



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Kiki Smith, 2017  
July 20 and August 16

Funded by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation.

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kiki Smith on June 9 and August 16, 2017. The interview took place at Smith's studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by Christopher Lyon for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Kiki Smith and Christopher Lyon have reviewed the transcript. A number of Christopher Lyon's corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been heavily edited. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

KIKI SMITH: After menopause, I just didn't have the same—I don't have the same sort of manic need to be making something every second of the day. And then also, I know the forms of making things often, and I know the forms of exhibiting something, or the distribution of it, and then I have to relearn or find some crevice of something that I've missed, to find a new way to, you know, be excited about what I'm doing. You know, I've been working a long time, so I've had a lot of experiences that for the most part have been very good. Also, I got married recently.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Whoa.

KIKI SMITH: So I've spent time being married. And also living out of the city, I was paying attention to other things, like gardening and things like that become endlessly fascinating. Living out of the city for me is inspiring for work. For a long time, when I first started going to New Mexico in the '90s, my work changed a lot, just from being out of New York. But it's not that in New York my work was very social in its configurations or anything like that, but it's still different than work made in a more natural environment with plants and birds and animals.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Let me interrupt you for just a moment, so I can do a little header for this. This is Christopher Lyon, interviewing Kiki Smith, on June 9, 2017, at her house in the Lower East Side of New York. So hopefully we've got that, yes.

Yeah, well, that's interesting, that you cast that geographically, because what I was trying to think about is how we could talk in a way that was not overly linear and narrative, that could work across pieces from the different decades, and make connections that might be interesting to you, but at the same time, have at least a little bit of a framework, so this wouldn't be too hard to follow. It struck me that maybe one way to do that, which would be reasonably neutral and yet potentially illuminating, would be to talk about the successive domestic environments, if I can put it that way, that you've been in, perhaps starting with South Orange, but also Ludlow Street and this house. Where are you upstate?

KIKI SMITH: In Catskill. Catskill, New York.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Catskill, New York, okay. And there have been some intermediate places. You were in Berlin for a residency, was it?

KIKI SMITH: No. I used to go there every year, for five or six years.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you mentioned New Mexico. So there are these different environments that have—

KIKI SMITH: —produced work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know how that sounds as a structure, but—the other thing that—oh, I was taken with this. I was looking at the catalogue for the Pace show, *Lodestar*, and you are quoted—just a very nice sentence: "The idea was to build an open narrative about the precarious wanderings during life's pilgrimage, as well as to acknowledge that often, during quiet and seemingly incidental moments, creativity and inspiration are given to us freely, and how, as an artist, one tries to imbue the next generation with a sense of possibility."

KIKI SMITH: That's nice.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Which, in a way is kind of the point of these interviews.

KIKI SMITH: I went to Venice and listened to Philip Guston movies. I went three times; I didn't listen to the whole thing in one sitting, but I listened to them, and it was so great, because the language he was speaking doesn't exist any more. The way he spoke and the cadence, he sounds like [Allen] Ginsberg, and it was really interesting to hear the way people spoke English forty years ago compared to the way Americans speak now. Also, how he

spoke was very free, I thought.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was he—?

KIKI SMITH: He was just talking about his work. I have no recollection of what he said. I just was very struck by it, how it was from a different time, how language changes, how consciousness changes over time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You also have said in the past, and I always was very taken with this, that your art is a way of learning about the world, that there's some kind of, sort of, I don't know if it's curiosity?

KIKI SMITH: I always said it was a way to synthesize your experience into an object. Also, for many people, I think it's a way to get an education. Some people's work is very research-based, in a very literal manner, and people make very didactic work from it. I think that their pleasure is in the investigation of material, of learning about a subject, learning about something.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: For me, it's mostly learning about forms or the scale of things, or forms that exist in the two and three-dimensional world. And just learning weird techniques of making different things. I do think that a great deal of the impetus is curiosity, the pleasure of discovery. Sometimes just to discover what's under your foot, but sometimes to discover things that are really far away, that you don't know about at all.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In the '80s, you and your sister studied to be EMT technicians?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. That must have been '86 or around then. We studied at Interfaith Hospital in Bed-Stuy. We went for six weeks and sometimes it seemed like several months of going like every night or three nights a week to school and just studying what you were supposed to do.

I thought that was something that would be good for everybody to do. It was at the time of the war in Nicaragua. There was a book called *The Barefoot Doctor*, about how people in these wars, or insurgencies, needed to know how to take care of themselves. I was impressed by that; that as a citizen, one should know first aid and what to do if someone is choking or having a heart attack. I was making such a subjective version of the body—I was using *Gray's Anatomy*, so it wasn't [completely subjective]—but it was still my own personal view of the body that had a personal resonance for me. That intrigued me.

My sister Bebe wanted to learn how to be an emergency medical technician and I said I would go with her, because I thought it would get me out of my navel a little bit and into some other version of the world. It was fascinating to me in the same way sublingual things pop into your head, associations you make that come to you, that aren't really—[it wasn't] so much about becoming an emergency medical technician. And anyway, you couldn't become one on a volunteer basis in New York City.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: I didn't really want a job, because I already had a job. I was an electrician's assistant. So I didn't want to [become an EMT], but I really liked it, and actually, that's when I made the second prints with [Joe] Fawbush, which I basically just made at home on my table. They were called *Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law*. That was because the teacher talked about the solid and the hollow organs, the heart or the stomach and intestines as hollow organs, and the liver and kidneys as solid organs. I never thought about what that meant, and it wasn't like I came up with any particular meaning.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

KIKI SMITH: It just meant something, you know, it just struck me. You know, how things, sentences, or words strike you with meaning that isn't necessarily discernable.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You started, at that time—I don't know what the chronology is exactly—but you were making organs.

KIKI SMITH: I already was. The first print I made with Fawbush was called *How I Know I'm Here*, and that was after I went to Mexico, but I think—well, no, it must have been earlier than that. That was the first one, and my niece was already about two years old or three years old, so that was probably '94. *Possession* must have been a little later. Charlie Ahearn taught me how to do silk-screening, because I was making t-shirts for the Times Square show, which was '82. And then these were sort of the first art things, like a real art edition, a print edition, that I made at home on the kitchen table with a friend helping me.

They were good prints, just for me good, because I flooded the screen. When you silk-screen, you flood the screen and then you put it down and you squeegee across. But a lot of times, I'd get a sort of smearing

underneath when I was making t-shirts, and it would all be a mess. But then I just started taking the ink that goes underneath and rubbing it with paper towels, so it would have the image, and make a monoprint at the same time, like an obliteration of the image at the same time as it printed the image. Then I would go over it in yellow ink so that you could see the organ. For me that was really the first—I had only made about three or four prints before that, so that was a big deal to me, to figure out how to use the actual meaning and mistakes.

It was at the time that Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood made the punk movement, and all that bad t-shirt printing. It was like you would be trying to make it good yet it was always kind of bad. Then I thought, oh, just use the medium, use the bad crappiness of it to make something that's interesting, that you couldn't just make. I think that's why I like printmaking so much. You make something that you couldn't make by intention. For me, in printmaking, what I like is always sort of throwing a spanner in, putting something in it and then making something happen that I didn't know was going to happen.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: Other times, I spent years trying to learn how to make a good etching. But that was nice, it was nice making those prints. I don't think we sold any, and I had to take them back, I got them back later, after Joe died, and then painted them. I hadn't painted at that time, because I got sick of painting them. One part of me really likes repetitive manual labor, you know like this [indicating a piece she is working on], like scratching wax, because you can spend about ten hours doing it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And what is that you are making?

