Edith: An Architectural History
An installation by Nora Wendl

January 19 — February 28, 2023

Thursday, January 19

Artists talk: 4:30 — 5:30 PM
Lang Performing Arts Center Cinema
List Gallery reception: 5:30 — 7:00 PM

Gallery hours: Tues. — Sun., 12:00 — 5:00 PM
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The List Gallery, Swarthmore College is pleased to present Edith: An Architectural History, by Nora Wendl. Incorporating videos, printed fabric panels, and photographic installations, Wendl’s List Gallery exhibition calls attention to the myths, controversies, and even the redacted testimonies surrounding one of the icons of modernist architecture: The Edith Farnsworth House. Nora Wendl will give a public lecture about her work on Thursday, January 19 at 4:30 PM in the Lang Performing Arts Center Swarthmore College. The List Gallery reception will follow from 5:30 to 7:00 PM. List Gallery hours are Tuesdays through Sundays, Noon – 5:00 PM. Gallery admission and all events are free and open to the public.

Trained as an architect and writer, Wendl researches and reinterprets architectural history through writing, photography, film, installation, and performance. Since 2003, she has focused on the life and work of Dr. Edith Farnsworth, a Chicago-based physician who, in 1945, commissioned Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to design a weekend retreat on her riverfront property in Plano, Illinois. The resulting steel and glass house became an icon of 20th Century modern architecture. However, cost overruns, design flaws, and construction delays led to a lawsuit between Farnsworth and van der Rohe—a process that transformed the house into a contested space, and fostered historical narratives that mythologize van der Rohe as an artistic genius, while casting Farnsworth (without substantiation) in the role of a disappointed lover—ignoring her documented contributions, and her right to occupy the house. Wendl’s engagement with primary
documents related to this history underscore Farnsworth’s voice and presence in the house, which the doctor occupied from 1951 – 1968.

A centerpiece of the exhibition is I Listened (2022), a series of four architecturally-scaled photographs showing different views of The Edith Farnsworth House. The images are printed on semi-transparent panels that hang from the ceiling, creating a space within the gallery that is simultaneously intimate and unrestricted. White plywood staircases placed next to two of the panels invite visitors to imagine themselves ascending to a pristine inner sanctum; at the same time, the steps call attention to the artificial and contingent nature of such perspectives.


The barriers to historical research are writ large—literally—in Wendl’s two-channel video titled “Guard Everything and All Will Be Well,” which documents the artist redacting the trial transcript of van der Rohe vs. Farnsworth, a document that she was permitted to read, but not substantially quote, paraphrase, or represent. An adjacent installation, I do not remember conversations with the moon, consists of redacted transcript pages punctuated by scattered fragments of legible text. Collectively, such works call attention to some of the unequal power relationships, reputational gatekeeping, and compromises that limit our understanding of history.

The exhibition also features Wendl’s film, This is also a glass house (2022), documenting the artist’s temporary installation in Edith Farnsworth House in 2020. Completed collaboration with the National Trust for Historic Preservation the installation filled the house with replicas of the furniture Farnsworth used from 1951
until 1954, when a devastating flood destroyed the interior. In Wendl's film, a female voice braids Wendl’s own musings about desire and space with excepts from Farnsworth’s memoirs and unpublished poems.

Shown together with two photographic series, Pony Coat (2021) and Glass Docs, the film reflects the artist’s exploration of architectural history as an embodied practice, integrating historical and documentary strategies with personal perspectives, imaginative experiments, and political discourse.

Nora Wendl is an associate professor of architecture at the University of New Mexico, where she teaches both architectural design and theory. She is also executive editor of the Journal of Architectural Education. She has been awarded grants and residencies by numerous organizations, including the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, the Santa Fe Art Institute, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP). For NTHP, Wendl was content lead and design co-lead for the 2020-2022 exhibition Edith Farnsworth, Reconsidered, in which the Farnsworth House was staged as Dr. Farnsworth actually inhabited it in the early 1950s—rebuiting the claim that Mies van der Rohe furnished the house. Wendl has also written and published widely, including poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and academic articles that have made their way into popular press. Her most recent publication, “Guard Everything Appropriately and All Will be Well” in Revista Arquitectura (2021), examines the trial transcript from van der Rohe vs. Farnsworth and the exhibition Edith Farnsworth, Reconsidered as twin artifacts—both representing the same period of time (1951 – 1954) and both institutionally redacted to “protect” the legacy of the architect.

This exhibition is made possible by the Bruno Fine Arts Fund and the Program of Art History.