

Edmund de Waal at Kettle's Yard

26 May – 22 July 2007

Teachers' pack

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For further information, go to www.edmunddewaal.com

Press release: Edmund de Waal at Kettle's Yard

This summer Kettle's Yard is presenting an exhibition of the work of the leading British potter of his generation, Edmund de Waal. His work is characterised by the repetition of the simplest, cylindrical, porcelain forms, each distorted by the hand and in their firing.

For de Waal, who read English at Trinity Hall, Cambridge in the mid '80s, the exhibition is a homecoming. Since student days Kettle's Yard has been a constant source of inspiration.

As a potter, and as a writer about ceramics, Edmund de Waal has long reflected on how pots have been presented and perceived, from the mass produced teapot to the studio crafted object, and their relationship to the buildings they inhabit.

Using the variety of spaces in the gallery at Kettle's Yard and extending into the house with its permanent collection, de Waal has created a series of installations. The first, *A Change in the Weather*, offers the visitor a pot for each day of the year. Further on, there are pots in a skylight, on shelves and in boxes, and running along the street-front window sill. In the last space, we are invited to glimpse into a room – a *wunderkammer* – lined and stacked with 342 plates. In the house, smaller installations replace the normal pots and find their way into bookshelves and cupboards.

The exhibition is organised in association with the newly opened *mima* in Middlesbrough where the same pieces will explore quite different surroundings. The exhibition is accompanied by a book including photographs by H el ene Binet of the installations at Kettle's Yard and *mima*, as well as other pieces at Chatsworth and elsewhere.

On Saturday 23 June there will be a symposium discussing the sculptural reading of architecture with architects Deborah Saunt and David Hills, artists Keith Wilson and Richard Woods, H el ene Binet and Edmund de Waal, plus new and ancient music.

Kettle's Yard opening hours: daily except on Mondays – gallery 11.30am-5pm, house 1.30-4.30pm. Open on Bank Holiday Monday. We ask Education groups to visit the house outside opening hours. Please call 01223 352 124 to book.

Quotes from Edmund de Waal

(who describes himself as 'a potter who writes')

"In learning to be a potter through my apprenticeship with Geoffrey Whiting the aesthetics of a workshop became significant. Through his almost monastic life I became aware of the way that lines of pots on boards often seemed more resonant than single objects, that there was a charged life of repetition that came into play in the gravitas of the pared down environment of a workshop."

"In avoiding the hand made, the gestural, there would be none of the embarrassing demonstrative qualities of craft, only the synergy of industrialism with essential living.... As Veblen noted in 1898: 'The marks of hand labour come to be honorific, and the goods which exhibit these marks take rank as of higher grade than the corresponding machine product... it comes about that the visible imperfections of the hand-wrought goods, being honorific, are accounted marks of superiority in point of beauty'. A problem for me as a potter growing up was how to reconcile a love of those 'visible imperfections' that come with gesture, with that love that dares not speak its name, the passion for stacked industrial porcelain plates and Johnson's chemical dishes."

Catalogue for: Modern Home: An Intervention by Edmund de Waal at High Cross House

"There's a very basic level of skill that is only acquired through repetition. It's one of those truisms that is very difficult to get round in ceramics, because people make it into a great moral law. But it actually seems self-evident to me that actually the more objects you make of the same size, same shape, the more attuned you get to slight differences. Your eye and your hand become more carefully attuned to difference..."

"... porcelain was a material that I hadn't worked with in my apprenticeship, and it wasn't a material that I associated with the Leach tradition at all. I mean porcelain for me was really a new way of thinking about the pots I loved, and the pots I loved were both Korean and Chinese celadon bowls. But also Bauhaus pots, modernist pots from the 1920s, futurist pots from the 1930s, a whole different spectrum of porcelain objects. And by using this material it allowed me to sort of enter a different kind of territory... it's a very plastic material, but it's a very treacherous material. You have to work very quickly and decisively. It's a very seductive material as well, very smooth and very beautiful... When you fire it to the temperatures I'm firing my porcelain to, it bends and warps, moves around. So you can't make a perfect porcelain pot – or I can't make a perfect porcelain pot. So what you're dealing with is a material which actually is susceptible to gesture, to how you handle it, to your movements around it."