KIKI SMITH: I'm making a wax for a bee, a honeybee, and then the antennas go on.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I see. That's really nice.

KIKI SMITH: And then the two of them sit together.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do you make honey up [in Catskill]?

KIKI SMITH: My husband does. I work a little bit sometimes, but mostly he does it. We have, I don't know, 50 hives now.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Fifty hives?

KIKI SMITH: I think so.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Good grief. Well, I think that one of those Fawbush shows, the one with the bronze baby.

KIKI SMITH: Oh yeah, I had honey things in that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That was the first time I saw your work. I think that was a pretty amazing show. That piece is dated 1987, the bronze baby. Was it done in Berlin?

KIKI SMITH: Oh, the one with the X-rays.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The X-rays, yes.

KIKI SMITH: No. I made it in a foundry upstate. I can't think of the name of now. I have a friend, Raimund Kummer, who was part of a group of artists called Büro Berlin, and they made an exhibition called *Emotope*. I was invited, and Geneviève Cadieux from Canada, and we became very good friends. There was one other woman in it, and then the rest were men, from all different countries. The [German] Senate supported it and they had different locations as possibilities, and one of them was the Spandau Prison, where [Rudolf] Hess was kept. I said I wanted the—what year was that?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Maybe '88 or something?

KIKI SMITH: That's funny, because at that time I went to visit prisoners in America. I thought, what did it mean, that there was this prison that had been from the war? People had been killed there. Then the English had it, and they had Hess. I thought it was like the heart of darkness, and what did it mean, having one person, essentially, in a prison?

They had popular barometers in Berlin at the time. They were made of lamp glass, with a different weight, maybe with water, and they would go up and down. I thought that was sort of amazing, the idea of measuring an

internal pressure, and I thought, oh, that's like a person, an expression of an internal pressure. I was going to Dahlem Museum at the time a great deal, which was the ethnographic museum, with the things that had been taken out of East Germany when the Wall came down, and were stored in an ethnographic museum. I would go there a lot, and they had a book about the X-raying of sculptures in order to see the internal bracing, the repairs.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So that raw form inside.

KIKI SMITH: All of these things. So I bought a barometer and put it inside. And then I made X-rays of the sculpture. It was about different things, like faith and trust. You could only see the barometer in the form of an X-ray; there was no [tangible] evidence of it. And so you had to have faith that it was there, you know it was like Catholicism.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —About faith and the invisibility of God. I wanted it to face this prison. But then, right as we were doing it, Hess died, and then all these Neo-Nazi people came to honor his death. So the prison immediately was torn down. They just erased the whole thing, because they didn't want it to become a shrine to the Nazis. It was a big building. We installed the work in an apartment building, being built right by this prison. The windows had just been installed, and I hung the X-rays on the windows.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There were like three of them, right?

KIKI SMITH: Yeah, on the windows. The figure ended up being like a witness, watching the disappearance of this building, because Hess had died and they didn't want it to become a memorial for him. . As an artist, you have your own weird personal interests and tensions. Things like X-raying sculptures—what does it mean? It is a way of experiencing sculpture. You can do something and then there's the confluence of that experience, of your personal experience with what's happening in the world. And then all of a sudden, your thing is the only place that has the clear vision of this building being taken down. So from the time the show opened until it ended, the building was standing and then it was complete rubble, and now it's probably apartment houses or something. It was really interesting and fun. That was the year I went to Nicaragua. I was in Nicaragua and then I came home and went to Germany. I took it in a suitcase on the airplane, in my luggage. It was a heavy sculpture.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I bet.

KIKI SMITH: And then I was lucky, because I had gone under budget. I think that's the first time I had ever had a budget to do something, where somebody else paid for it. I think it was my second sculpture, a bronze sculpture. I got 250 deutsche marks back, or 250 dollars, back, and I spent it on KPM dishes and brought the suitcase back with all the dishes in it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: I still own that piece. Nobody ever bought it. When I first showed it at Fawbush, I just said, "Okay it's for sale" and if nobody buys it, I would say, "Okay now it's not for sale." "Maybe it's bad or maybe it's good, I don't know which, but I'm just keeping it." It was like they had their chance, now it's mine. [Laughs.] I had to ease up on that a little bit.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I seem to remember that years ago, when we talked about this, you said there was an element of compassion maybe, or grace, or something like that, in this figure looking out over this sort of symbol of evil.

KIKI SMITH: I just thought, what does it mean if a person epitomizes evil, and they're like the heart of a building? And then I thought the barometer was like a heart of a person. It's a weird thing, when people represent such strong realities and they're also just fucked-up people.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right.

KIKI SMITH: Or products of their time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, so you grew up in the house in South Orange. That's the house your father was born in, right?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, he was born there. His grandmother [had] moved—they were building it as a summer house, so it had no insulation. Then, her husband died, and she ended up moving there from Newark. Her daughter moved in with her and lived there with her husband and kids. I don't think that grandmother was alive when my father was alive. But my father grew up there and then I grew up there. And then my father moved out in his 50s and moved to a house a mile away, and we would go back and forth for dinner.

[Side conversation.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's good coffee, thank you so much.

KIKI SMITH: It's Japanese.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, was there an interim place that you lived between South Orange and the Ludlow Street apartment?

KIKI SMITH: First I moved to New York, on 10th Street, between 1st and A, for a couple months, and I moved in '73 to San Francisco and lived with my cousin, who was a rock drummer in a band called The Tubes. I lived with him for a couple of months, and then I sort of flopped around from one person's house to the next. And then Bebe or Seton, one of them came out, and we lived together. We had our own apartment.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In San Francisco?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. Then I came back to the East Coast. Another summer, my sister Bebe and I drove across the country and we stayed in San Francisco, and then I came back and I lived in New York with a friend from California. Then I went to Russia, and then I moved upstate, to Great Barrington.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, really?

KIKI SMITH: I had a friend from high school who lived there, on a farm with her sister and sister's boyfriend and her boyfriend, and so I went and lived with them. Then another friend of mine came. We'd gone to high school together, so I went back to school with her in Hartford, Connecticut. I went there for a year and a half, and then I moved back to New York in '76. For the last couple of years, I've kind of been going back and forth.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. And you bought this house in '96?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, June 6th. I lived on on the Bowery for half a year with an artist, and then he left and I moved to South Street and then to Ludlow Street for 20 years. Then I moved here.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I remember visiting you there.

KIKI SMITH: On Ludlow Street?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes. Throwing the key down. [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: My sister lives there now, it's very different. It's all fixed up.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

KIKI SMITH: It's much better.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, so I don't want to forget the biographical stuff. I was looking through the work—and this may make sense to you or it may not, I don't know—but I was looking through the work and it struck me that you could follow it through spans of your career in terms of certain kinds of, like, subject matter. I was trying to be as uninflected as possible, just descriptive. You know, like "infants and children," or "life and death."

KIKI SMITH: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Not interpretive. And I was wondering if this might be a way to meander through the work.

KIKI SMITH: Sure. You know, I just got certain books and they influenced me. The first part of my work is about different systems in the body or images of the body, or loose associations to different things. Sometimes about systems, about organs that are taking in and expelling fluids. Thinking about different systems, different parts of the body. They just discovered a new organ last year that they didn't know anything about. It's in your back. I don't know if they know what it does, exactly, but it is an organ.

