

HEIDI SCHWEGLER: POKING HOLES

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Heidi Schwegler, associate professor, metals, Oregon College of Art and Craft

A series of intriguing reversals and transformations structure Heidi Schwegler's two-part installation (2009, on view), a curious hybrid of conceptual art and craft. The textual element of the piece, *Means without End*, which the artist has inscribed in a Garamond font on the gallery wall, recalls similarly deadpan proposals by Lawrence Weiner or Sol LeWitt in the 1970s, or the earlier directives of Fluxus:

Arrange the pattern and with circular motions burnish lightly with your fingertips. Drill a small pilot hole in the center of each shape. Gently run your thumb along the blade, you should feel it snag as you slide up. Place the bottom of the blade in the frame and tighten the nut. Slide the top of the blade into the hole and secure the frame between the table and your chest. Float the plate, apply pressure with your body and secure the top of the blade. Once positioned, hold the plate firmly with your left hand and begin cutting with full strokes. To cut a sharp corner, move the blade up and down in a neutral position as you slide the plate. When facing the edge to be cut, push forward. Once the piercing is complete, loosen the top nut and release the frame.

Schwegler challenges the viewer/reader to discover the relationship of this initially cryptic set of instructions to the central component of her installation, located elsewhere in the Museum, *More Than Simply Made*, an eleven-piece pink-and-white Melmac tea set (sans teapot) arranged on a clear sheet of Plexiglas floating over a white Corian base. Two terms in the above paragraph, "plate" and "piercing," ultimately illuminate the connection between tableware and text. We see how each object in the tea set – each plate, cup, saucer, and the butter dish with its cover – has been pierced through with holes, creating a lacy pattern. The wall-mounted instructions explain how Schwegler painstakingly perforated the plastic pieces in her studio, as if she were transmitting these procedures to a group of her students. In ghostly, insubstantial letters stenciled in gray, she reveals her laborious process (burnishing, drilling, tightening, cutting, pushing, pressing, releasing), in which she engages not just her fingertips, thumb, and hand, but also her chest – indeed, her entire body. Schwegler calls our attention to craft as making, the bodily complement to her cerebral conception of the work of art.

By operating on the tea set, Schwegler has transformed it in several ways. Most obviously, she has rendered it useless. Stripped of its function and placed on view in the Museum, the formerly humble dishware becomes fine art, the subject of curatorial concern and these critical ruminations. Schwegler's is of course a familiar Duchampian gesture, akin to turning a piece of plumbing on its side, and also involves dislodging the tea set from the realm of cheap mass-produced goods and situating it firmly in the context of unique and even precious works of art. Handling and working the already much-handled second-hand tableware, moreover, Schwegler ensures it will no longer be touchable at all, except by the

gloved hands of museum professionals. Ironically too, by subtracting material and thus utility from the tea set, Schwegler has increased its monetary value and shifted the social status of its targeted consumers. Before, the Melmac set might have appealed to home decorators or shoppers on eBay nostalgic for the 1950s; now, its allure is for up-to-date, informed connoisseurs and collectors of contemporary art.

The perforated decoration Schwegler has imposed on the objects that comprise *More Than Simply Made* further extends these ironies. She derived this intricate, floral-inspired pattern from Ming-dynasty blue-and-white porcelain, fragile as the dishwasher-safe Melmac is durable, fine as the plastic is common. Produced from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, much Ming china has made its way from royal or courtly dining rooms into museums. Here Schwegler invokes the history of this elegant porcelain from a pre-industrial past on an atomic-age tea set made of melamine resin, a synthetic polymer employed in domestic articles and surfaces as well as rocket nose cones. As light falls on the altered tea set, Ming shadows appear on the smooth white Corian below it, a lovely design from long ago and far away haunting the artifacts of recent technological advances in the capitalist, consumerist West. The beautiful effect creates a metaphor for cultural influence or, ever so subtly, for the ascendancy of China in the world today. Topical associations multiply, as we remember melamine's sinister emergence in the news, first in 2007 when it contaminated pet food imported from China to the United States, killing hundreds of dogs and cats, then again scandalously in 2008 as a protein-simulating additive in milk powder that poisoned untold numbers of Chinese infants.¹ With useful applications developed for the modern home, melamine has re-emerged as a virulent toxin in that very same domestic environment.

Taken out of commission in the home, Schwegler's transformed tea set, together with its lengthy "caption" on the wall, affords us a glimpse as well of the artist's self-critical reflections on her own practice. She has articulated her desire to override a Cartesian dualism that would distinguish body and spirit, and points to an intuitive aspect of the creative process, "thinking with the hands."² Poking holes in a whole range of categories, wittily challenging binary oppositions in a two-part work of art, Schwegler also performs a deft move, of the sort Glenn Adamson has recommended as a curatorial strategy that might bridge the craft/contemporary art divide: treating craft itself as a subject, as "a topic for conceptualization."³ Straddling the arenas of art and craft, Schwegler luxuriates in – and yet remains suspicious of – the seductive pleasures of making, worrying in her wall text that they may be just "means without end." In the crafts person's overvaluation of process for its own sake, she detects a fetishizing tendency, covering over an imagined deficiency that one fears and simultaneously refuses consciously to acknowledge. In this scenario, exalting craft techniques (burnishing, drilling, cutting) may compensate for a fundamental insecurity over the work's potential lack of significant content. Schwegler wants instead to offer viewers something "more than simply made," something exquisitely crafted and at the same time provocative and meaningful. Ideally, just as her artistic labor is both physical and cerebral, the objects she creates will be satisfying to her viewers visually *and* intellectually. And indeed they are. In *More Than Simply Made*, with its pristine surfaces and delicate play of pink shadows, its quiet inquiry into issues of aesthetics, class, and cultures, Schwegler has surely realized her ambition.

1. See David Barboza, "China Begins Inspections of Ingredient Tied to Tainted Pet Food," *New York Times*, 5 May 2007, and Gardiner Harris and Andrew Martin, "U.S. Blocks Products with Milk from China," *New York Times*, 14 November 2008.

2. Heidi Schwegler, personal communication with the author, 20 February 2009.

3. Glenn Adamson, "Handy-Crafts: A Doctrine," in Paula Marincola, ed., *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006), 110.