BBC3 Radio interview with John Tusa.

Key themes

- **Multiples:** the effect of having many pots together. De Waal believes that the 'charge' from a single object can only create a limited impact whereas a group of objects can have a greater effect on a larger space. However, within each 'collection' of pots that makes an artwork, there is often a great deal of variation in shape, colour, shade, and scale. How does he create a sense of unity?
- **Installation:** an artwork that responds to the space in which it is exhibited. De Waal describes his works as 'site sensitive' rather than 'site specific' as they were made with a place in mind, but can also be shown in other spaces. The containers in which the pots are presented also create another defined area, a 'micro-architecture'.
- **Space and Architecture:** De Waal is interested in how his pots work with the immediate surrounding environment: is your attention drawn to the texture of the walls, the height of ceilings, the volume of space that fills the room, the temperature, the scale of your own body in relation to the room and the artworks. De Waal is also interested in how that environment can change (different times of day, weather, light, etc) and how the subtleties in the pots are also affected (blues may appear bluer in some lights, etc).
- **Gallery and House:** The bare display in the 'public' space of the gallery has a completely different atmosphere from the installation in the 'private' domestic space of the house. How does an understanding of de Waal's work change in these different contexts?
- **Familiar versus Unfamiliar:** we have pots around us, in our homes on cupboards and shelves. In galleries, we expect to see artworks at eye level on plinths. De Waal encourages us to think differently about both of these things by treating the pot as a sculptural form and displaying it high, low and sometimes even partially hidden in the exhibition.
- **Functional versus Aesthetic:** One of the few remaining assumptions about art is that it does not serve a practical function (unlike a table or a tap or an umbrella). One of the most basic, most practical objects that exists across possibly all cultures is the pot or vessel – something to collect and hold water or food primarily. De Waal creates art works from functional forms. He uses the shape of the pot like a sculpture, creating an aesthetically pleasing object that can be considered in terms of volume, shape and mass.
- Consider the divide between **art and craft** – why is there a distinction? What are the qualities of each? Is this divide still relevant (think of Tracey Emin working with textiles)? De Waal is a potter and an artist – is it necessary to specify each of these things separately?

Questions and starting points

- Where would you expect to see an exhibition of ceramics?
- What are pots used for? Would you put Edmund's pots to these uses? Why/why not?
- How do the pots within each artwork vary?
- As each is hand-made, each is unique: do you get a sense of a group of individual objects repeated or a single entity made up of smaller parts?
- How are the pots displayed in an unusual way – why has the artist done this?
- How are the gallery and the house affected by the inclusion of these objects? Are you looking more closely at other objects nearby or attending to the space itself?
- Are Edmund's pots art or craft? What is the difference?
- How are his pots like sculptures?

Gallery

- *Change in the Weather*
 - 12 shelves and 365 pots: what could the shelves and pots represent? (months and days in a year)
 - What could the different colours represent? (see the title of the work for a clue)
 - The rhythm of the arrangement suggests music: how would this artwork sound?
- *Predella* is inspired by a religious altarpiece – can you see how? (lower shelf suggests general populace, then 'taller' apostles and minor saints, then as pots get light, larger and fewer, archangels in heaven. It is the most representational work in the show).

House

- *Reading Silence* (located in Helen's sitting room in the cottages)
 - What did the artist need to consider when planning this work, which is shown amongst books on a bookcase?
 - What title would you give this piece?
 - How would it look different in your bookcase at home?
- *Below the Waterline* (located in the cupboard upstairs in the extension)
 - How does the texture of the pots contrast with the texture of the cupboard?
 - Why has de Waal made broad squat pots for this artwork, and tall thin pots for *Reading Silence*?