You know, you could just put down a pebble or you could put anything down and then look to see what surrounds it. So all of that was about what surrounds things. Sometimes emotions surround them, all different emotions. And sometimes things are just historical forms that are interesting.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. The ironic thing to me is that your work, as much as anyone's I can think of, would benefit so much by being presented in a way that people could look at it through different vectors. You could look at thematically, you could look at it in terms of mediums, you could look at it through formal relationships, and all of those views would be relevant.

KIKI SMITH: That's why your electronic books would have been good.[\*]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I know, that is frustrating. [Laughs.] Well here's an example, actually, and I didn't start this on purpose but it just kind of worked out that way. I was looking at the body and anatomy, you know, and the piece in San Diego is so beautiful [*Standing* (1998), on the campus of the University of California at San Diego].

KIKI SMITH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But you know immediately, I'm saying to myself, "Yes, but it's not only about that." There is the *écorché* quality of the arms and so on, but it's also about a certain kind of figure expressing compassion or grace. It's also about fluids and liquids and so on. There are these different vectors that run through it that sometimes reinforce each other and sometimes can just be confluences. And it struck me that many of these works are on pedestals of one kind or another. The bronze baby, *Standing* [the figure stands on a 12-foot-high concrete cast of a eucalyptus trunk]. In *Woman on Pyre*, 2001, the pyre itself is a kind of a pedestal.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, a pedestal.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But a very sinister one, you know.

KIKI SMITH: That was the most expensive pedestal, too. I only made it on one piece because they charged me so much money to make the pedestal. It was more than the sculpture, I couldn't afford to make it again.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But it seems to me like—

KIKI SMITH: Well, that's also because they're different—you know, the body and gestures. A lot of how we know people or how we know sculpture, what the meaning is, is through the gesture. Physiologically, things happen to your body when you're in different poses. The arms being open came from my friend Kummer in Berlin saying he wanted to be with a woman who could open her arms wide like that. And I thought, "I can't do that, I'm not doing that." I mean completely viscerally thought, "I can't do that, I'm not doing that." So that of course is something that I had to think about [laughs], "What's the matter with me?" But that's way too vulnerable and I wasn't going there. I liked that pose ever since. There are two Egyptian sculptures of two young women, and I keep thinking they're scorpions or something, but they have their arms out like that, at a kind of 40, or whatever that angle is, [degree], and their dresses are like pleated gold. Somehow, something about them has to do with scorpions, but I can't quite remember

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, and also kneeling like that—

KIKI SMITH: I don't know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I could be wrong.

KIKI SMITH: That one with the stars [*Standing*] was like an *écorché*. It showed the arms, and the water comes out of the veins, and it showed the muscles at the back of the legs. But yes, it's a stance of compassion, like the Virgin Mary, you know, when you open up your body. In the *Women on Pyres*, it's the same thing, with the arms open wide, but it's a gesture of pity—"Why has thou forsaken me?" It's the forsaken, people pleading, being forsaken. I suppose it's like the cross, too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: You know, the open and the closed body. I made lots of sculptures that were closed bodies, more like a fetus or a crouched-up body.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You seem to have thought a lot, and in very creative ways, about the relation of figures to the ground, to the floor.

KIKI SMITH: Oh, and the supplication.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The supplication.

KIKI SMITH: I can't say that I do anything with any intention. It just comes into you, something just occurs to you, and then you can see what happens. To me, that's the exciting part, being willing to fight inanimate objects and make something happen with them. Fight a material, or have a relationship to some material until you find something that gives you a feeling. Because to me, it's not about an explicit feeling. I just want to feel it. If I make something, can I feel it back? What does it do? I don't try to elicit something specific. Just to see if something can have a feeling that feels intimate or close to me, or feels true to me at a given moment.

But also it's just about exploring different forms. Like the mother's milk sculpture, that's from those wooden

medieval bust sculptures that are very beautiful. They're on pedestals or something coming off the wall, and that was like the milk. I like the idea of body parts oozing liquids uncontrollably. It's like trying to be a contained body, and then there's this mess spilling out, like it's going out through your skin and your orifices, and it's held by gravity. It's not floating up, it's falling. Everything is falling down and away from you. It's also like a drawing in a sculpture, because all the fluid parts are made physical, like a drawing in space. I made lots of pieces like that, for example, the upside-down *Pee Body* and the train. You know, a thing between drawing and sculpture. Something that moves between being two-dimensional and three-dimensional, decorative and pictorial, decorative and an object.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's interesting.

KIKI SMITH: I always have loved the rooms at the Met with the flat Buddhist paintings on the wall. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations. I liked Barry Le Va's work very much when I met him, because his work played a lot between diagrammed pictorial space and object and drawing, like moving between drawing and sculpture and the borders of these things. That's exciting. I do it sometimes, in a sort of girly way, put shells for eyes or put glitter on things [laughs], like a teenager's decorating phase. Decorating boxes or something. I liked that as a kid, making dollhouses and things like that, decorating surfaces. In European sculpture there is some ornate surface decoration, but it's not really heavily ornate, the way it is in Asia and Africa, in bronze casting and stuff. Some people do it, like the man who did the heads, I forget his name, in Austria.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, back in the 18th century?

KIKI SMITH: He gave an enormously elaborate dress to somebody, a queen or something, that is all hammered, like armor. All chiseled. In armor, there is a great combination of drawing and three-dimensional. That's the beginning of etching. People would rub stuff into the line to see what the picture was, as they were working, and then they started printing from that. Things slipping between object and illusion. A pictorial illusion slips into the world to turn into a thing, or back and forth. I have always said it's about mass and appendage, about the trunk of the body and the arm. A piece that my father made, one of my favorite pieces of his, is called *Source*, and it's both a vertical piece and a horizontal piece, and it can be taken apart. It was called *Trunk and Arm*. That, to me, was an idea of the mass of the body and its extremities, or hair, or fingernails, but mostly arms and legs or penises and bosoms, things sort of falling off or moving out from the mass. To me that's interesting, in terms of thinking about sculpture. I did used to think about it a lot. I don't know what I think about now.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You talked to me about Rauschenberg at one point. Just thinking about the combines, for example, What did Johns say? A painting playing the game of sculpture, or something like that.

KIKI SMITH: [Rauschenberg's works] are going in all directions. They often were flaccid, on cloth or veiled or layered, and they were also signage, or silk-screens. Advertising kinds of things, you know, which had to do with media. His things work on so many different levels and he was so radical. I went to ULAE once and spent the night, because I was making prints there, and Bill had just finished a book about Rauschenberg. I was really into paper, making paper sculptures, doing all this paper stuff, and I just thought he did everything that I ever thought about for a second, before I was born. He was so inventive and explored so much. I also thought that his work really was about a vernacular of the South—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, interesting.

KIKI SMITH: If you think of people covering insides of shacks with newspaper to stay warm, it really is regional.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Almost nobody talks about that.

KIKI SMITH: Really?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Or I might have missed it. [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: That really struck me when I saw his work. Even like patchwork, and how African Americans have worked traditionally from finding things, scavenging and putting together things that already exist, the way a quilt is done. His work is the same, these combinations of things. I spent a lot of time in Detroit when I was younger, and there was a big African American art community there, people taking things and nailing them to buildings. The white artists that I knew there also worked from scavenged things, industrial things that they found and utilized that in their work. That really shocked me, when I saw that, because I had mostly had seen my father's work, which was fabricated and it did have an intention. It [began with] a drawing and [the art work] was made to look like [the drawing], and [the fabricators] made it look like that. But the people [in Detroit] just took all of this junk and would, like, shoot it to bits, until it was completely fragmented.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah.



