

Creative Expression Is in Full Flush At Kohler Factory

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Here Artists and Workers Toil
Toward the Same Goals,
And Either Sink or Swim

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What do you call an elliptical vitreous china bowl juxtaposed with a cistern of the same ceramic material, embellished with a small piece of molded metal?

Toilet or art?

At the Kohler factory in Kohler, Wis., it could be either.

Here, in the company's 191-acre complex, 3,000 blue-collar workers turn out thousands of toilets, bathtubs and sinks a day, mostly by hand. Alongside them, a small band of artists turns out modern art: cast-iron handbags, ceramic carrots—and surrealistic toilets and sinks.

A Common Bond

The Kohler factory is the setting for a brave experiment in American diversity. Artists and factory workers rarely interact in day-to-day life, and their social values—politics, religion, hobbies—tend to be different. Yet they have one thing in common. "Artists come here to fabricate and solve problems, and that's pretty much what the workers are doing," says Jim Neiman, until recently the official liaison between artists and workers.

Although the results of the project can't be quantified, both groups say the program forces them to rethink art, bathroom fixtures and each other. "At first the employees were very skeptical," says Ruth Kohler, the program's creator and a member of the company's founding family. "They had a stereotypical view of artists as flaky and not necessarily having the skills the factory people had."

Over the years, however, the workers and the artists began to appreciate each other's craft. For the artists, the factory is rich with creative possibilities. Arnold Zimmerman, a New York sculptor, explains: "The factory is an endless source of inspiration for forms and the way things are made and put together. Seeing 200 tubs lined up still warm from the mold—it's like nothing you've ever seen."

Often, this fascination translates into art. David Tell came to the factory to create assemblages of agrarian detritus and ended up making wine goblets from brass showerheads. Ann Agee, who came to make teapots, was drawn to a toilet. "I had daydreamed about making a toilet," she says, "but I didn't know I'd spend so much time on it."

The program is a project of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and is partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The space, materials, technical assistance and most of the cash come from Kohler, a privately held company with annual sales of \$1.4 billion.

To earn the privilege of a four-month stint in the factory, artists from around the country are put through a rigorous selection process. Then they are given transportation to the factory, a room, steel-toed boots, safety glasses, a bicycle and a weekly stipend. The artists can go practically anywhere in the factory, and they can use any raw materials they find. They are, however, limited in the number of finished fixtures they can commandeer, thanks to an early participant who deco-

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A Work of Art

Artistic Expression Is in Full Flush Here at the Kohler Toilet Factory

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rated 65 sinks with abstract designs.

Many of the artists work in the pottery, the warm and relatively quiet place where toilets are cast. Others find themselves drawn to the foundry, a dark, dangerous mill where iron is cast for bathtubs, sinks and engine blocks. "Most people are disgusted and shocked by the foundry," says Mr. Zimmerman. "I was always slightly afraid; you don't know where you can walk, your peripheral vision is constantly being stimulated, there's stuff going on all around you."

Chris Weaver, an artist now working in the foundry casting a lifesize deer that doubles as a barbecue grill, calls the foundry "addicting."

In the foundry, the workers pour metal so hot—2,500 degrees Fahrenheit—it looks like liquid fire. Some show how tough they are by not wearing hats, gloves or masks. Darrell Nack, a 21-year veteran of the foundry, calls the smoke, grit and dirt "just part of living."

But inside, Mr. Nack and other foundrymen lurks the joy of making their material—iron—defy its natural properties in search of a beautiful shape, be it sink or art. The workers, whose jobs are so specialized that a worker may grind bathtubs for 30 years, enjoy the change and challenge of casting works of art—army boots with swimming flippers attached, an eight-foot-tall, two-ton bear, a 1950s prom pump. "If [the artists] think it's going to work, we'll give it a shot," says Arlen Pitzen, a foreman in the foundry.

The artists say the workers take considerable risks when casting their molds, and will interrupt their work to oblige. Melissa Stern, a New York artist, tells of casting a large piece one midnight when her mold sprang a leak and molten iron poured onto the floor, igniting a wood pallet. "John [Tryba], who likes to cast for the artists and only likes big, complicated, dangerous projects, was cursing me, and the other guys were standing around cracking up," Ms. Stern says. "It confirmed everything they thought about artists: We're cute and fun to have around, but we're not that smart."

The foundry men hold a special place in their hearts for the artist they call No-Core Brook, who cast many objects, no matter how huge, without a core. The result was art so heavy it was practically immovable, including a 235-pound cast-iron violin case.

For practical reasons, few artists can routinely work in iron. Although the material itself is cheap, the equipment to melt and pour iron is unthinkably expensive. Artists can rent time at commercial foundries, but it is financially risky for a piece of art that hasn't been commissioned.

When the workers make a bad mold, they have failed. "If there's a flaw, we have to throw it out or fix it," says Eugene Beeck, who has worked at Kohler for 32 years.

But when the artists make a bad mold, it is art. Mr. Weaver's first deer/barbecue grill was a bust—when the hot iron was poured, the core of the mold floated up and broke through the deer's back, creating a ragged hole in what was supposed to be a

smooth surface. "The workers see the deer and say, 'That's too bad,'" says Mr. Weaver. "But I was excited about it."

Similarly, Maria Alquilar, a Santa Cruz, Calif., artist, left some flashing—metal that has leaked through a faulty mold—on some of her work. "The workers said, 'You have to take that off,'" she says. "But I liked it, and after a while they came to like it too."

The dialogue between the artists and workers contains a healthy dose of skepticism, a constant testing of the artists to prove that what they do really has that much value. The most common question the workers ask the artists is, "What's that?" "If you don't have a sense of humor, you're dead meat," says Ms. Stern.

Some artists can take the constant challenges, and some can't. "I've seen a lot of artists shaken up by very difficult questions—'Can you repeat what you're making, could you make a hundred of those?' Or, 'I've seen one of those, why do you have to make another?'" says Mr. Neiman. The workers are "brutally honest," he adds.

Yet some have also become art collectors, filling their neat, Midwestern bungalows with dozens of bizarre objets d'art, valued in the thousands of dollars. Mr. Nack has a number of pieces given to him by artists. His garden is the site for a cast-iron squirrel with nails driven through it. Mr. Nack's choice for weirdest work: a lifesize cast-iron stomach. "It's art," Mr. Nack says emphatically. "It's sitting right here in my living room." In his bathroom is a Kohler toilet, priced at \$185.