Activities for the Kettle's Yard House

Ceramicists at Kettle's Yard: Bernard Leach and Lucie Rie

De Waal was a student at the University of Cambridge and spent a lot of time at Kettle's Yard, surrounded by the ceramics of Jim Ede's collection. Bernard Leach was a crucial early influence (although de Waal moved in a new direction after a research trip to Japan in 1991). Lucie Rie admired Leach's work and also developed her own distinctive style.

TASK: Find one work by each potter (Leach, Rie, de Waal) and make a sketch of each on the same sheet of paper.

- Make a note of the size, colour, texture, and shape.
- What do they have in common?
- How are they different?

Collecting and arranging

De Waal has made groups of pots in his installations around the house. Jim Ede, who created Kettle's Yard, was also very interested in grouping and arranging objects together, such as the pebbles on the circular tables downstairs in the cottages. In both, there are variations in size, shape, texture and colour. De Waal is also interested in the dual forces of organisation and chaos – how the pots belong together but are individually quite different.

TASK: Compare one de Waal installation in the house with an arrangement of objects by Jim Ede.

- Start by looking around the house, finding all of de Waal's installations. Were some harder to spot than others?
- Find an example of de Waal's pots which 'blend in' with their environment – why do the pots look so 'at home' in that location?
- Find an example of de Waal's pots which contrast with their environment – why do the pots stand out in that location?
- Find an example of Ede's arranged objects in the house that you feel is similar to the way de Waal arranges pots – explain your choice to a partner.

Installation

TASK: Plan your own installation

- Draw a section of one room, taking out some objects that are there and replacing them with your own de Waal-esque installation of pots.
- Think about how the shape and size and number of pots reflect the space in which they are shown.

Activities for the Kettle's Yard House

Tenebrae No. 2 (located on the dining table, downstairs in the cottages)

Tenebrae (Latin for shadows) is a religious service celebrated by high church elements of Western Christianity. The service is typically celebrated in the evening of Holy Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday or in the morning of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and is held to represent Jesus' death.

Lighting is gradually reduced throughout the service, initially being fully lit (often including candles), extinguishing and reduction of light occurring throughout, and eventually ending in total darkness (thus the name of the service).

During some versions of the service, the place of worship is gradually stripped, which means that the decorative elements, such as any cloths on the altar or removable objects of devotion, are removed. Imagery such as icons, crucifixes, altar decoration, and other decorative but immovable objects, are covered by plain cloths or otherwise hidden in some manner. This happens as the service progresses so that whilst at the start of the service, the place of worship is in its usual state, at the end it is totally plain. (source: *Wikipedia*)

TASK: In groups, discuss the following questions in relation to the work Tenebrae No. 2

- How does the title reflect the artwork?
- Is there a relationship between the dining room table and the arrangement of the objects?
- How is the choice of colours in the pots relevant? What could they be picking up on in the room and repeating?
- Does the arrangement of the pots into a spine down the centre of the table remind you of anything?
- How has de Waal created a sense of religion, spirituality, or ritual in this installation?
- How would you respond differently to the work if the pots were arranged randomly across the table (or around the bench seat?)
- How do you think the work may change at different times of day?

Ghost (located on the bridge shelf, above the rocking chair)

Ghost is an arrangement of pots and plates that replaces the objects usually displayed along this shelf. De Waal worked from memory to create this piece, which is an interesting challenge as memories can often prove inaccurate. However, this isn't about accuracy, but about how the space has been remembered and what impression it has left.

TASK: How good is your visual memory?

- In pairs, select an area (room or corner) of the house, including one of de Waal's works.
- One person is time-keeper and allows one minute for the other to look at a room. With their back to the space, that person then has three minutes to sketch (or list) everything about it they can remember.
- Swap over so each person has a turn as time-keeper and observer.