KIKI SMITH: Or grind things. Just take things and mash them all together and grind them all with grinders. That had something to do with people using what is at hand, like a scrappiness in America, using things you would associate with folk art, and Rauschenberg's work has that a lot. He is super inventive.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There are other people in your youth. I think you mentioned Richard Tuttle as being somebody that you—did he work with your father?

KIKI SMITH: He, for a while, worked for my father. My father was a great admirer of him and his work. They were both from New Jersey, although Richard's ancestors were like people on the *Mayflower*, seventeenth generation American or something.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't know that.

KIKI SMITH: He's someone with deep roots in America and that's why he has such a deep appreciation, I think, of many American things. As a teenager, I was very influenced by him, that he used muslin and that he could just fold up [his art]. My sister's boyfriend went to Mexico and he brought her back a bolt of muslin. She wasn't that interested in it, and I ended up with it and I made things that were Richard Tuttle-looking. [Laughs.] I made kites and I would paint them. I loved it. When I was first in New York [for an extended time], I would take twigs and sew them into boats and then sew muslin on and paint them with dayglo paint—like glow-in-the-dark paint. Some of them were really long, and some of them were about five, six feet high. I would go into my parents' backyard and cut ailanthus [shoots or branches] and bring them back to New York and sew them or tie them together.

But he was very, very influential, and still is, always. I think he's really one of the most formally creative people in America. He's a rigorously aesthetic person in that he always is expanding. And then he has all these other underlying things going on. He made a show once at Mary Boone where every [piece consisted of] a [pencil] line down the wall and then a little [sculpture, collage or painting near the floor]—the size of a postcard. [Note: this is a description of Tuttle's 1992 show at Mary Boone. -CL] I always have found his work very inspirational. I like that it hasn't worn off, it doesn't have any evidence of his thinking. It's what I am deeply moved by and attracted to, because it's very rigorous work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then there's this group that you coalesced with or whatever, before the Times Square show. Tom Otterness, some of those people. How did you all come together? How did that happen?

KIKI SMITH: Well, they were all together. I think a lot of the people that were in Colab, or Collaborative Projects, Inc., went to the Whitney School, Whitney Program, and I met them all after that, because I was from Hartford. I went to school at Hartford Art School for a year and a half and then I moved to New York. I hung around mostly with painters, at Magoo's, for the first year or so, people who were a little older than me. Then I met people my age and they all were into making collaborative projects, they were much more media-oriented. They made *X* magazine [*X Motion Picture* magazine], which then became *BOMB* magazine; Betsy Sussler comes out of that. [For history of *BOMB* and its predecessor, see -CL] People were making films and music and graphics, a lot of graphics.

Tom Otterness was a thing-maker. A lot of the people really weren't, or they were expanding what a thing was, like Jenny Holzer's work. I just made things. I drew packs of cigarettes and stuff like that, so I didn't really feel like I fit in to any of it, but then I guess they got liberal or something and I thought, oh, all you have to do is go to a meeting three times and then say that you want to join, and that was it. So then you could be part of it and participate. I liked the idea of people making things together. I always say now, people are waiting around for someone to discover them or give them permission. We were just gangs of young people making things. The Times Square show was like that: renting a space and making a show. That was in 1980, so it was sort of this turn of the decade, as if we were in a new time period or something. The '80s was going to be different. It was definitely young artist-instigated. I don't think anybody showed in an art gallery until then. And I think at that moment, art galleries did come and started showing a lot of the artists.

A lot of the artists in Colab are ones that one knows today too, those who started showing in galleries in 1980, whereas I didn't start showing until eight years later, at Fawbush probably in about '86, but I didn't have like a real show until '88. I was very peripheral. I was not important in Colab at all, but I liked being in it. I think I was an officer once, doing something or other. I made a proposal for a project once, but nobody did it. I mean, I got money, because you would have to pitch. You would make a project up and you would have to pitch it and say what you wanted to do. But I met a lot of people. And that was also about discovering forms of exhibitions, and then Cara Perlman and Tom Otterness, at the Times Square show, organized A. More Store.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, yeah.

KIKI SMITH: No, it wasn't called The A. More Store, it was called The Store, and afterwards we named it A. More Store, I think. After *love*, but [also] after Alan Moore. I really liked making multiples. Charlie Ahearn taught me

how to make t-shirts. When I was young, I thought I wanted to be an artist so I could end up at Macy's. I wanted to have things in Macy's, I wanted to make things that people could have in their houses. I think a lot of people in Colab were influenced by the Russian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution, the intersection between life and politics, or social activity and daily life. I'm not very good at daily life, but I certainly like the fetishism and accouterments that go along with daily life. I could have a thousand tea towels if somebody let me [laughs]. I try to keep it down. Or dishes. I'm like a pathetically undomestic person, much to the chagrin of people—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —but I like domestic life. My father worked at home in the living room, and so I work at home in my living room.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Your mother, did she entertain people?

KIKI SMITH: She wasn't entertaining.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, like, dinners.

KIKI SMITH: No. My father invited people for dinner and my mother cooked it and we sat and had dinner. But she wasn't a socialite or anything like that. Not in the least. But we often had company, my parents' friends, students, people that worked for my father, who were basically his ex-students. My mother cooked dinner for them or made lunch, but she wasn't gregarious.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I see.

KIKI SMITH: None of us are like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Your father passed away in 1980?

KIKI SMITH: 1980.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: His death resonated for you over the following years. Is that—?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, it was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me. It's still one of the biggest. There are four people in my family. There were five, and then I have a niece, so there's six. Three of them are dead, and three of them are alive, so half my family is dead. So I've had other deaths that have impacted me.

His death was a big deal, because I had to think about death and how life grows on death. You know, how we eat things, kill things to stay alive. I made *Hand in Jar* after my father died. This is when I was in Berlin. I had clay, and I made a skull with ivy growing out of it. I found this hand, like a Halloween hand, on Kenmare Street, and I took it home to give to John Ahearn, because he was just beginning to do his castings. And then I put it in a mason jar with water from my fish tank and algae grew all over it, and I thought well, that's like a different life on death. One life on death was like us eating our carrots, and then another was like mold growing on people, or fungus.

[END OF TRACK.]

KIKI SMITH: At that time I was very curious about cancer, or things that could mimic life and mimic death. They had the attributes of death but also attributes of life. We don't go between life and death, but many other things can do that. Viruses and different things can have the attributes of both. That was interesting to me. Like, what are the borders of life and death? For me, I suppose the first year or two or three years after that was about— not reconciling with my father's death but certainly thinking about it. In other ways I felt much freer when he died, because he was so large in our lives as children. He was very respected as an artist, and for lots of people I would encounter, I was always the daughter of my father [laughs], like a bad....

