international artist each year. Artists began arriving from Europe, Africa, and Asia as well as the Americas to share their perspectives with one another and with the industrial associates, boosting the level of cultural exchange as well as the prestige of the program. As the 1990s continued, Arts/Industry became firmly established in the Foundry

as well as the Pottery. Two artists at a time worked in each studio, usually for three-month residencies, putting in long days at the factory, and retiring to the artists' house at night. The history of the residency program from this time forward is primarily the story of individual artists, sixteen to twenty-two each year, many of whose ways of thinking and working were affected by their time at Kohler Co.