Activities for the Kettle's Yard Gallery

A Line Around a Shadow (located along the front window sill)

These 97 pots were originally made for the white drawing room at Blackwell, the Baillie Scott Arts and Crafts house in the Lake District. However, de Waal describes his work as 'site sensitive' rather than 'site specific' so while the effect is different (they were displayed above a fireplace at Blackwell), the pots work successfully as an installation at Kettle's Yard.

TASK: Consider this artwork in relationship to its context.

- Stand next to the ramp in the gallery and choose 5 words that describe *A Line Around a Shadow*. Spend time choosing carefully: think about environmental factors such as the light, the temperature, and sounds.
- Stand close to the window and choose a further 5 words that describe the work.
- Stand outside on the footpath and choose a further 5 words. Think about the subtle changes that come about from viewing this work from different perspectives.
- Sketch only the reflection in the wooden floor.
- Sit closely and sketch a small detail from one pot (such as the stamp, which is the equivalent of a painter's signature and often the only disruption on the smooth surface of de Waal's pots).

Hand-made versus machine-made

Consider the following quote from de Waal (radio interview on BBC3 with John Tusa) in relation to *Register* (floorpiece in the back gallery)

"When you're making a vessel, and I really am actually only interested in vessels – that's for me the most interesting things about ceramics – when you're making a vessel every single touch of your hands after you've thrown the basic cylinder, actually changes the interiority, the sense of the internal space, completely. You can make twenty pots in a row, and by just moving them ever so slightly each of them has a very different resonance, a very different sort of pitch."

TASK: Consider the manufacture of the pots and their display

- Looking at *Register*, what appears made by hand and what appears made by machine (and what is the difference).
- How is a mass-produced object valued differently from a unique artwork?
- What is the relationship between the inside and the outside of the pots?
- What is the relationship between the pots and the container?
- Why are there two containers? Why are the pots arranged in a single file?
- What came first: the container or the pots? How can you tell?

Activities for school

What is a *wunderkammer*?

In the exhibition, *Wunderkammer* is an artwork of over 300 plates and vessels stacked within a wooden container. You can look inside the space but never see all of the pots, only some at a time. The container creates a miniature room, a particular space to peek into. The shape of the container is as important as the arrangement of plates within it.

The title refers to the 17th and 18th century tradition of collecting an eclectic range of items (rocks, animals, tools) from various countries. These curiosities were displayed in a 'wonder cabinet' (translated from German), which was an entire room rather than just a cupboard. It is from this tradition of collecting and displaying artefacts (including ceramics from Japan, Korea and China) that museums developed.

The sense of wonder and discovery is important to both de Waal's *Wunderkammer* and the tradition of amassing unusual objects.

TASK: Create a *wunderkammer*, either 3D objects arranged in a box or 2D objects collaged onto paper.

- Research the history of *wunderkammer*, find examples via the web in stately homes or perhaps paintings of famous collections.
- Think closely about what your collection should include and how it should be displayed.
- Will there be a theme (the natural world? Blue things? Spirals and circles? Ceramics?)
- Will you only allow 'peep holes' into your *wunderkammer*?
- How will you make your *wunderkammer* exciting for a viewer?

The importance of Minimalism

Minimal Art emerged as a movement in the late 1950s and continued through the Sixties and Seventies. It is a term used to describe paintings and sculpture that thrive on simplicity in both content and form, and seek to remove any sign of personal expressivity. The aim of Minimalism is to allow the viewer to experience the work more intensely without the distractions of composition, theme and so on.

(www.artmovements.co.uk)

TASK: Find out more about de Waal's artistic precedents

De Waal is inspired by the sculptures of Donald Judd and Carl Andre and the architecture of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.

- Who were these artists and architects? What was their work about?
- How do de Waal's pots relate to these influences?
- De Waal's manufacture of pots by hand is very different from the machine aesthetic of the Minimalists, so why doesn't de Waal make pots using machines?
- Can you find any other examples of Minimalism in design and the arts?