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: My ex-brother in-law, Walter Robinson, curated a show at Artists Space and I made paintings of cats walking on the moon. Big paintings of cats in outer space and cats walking on the moon. The woman who wrote the review said I should leave art-making to my father. And I was ashamed. How could I think about making art when my father made art and he was such a great artist? Other times people have said to me that they realized they weren't like Picasso or Rembrandt or van Gogh or someone, and I thought, "So?"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: I take it as a base assumption that I'm not good at making things. I am not making great things, and then I think, "So what? I need to make them, I want to see what happens." In art at least, you are stopped by

whatever you want to stop you. Nothing is stopping you. Some people are stopped because they're not good at drawing. I'm not particularly good at drawing either, and I'm terrible at sculpting, but I really love the struggle. I love fighting it until I get someplace where I can say it's okay. Sometimes I look back on things and just cringe at how bad they are. But I made up strategies for myself where it wouldn't matter. I thought of that saying, Exploit your—not your disabilities, but—your deficits.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: Like, explore your deficits. Rather than being hindered by them, just embrace them and make something out of it that's good for you. Lots of people I know stopped [making art], and they went into art business and did other things, but to me, I thought they just didn't need to do it as much as I needed to have my own self-expression. I needed to do something and have something that was mine, more than anything else. And it's still a little bit like that. Here I'm making dopey beads and stuff, but it still is that I need something that's mine, that comes from my energy, that's like a proof of my experience, or of how willing I am to put energy into things. Sometimes I'm furious. I was trying to make bird claws yesterday for an hour and then I thought, I want my foundry to hire a modeler, so I can say, "Make the bird claws look like a bird claw." I don't need every aspect of the experience myself. I just need it to fucking look like a bird claw—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: You know, when it's like melting and not looking right, I don't care. I'm not trying to achieve some perfect authorship; sometimes I just want it to work and be done.

The way I work in metal a lot, I make waxes. I make clay drawings and then I pour waxes into them, and I pull them off and then I start collaging them together. I make sculptures like this. Normally people would say "This is how it's done," and then cast it and then, you know, you could cast multiples. But I make it sort of halfway done and then have to work for hours on every wax, which sometimes I get really sick of. But then I get to have my own experience, and they can be different a little bit. It gives me something to do. I also think that it's like gardening, which is mostly like digging holes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: I don't have big ideas of what I want to do with myself. It's not like I feel compelled to go hear music or take advantage that I live in New York. I don't have a big drive to have a life. I didn't grow up having so much of a life, and so I'm in a certain way relatively content not having much of a life. I like making things, it gives me something to do, it gives me a place to locate myself in an activity, and then I can fly around in my brain. [They laugh.]

—or listen to books on tape. I have endless quantities of books that I never read, reference books about lace, all different things, because everything is so fascinating.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think there was a certain point when you had perhaps several assistants and you were operating at a fairly ambitious level. Maybe this is in the early 2000s, and you've stepped back from that a little bit. Am I reading that right?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I mean, I probably have more assistants now [laughs] than I did then. You know, I used to make a lot of shows, but I didn't start showing until I was 30. My first show at Fawbush, I was 34. So most of the things I did were in my late 30s and 40s. I always feel like I'm a late bloomer, because sometimes if I think about how immature or naïve or just odd I am, at different ages, when most people have families and are retiring practically, and I feel like I've just arrived on the planet. I worked really hard and fast, and I had a tremendous amount of energy and ideas, and I just did them all the time. I like putting things in rooms. I like making shows, I like organizing them, and I like the feeling of them. I like the feeling that you can make in a room. I think sometimes in the art world, you get a sense of what the parameters are. There are other things to pay attention to in life. It's not like I'm good at paying attention to them, but there just have been things that seem more important to pay attention to.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: When did you get married exactly?

KIKI SMITH: I was married three years ago but we've been together five years.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What does he do?

KIKI SMITH: He's a beekeeper. He can do everything.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How did you meet?

KIKI SMITH: We met upstate. He has children, so I really love that. He has a daughter who is going to Columbia,

and she's really bright and just wonderful. I'm not great at any of it for sure, but certainly the last couple of years have been more interesting to me than going and filling up another space. Before I met him, I had grown tired of being on the road for months at a time. I like people, I like being around people, I find people charming and interesting, but I just thought it's too much, to be itinerant all the time. I worked out in Walla Walla, Washington, in a foundry, and now I work in a foundry in Kingston. I really like working with people who know how to do things. I also work in Italy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I remember coming to see you when you were at Mayer [Franz Mayer of Munich].

KIKI SMITH: I spent 20 years in Mayer, where I made that big *Pilgrim* piece. I was the only person there doing my own work, not for a commission, because nobody asked me to do anything but I needed to do it anyway, and I liked it. I went to Italy, in Alba, for a month, a couple of years ago, just by myself, working, and I worked at my own pace. I realized that I was the happiest that I'd been in my adult life.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

KIKI SMITH: I just didn't have to do anything. I remember somebody sent me something I had to sign, or do something and Fed-Ex [it], and I just started crying. I thought, "I can't do that, that's way too much stress for me." I made sculptures, funny sculptures of fountains. I was really happy just being by myself and working. I think Munich afforded me the same—I lived in the factory and I worked there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They kept an apartment, didn't they?

KIKI SMITH: It was much nicer than my apartment in New York, with big windows. Sometimes I would eat at the train station. It was a pretty low level of existence, but I'm very happy being anonymous, just being a person who says hello to people. You get lunch someplace and you say hello, or you say hello to the workers, but it doesn't get that involved. As long as something is grounding me, I like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What led you to become interested in working with glass, glass painting? How did that come about?

KIKI SMITH: Amy Taubin, who gave me my first show at The Kitchen. That was really my first show, and I made this piece that was about women who were beaten to death.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: With David Wojnarowicz?

KIKI SMITH: He helped me make part of it. [Amy's] brother was a doctor, and she told me that he had told her about people who compulsively swallow pins or safety pins. I remembered as a kid, we would swallow string and pull it back up our throats, or we would sew our fingers together and stuff like that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: We thought that was really amusing. She told me that he had a medical magazine where you could see all these things that people swallowed compulsively. And I thought, "Oh, I get it. That is just how we are, just swallowing the world compulsively," you know? I wanted to make a glass stomach, and somebody told me about the Experimental Glass Workshop on Mulberry Street.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah, I remember that.

KIKI SMITH: I went there and I met a guy, and I made a sculpture of a stomach and then he said he would blow it [in glass] for me, and then he asked me if I would make another model of a stomach for a Pepto-Bismol commercial. I had to make two of them, so that they could put the Pepto-Bismol between the two glasses that it was coating. I made him that [model] and then he made me my stomachs.

Then Stephen Day taught me how to do stained glass painting. He just told me, in two seconds, how to do it. How to mix gum arabic and lead powder. I was crazy about it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then it's fired?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. But mine would all slump, because we didn't really have shelves. We had them all stacked and they would all slump. I wanted to make sperm, so I made sperm. There was a gallery, Marvin Numeroff, on Broome Street, and Claudia Gould worked there. He had a medical testing lab, and I asked him if I could come with David Wojnarowicz and make X-rays of us beating each other up, for this show I had at The Kitchen, and then, also, we made MRIs.

They did testing and one of the things they tested was slow sperm. You would be looking at people's sperm, and some were going too slow, or they're doing wrong things, something like that. I thought it was like a miracle,

because you're looking under a slide and there's something alive, moving, and it's luminescent: completely white, luminescent sperms moving, and I thought, "Oh, I want to make sculptures of sperm in Schott crystal." So I made those and then paintings of a cross-section of the muscles of the head that I copied from a medieval drawing. I made lots of them for an Artists Space benefit, and they all sat on a little shelf. They were all completely warped, just a mess. I imagine they're all broken now. I've never seen any come up [for sale] ever. I didn't really understand how to do it, to make them—we just stacked them. They didn't have shelves and I didn't have the money to buy shelves, so they came out wonky. Every one was completely wonky.

