Mary Nohl (1914–2001) graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1937. After college, she taught art at several schools before returning home to live with her parents and open a commercial pottery studio. It wasn’t until after the deaths of her only sibling and her father, and her increasingly frail mother’s move to a nursing home in the 1960s that Nohl gave free reign to her imagination. She spent the next fifty years transforming the interior and exterior of the family cottage in Fox Point, Wisconsin. Voracious and interdisciplinary, Nohl made sculptures, paintings, ceramics, glass, and graphic novels, and adorned nearly every piece of furniture in the home. As indicated by her personal notes tracking her diet, exercise, and art practice, Nohl’s approach was methodical, disciplined, and all-consuming, leaving little time for the social interaction that she seems to both craved and withdrawn from.

This exhibition honors the moment and the place where it all began for Nohl—the interior—and brings together her various forms of art making in a complete restaging of her living room.

GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS AND BOO: MARY NOHL + Catherine Morris
April 30–August 20, 2017

Front Image Cutline:
Mary Nohl, Untitled, n.d.; oil on board; 24 x 24 in.
John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

GREETINGS AND SALUTATIONS AND BOO is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center’s fiftieth-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center’s collection of artist-built environments.
How were you introduced to Mary Nohl's work?

My response to Nohl's work is very much informed by my interests in how work by women artists gets contextualized and written into history. I am also very interested in how those perceptions change over time and how artists are appreciated differently by succeeding generations. Nohl's work feels so specific to making objects, yet fully informed by a sophisticated understanding of the history of art—from surrealism and Jean Arp to abstract expressionism and, perhaps, pop art—opens up new opportunities for research and for exhibition making.

How does your own background inform your response to Nohl's work?

Catherine Morris is the Sackler Family Senior Curator of Feminist Art and a Curator in Residence for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. As a curator and writer, she curates exhibitions that contextualize feminist art within broader cultural, historical, and political contexts of the time. Her work incorporates this modernist history into personal narratives that emerge from the home, landscape, and families where she lived and worked for decades. She has devoted the last fifty years of her life to turning her childhood home into a fantastic yet fragile environment that reflected intense training and a freedom to create. The site specificity of her project—its rough-hewn materials gathered from local environments—also put it in danger. Nohl was an artist who clearly digested and explored the history of art, taking from it an aesthetic sensibility that she adapted to her own vision. I suspect the clarity of this aesthetic lineage looks fresher and sharper in 2017 than it did in 1980.

Nohl's story features a number of narratives that typically took artists out of the running for serious consideration in the art world of the time—she was a woman, she made work in and for a personal and unique domestic context, her work had a bent toward the narrative rather than lofting the purely abstract like certain colleagues. 

How does your own background inform your response to Nohl's work?

And it seems important to understand that Mary Nohl and her commitment to being an artist contain a political component. The decisions a person like Nohl had to make to set up her life the way she did must have been difficult, involving personal sacrifice and knowledge of the possible pain involved in bucking social norms. Her decision to build a chain-link fence between her beloved home and art and the equally cherished lake outside her door. A woman working alone, from and with her own financial and physical means, would automatically be a suspicious character in almost any setting, an increasingly affluent political context of her time.

But there are parallel narratives that are equally true. Her story aligns closely with the twentieth-century history of modernism, and it reflects many of the aesthetic and materials interests of that time. Her work incorporates this modernist history into personal narratives that emerge from the home, landscape, and families where she lived and worked for decades. She devoted the last fifty years of her life to turning her childhood home into a fantastic yet fragile environment that reflected intense training and a freedom to create. The site specificity of her project—its rough-hewn materials gathered from local environments—also put it in danger.

Nohl's work feels so specific to making objects, yet fully informed by a sophisticated understanding of the history of art—from surrealism and Jean Arp to abstract expressionism and, perhaps, pop art—opens up new opportunities for research and for exhibition making. Feminists of the 1970s famously introduced the adage “The personal is political” into our common thinking. As a curator and writer, I understand Mary Nohl to be someone who did not want to be a woman and an artist. She was hooked almost immediately.