But I loved doing it. And then because of that, my friend Kummer had a friend, Stefan Uber in Munich, who was working at the Mayer. I went to Mayer with him, and I met them, and I said, "I'm going to become part of your family. I'm going to come here and I'm going to do lots of work. " And they just looked at me, like, mm-hmm?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] But it happened?

KIKI SMITH: But I did. Yes, because I was asked to do a show by Petra Giloy-Hirtz and Dr. Steiner, who was the head of the Diocesan Museum in or near Starnberger See, outside Munich [*Kiki Smith: Creation*, Diözesanmuseum, Friesing, Germany, 1999]. I said yes. In Germany, they had budgets, whereas here, I never had a budget for anything. I said I wanted to keep the money in Germany and make stained glass paintings, and I made the paintings of Sainte Geneviève and the deer.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, is that where those came from?

KIKI SMITH: And then I made a painting of moons.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The one that's on the shelves?

KIKI SMITH: That one I did later.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Later, okay.

KIKI SMITH: No, actually, that I did in Brooklyn.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you?

KIKI SMITH: Is that true? I think I did that in Brooklyn. Then I made more of them. I made about seven paintings of the moon and then I made all these deer and Sainte Geneviève, and then I made Little Red Riding Hood and the wolves, and that was long, large piece. Some people bought the Little Red Riding Hood for a foundation in Switzerland, I think. But the *Pilgrim*, you know, is just enormous, 24 drawings on glass that are about six feet by seven feet, or something like that. They're big. Most people make something for an [existing] architecture; I eventually got asked to make things for chapels, but I didn't want to. I wanted to make my own version of a chapel. I didn't want to fit whatever I made to a dogma, or to fit too literally.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You did make that beautiful window for the synagogue [rose window for Eldridge Street Synagogue, 2010].

KIKI SMITH: That was because synagogues have more freedom.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

KIKI SMITH: They were doing a restoration and no one knew what the window had looked like, which somehow seems impossible to me. It blew out in the early '30s. They had asked artists to be in this competition, which they didn't exactly tell me to begin with, and I said, I'm not doing competitions because it's a waste of time. But I really loved the woman who ran it, Bonnie Diamond, and this other woman, Amy Steinfeld-Miller. I just found them really compelling. Then I had an idea, and I said I'm not doing it, but I have an architect who made my porch, Debbie Gans. It was her birthday, and she is Jewish, and I thought, "Oh, you want to make a synagogue?" Most artists hire architects or architectural engineers to do a project, and I said, "No, I don't want to do that, I want to make a collaboration." I had it how I wanted it although we had to change a bit for engineering problems. We had to change something that I wished hadn't been changed. In any case, we made it as a collaboration and that was really one of the smartest moves I ever made, because otherwise, it would have been like hell, having to talk to people. We made it at Gil Studio, who are the people restoring the synagogue but also the people with whom I had made all my moons and stained glass that were done in America.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you ever meet Julie Sloan? Any connection with that? She's a stained glass historian, expert, and restoration person.

KIKI SMITH: I don't know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I remember hearing her give a talk [at Eldridge Street Synagogue]. She was responsible for the restoration of St. Thomas Church, the one at 53rd and Fifth, you know, that's next to MoMA. Just an aside. But transparency, seeing through, that's a pretty early aspect of the work. I mean you're working with the X-rays and you're also working with translucent papers. You've worked with a lot of translucent—

KIKI SMITH: That's true. I don't even think about that because a lot of my stained glass hasn't ever been illuminated by light from windows. I made ones in Krefeld, which *Pilgrim* came out of. I had a show at the Haus Esters in Krefeld, [inaudible]. I made stained glass and frames, to be in the windows, and that was really the only time. You know, they're like very low-grade stained glass. I was painting on opal reamy, which is like a milk glass, with striations in it. Or sometimes with seed glass, with little bubbles in it. In the synagogue, we used color, like there's silver stain and colored glass and stuff, but in general, I'm just painting black on—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: I made black drawings on—like my prints. All of those were like those I made for *Pilgrim*, and all of them came from prints first. All the deer came from prints, the Sainte Geneviève, everything came from making lithographs first. Because you're working on light tables when you do glass painting, you do it in layers. You do your line work, then you do your washes, then you can go back, you know you can go back and forth, adding stuff, and you can fire them a fair amount of times. I've practically never used color. I've done a lot of hinterglas painting, and then I made paintings on glass where I leafed the back.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Leafed the back, okay.

KIKI SMITH: With white gold leaf usually, or gold gold leaf, so it becomes opaque. I don't know if it's the *Lusitania*? One of the ships at the Met, they're wonderful stained glass or hinterglas painting with leaf behind it, so it mirrors it. I can't think now if it's the *Lusitania* [the "History of Navigation" mural, 1934, designed by Jean Dupas, from the ocean liner *Normandie*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York]. It was one of the ships that had a tragic ending.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is a very German thing isn't it, hinterglasmalerei?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, it's essentially like folk art for saints.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But it was something that—

KIKI SMITH: And decoration.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —the early 20th century modernists, Gabriele Münter.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, people did tons of it. It was really in the culture, you know. They painted on glass with colored tin foils behind it, which was the low version, and then you have fancier versions. But yes, I love it, and I'm a sucker, for some reason, for German things. I was born there, but I also— When I first went to Berlin in '82, I went to Dahlem Museum. I would just go there and cry and cry and cry and cry, because everything was so moving, all the Madonnas. There was no idealization; they weren't idealized the way French and Italian things are so idealized. They were really people, you saw the humanness of the people and you saw the roughness of how things were made sometimes, or the fineness of how things were made. I thought, "Oh, I fit with this, I'm from someplace, I'm from this." Not a dark world, but like one where things are imbued with spirit. It might not be true, it might be just my fantasy—but things that were made before the Renaissance, or Enlightenment, were made for a belief. Like, the artists had a desire to create [things that express] belief; there's not irony in [those] things or cynicism. You know, it meant something to me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's an interesting aspect of your work, that it doesn't have layering and irony.

KIKI SMITH: I don't, I'm not—no, I don't like it. I'm too simple I like things that have care and love in them, and it's not like everything, but I like love and care. And it's not like—you know, to see that in an object, like it doesn't make anything good necessarily, like, you know, people can be very excellent at making things and they can be dead as doornails, or they can be anything. I don't know, I just like things that I think are moving.

[END OF TRACK.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is Christopher Lyon. I'm interviewing Kiki Smith on August 16, 2017, at her home and studio in the East Village, New York. Thank you for [laughs] submitting to—

KIKI SMITH: Thank you.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The last time we approached your art, talking about locations, places you've lived, you had a considerable number of interesting things to say about your goals and methods, and the circumstances of

your different living places. I suggest that we now focus on other people (and animals): family, artists—including those in your family, collaborators of various kinds, including printmakers, people working in foundries, your assistants, curators you've worked closely with, poets and writers. Just kind of walk through, not very systematically. I've organized them kind of by categories, just to keep them straight in my mind, but we can go anywhere that the conversation goes.

First of all, family is obviously unusually important to you. I think it's not the case for all of us that family continues to play such an important role in our lives, but it seems that's the case with you. We talked about your family at some length last time, but I didn't want to start off without establishing that as a kind of baseline for this. I didn't remember that you had a niece.

KIKI SMITH: Yeah, I have a niece.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Bebe's daughter?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, my sister's daughter.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then the last time you mentioned that you are now married and living mainly upstate, you come down here from time to time. I didn't want to neglect animals.

[They laugh.]

I think you grew up with birds in your house in South Orange.

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I had a cat, Minou [ph], that was the center of my universe as a child.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

KIKI SMITH: Until it went away and died. It was very important to me, that I had that cat. I had another cat that I think a possum or a raccoon killed. And then I had a cat in New York, Ginzer, for about 15 years also, that was very important to me. Now I share a cat with my sister. I've always really loved cats. I've found them very interesting, because they're so independent, but they also seem very psychically attuned to one as a person. It has been an enormous comfort in my life, to live with cats.

We had birds as a child, too, and I had birds as an adult. I had a lot of birds for a long time, but they're not really — Basically they just tolerated me. I ended up having one dove for ten years or so. It used to fly in and out of the house all day long and sit on the tree and come back in. I fed it and I gave it water, but it certainly didn't want to get near me. I tried not to harass it too much, but I liked seeing it and I drew pictures of it and made movies. I loved watching it sitting in the trees all day. But I think when the hawks came to the East Village, the birds got it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: When I first met you—I think you were on Ludlow Street then?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, then I had lot of birds.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] You had lots of birds.

KIKI SMITH: Once I had a relationship with someone, and a friend of mine said, "Kiki, you know when you get in a relationship, you have to make concessions." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "You have to get rid of the birds in your bedroom." And I said, "Oh, okay, okay." And that's when I stopped having birds, I suppose, except the one bird that flew in and out of the house.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But birds have continued to be a big presence in your art.

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I love birds; there are so many different kinds of birds upstate. I saw four eagles today.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

KIKI SMITH: There are osprey and there are hawks, and there are tons of herons, different kinds of water birds and geese, everything. There's a white goose and then there are billions of yard birds. On our road, there are different areas where different kinds of birds live, and there are vultures and crows, big murders of crows. If larger birds come, they all start screaming at the larger birds. I'm like a kid, I guess. They're wondrous creatures, you know, that kind of hold everything. Cats do, too. I am not really that fond of dogs. We had dogs sometimes when I was a child, and we had beautiful dogs, bull mastiffs. But I didn't like the smell of them very much: I didn't feel that same comfort. I felt a lot with my cats, that when I came home and they would sleep with me, I would dream all my work or that somehow I knew things from the animals that I didn't know just on my own. I have to let that one in.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Speaking of cats, right. That's a pretty cat, what's the cat's name?

KIKI SMITH: Dorrit, Little Dorrit.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Little Dorrit as in Dickens?

KIKI SMITH: As in Charles Dickens. It's my sister's cat, sort of. She lives with me part of the year and with her part of the year.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the most touching images in all your work is the *Pietà* with you and Ginzer. That is Ginzer, correct?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. That was a big lesson for art for me. Because I love the *Pietà*, because it's such a moving image, I had the idea of making a *Pietà* of myself with the cat. I tried to do it and I had a friend of mine take a picture of me holding the cat. I was like big and heavy and voluptuous and the cat was just sort of sitting there, thinking, what are you doing to me?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: You know? And it had no meaning, it had no substance to it. It was, like, totally not true. But then, maybe two years later, my cat died and then I was sitting there crying my eyes out. My assistants were here and I said, "Okay, now take the picture," because then it was real, because the cat was lifeless and long and thin and splayed out. I made a print of my cat. I wrapped the cat in a basket and brought it to the print shop and traced him on the plate, and took photographs, and then I made a nice print out of that. It was one of the best etchings I ever made. And then I also made the litho, you know, collage drawings of myself holding the cat. Sometimes the head was larger.

I didn't have a cat again for a long, long time, because I saw that when I was having my art career, I started traveling a lot. I saw that the cat suffered from my traveling. I could feel his suffering when I came home, and then I just didn't want to have anything suffer on my account. Whereas somehow now, between Seton and I, with Seton and the girls being here, it works out better. And Dorrit is more independent than Ginzer was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] No, I mean that *Pietà* is remarkable, because with so many *Pietàs*, there's a beatific expression on the Virgin's face. You were just really distraught, you know?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, I was. I was like an old spinster. I didn't live with anybody and the cat gave me a great deal of company and solace and pleasure and direction. Also it was good to look after something.

[Side conversation.]

It was my primary relationship in major parts of my life. It wasn't as if I didn't have friends, but my cat was my solace.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. Following along slightly in that religious vein, and I don't know if this is something [you want] to talk about, but there is a pronounced—I hesitate to call it Catholic, but it's touching on religious narrative, religious iconography—

KIKI SMITH: I think it is probably because I grew up with abstract art, that I love the narratives, and where I saw narrative was in church. I was most attracted to the iconography of religious objects. I think Catholicism and Hinduism have a lot in common because they believe in the objects holding the divine—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: — that you can manifest the divine in the physical. It fetishizes the physical in a way. All those accouterments of belief. In a lot of religions and belief systems you have objects, and to me the object is always, in a certain way, more interesting than the historical, cultural story. The thing somehow seems magical. I like the *Pietà*, but I love also the *Deposition*, you know, the Christ coming down from the cross, his body flaccid, like it has no form, a dead body. That's so moving as a gesture.

There are great sculptures of Depositions that aren't as known, in the Louvre or in Germany. There are lots of unbelievably beautiful sculptural Depositions. They are complex, too, because there are at least three if not four life-size figures, and the contrast of the active bodies and weight [of a body] without life, like a *lumpen* body, which has no power, no vitality to it. Those sculptures are a combination of those things.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are there limewood sculptures like that?

KIKI SMITH: The wood ones are the most beautiful.



CHRISTOPHER LYON: Which rarely travel, I think. We don't see them here.

KIKI SMITH: No. Dorrit?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, there she is.

KIKI SMITH: Good. Yes, those I'm crazy about. And an altar is a beautiful form. They're just manmade beautiful things. Like Torah covers. I had a show at the Israel Museum, and they had the most beautiful Torah covers, with silver repoussé work on them—velvets with silver repoussé and so on. I then made things using those modes of production, and also those forms. Sometimes I make things that have a relationship to the content, but most of the time it's sort of just transposing those forms somehow. I've made baptismal fonts. I made one which is of the Apocalypse, and it says, "I'm the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Those who come to me freely have eternal life."

As a child I had a book of Old Testament stories, and for years, I thought about them. Now they're more quiet, but when I was younger, they really played a big part in my ideas about things. Like there were stories of Moses' father being an idol maker and Moses playing with the idols and breaking them, and then a story about one god rather than multiple gods. You know, I had the idea of this room with idols, that somebody could make all these idols. I thought, I am an idol maker, an idol worshipper, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: I'm not—but I always laugh, because I think about my father's work and my work being influenced by that. My father's work is like complex monotheism, because it's monolithic but it changes on all sides and you can't—I mean, he has ones that are in parts, but a lot of them are very singular, and the singular ones can't be read from just one side. But if I can make a drawing with two things in it, I'm really ahead of the game. Any regular old painter can make whole backgrounds and foregrounds. I can make a single thing, you know, one picture of one thing, and that's it. I collage them together. But I love altar painting, sequential narratives, or Egyptian friezes; things where there is implied movement and narrative, friezes of activity, like a single frame or like film strips, a single image with a narration—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Like predella panels.

KIKI SMITH: —and then another one and another. I like accumulation through static [images], rather than a big story.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Flowing.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, a story in one image. I can't deal with too much information. I'm interested in how people do that, how they are able to build big complex narratives. But I just can't handle that. Maybe in the tapestries I do, but they're hardly a narrative. They're like a proposition or something.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But the individual things you want to infuse with life.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, things have energy. If you make something, it has the energy of your body and your consciousness, sometimes not much and sometimes maybe too much. I believe in objects, which maybe is a low, low level of spirituality—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —but I believe in the Earth and in things coming from the mud, created from the mud.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Like the golem or something.

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I love the golem, but I also love jewelry and things that, in general, are made from *lumpen* material, made from materials that don't have inherent form, and you bring form and meaning to them.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm fascinated that you were attracted so early to puppets, that I was reading about. For me, some of the most exciting theater I ever saw in my life was Bread and Puppet, back in the '70s.

KIKI SMITH: For me too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you know Peter Schumann?

KIKI SMITH: I don't know him personally.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. I wondered about that.

KIKI SMITH: When I was a teenager, I remember sitting in the car, listening on the radio with my mother, to Lotte Lenya reading Brecht. That was very profound to me. Since I was born in Germany, I felt that somehow that was talking to me, the German language. Brecht's theater was so rich and full and clear. And she took me to see *Marat/Sade* by Peter, what is his name, Peter—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Peter Brook.

KIKI SMITH: Brook. We were in San Francisco when I saw that, and it made a tremendous impression on me. By the time I was 16 or so, my friend was going to Goddard College, a girl whose family I had lived with. I would go up to Vermont, and it was the year that Bread and Puppet Theater went to Goddard College, to Cate Farm. My friend worked with them, and because of that, I went and watched their plays. It had German Expressionism and a biblical quality and scale to it. Even though it was very intimate sometimes, the meaning was large.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They took on big themes.

KIKI SMITH: The heart was large in it. And it was moving and pertinent to the time. I would go hang around them when they were in Coney Island, or in New York, but I didn't really know them. My friend and I and another person, a guy, made a puppet theater one summer. I was in 11th or 12th grade, about 16, and we performed mostly in Boston. We played outside, in Harvard Square, in Cambridge. We would do *Punch and Judy* shows in different places and in the street. I was the barker and my friends did the puppets, but I also made the puppets. I liked painting the scenes. We would also make crankie movies and I loved that. Bread and Puppet was a really big model. They had a theater, and they fed people, which I can't say I do.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That was part of each performance, right?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, that was profound.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They would get bread and soup.

KIKI SMITH: Aioli. They made bread with aioli.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, aioli.

KIKI SMITH: They also made posters, and they made these little pieces of fabric, all of this knickknack paraphernalia which was as accomplished [as the performances]. It wasn't secondary to what they were doing. And they made little books that were inexpensive.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I had forgotten that.

KIKI SMITH: So for me, making multiples has been a very big part of my work. Or printmaking, making something that people could afford, that's not very expensive art.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It seems like almost a straight line between that and the real estate show and the Times Square show.

KIKI SMITH: Which I had nothing much to do with making, but which I liked very much, the energy of it. And when we had the Times Square show, Cara Perlman and Tom Otterness made the store. For me, that was really the beginning of making multiples of things. Maybe I had made things before, these cigarette packs and fingers, but maybe I made them after the store, because somebody taught me how to make molds. But, you know, I had very much in my mind to do things that I learned from Bread and Puppet Theater. I saw them as often as I could, but I can't say that they loomed large in my life. [Laughs.] That's all.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, that's just so interesting.

KIKI SMITH: I think it's generational, too. You know, going to marches, the demonstrations in Washington, or seeing the *Grey Lady Cantata*. It was like Greek tragedy, with its choruses. It has a formality that Greek plays have, which I really like. But it also had spectacle, which I associate with the Middle Ages.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There was a rhythm to it, a kind of dirge.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, like part of a dirge.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was always struck by that, this kind of relentless *rrrrmmmm*.

KIKI SMITH: But also very comical. They had the garbage men, they had all these comical things happening. It was poignant and it was profound, but it was also very topical and relevant. I liked very much the formal abstraction. I'm not so interested in naturalism. Maybe that's also why I make singular images, more like icons.

You just get one thing at a time, like one thing is enough.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. If it's infused with enough life, it kind of takes on—

KIKI SMITH: Sometimes that happens and sometimes it doesn't cut it—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: It is meaningful when I see it in other people's work. When you see the love that they've put into doing something. To share love in a way that's not too personal. You get to put your love and energy into something and other people get to see that, but it is also a barrier.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Or it's mediated somehow.

KIKI SMITH: Yes—that's why I like printmaking, too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because it can be shared.

KIKI SMITH: Printmaking has a slight distance to it, but it's actually super cared for. A print requires a lot more attention than most things take to make. I like seeing the care, even if care alone doesn't make them good. We all know that you can be super good at doing something and it doesn't hold any energy or meaning, it's not a guarantee of that. Care can be abstract. It's not only in the physical world, it's not just putting time and hours into things, it's having an intent. I like art. I trust things that people make. In general I trust that people believe what they're doing, that it's not callous.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Or calculated.

KIKI SMITH: Or superficial.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the things, besides theater, I was curious about, is the books you encountered growing up, illustrated books. These older ones belonged to your father, is that right?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. My father was born in 1912, and he was the oldest son. His sister Mary was a year and a half older. There were five other boys, all younger than my father. Their books were probably from the teens and '20s. But you know, in a lot of the books in the teens, the illustrations had already been done in the late 1800s. The creation of contemporary childhood happens in the late 1800s. People begin to look at laws for children and to consider children as something other than a sort of property. Childhood is sort of invented in those times, and there's a proliferation of printed material and an incredible wealth of illustration.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Lithography in a large scale, really coming into its own.

KIKI SMITH: We had all sorts of books as children. Not only English 19th century books but Russian fairytale books. My mother would read us fairytales a lot, and my father would read us Edgar Allan Poe and Lovecraft and other things that scared the wits out of me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Scary.

KIKI SMITH: They were scary. But those books are wonderful in terms of printmaking. It really was an explosive time of printmaking. And of abstraction in illustration, too, like colors or different [forms] having— There's also [white] space in it. It's not all just like a whole bunch of endless details of illustration.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: It's graphic abstraction, you know? In the '20s or '30s, there's a lot of graphic abstraction, and there were big books, the *Chatterbox* books or *Uncle Wiggily* books, where you really felt the cranking of the machines making them. They felt like small, homemade productions. They were very beautifully printed with something like tissue in front of the plates.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I love that, yeah, yeah. Where you have to peel it back.

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I had one anthology of children's stories, with copies of older illustrations. I don't really remember having contemporary books. We just had the books that were in my father's house, because we grew up in his house, in his childhood house.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I want to move on to the artists, including those in your family, that you've grown up with, ones who have meant a lot to you. One of the things that I'm interested in is just that moment when the artists who are just a generation older than you: Nancy [Spero]—or maybe several generations, like Louise Bourgeois,

Lee Bontecou, Eva Hesse. Did they, in some important sense, represent the hinge where the single narrative of modern art, largely men—

KIKI SMITH: It starts diverging.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Starts to explode.

KIKI SMITH: Exploding, uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And in a way, your generation almost seems like the first one that is walking out into this new world, like, where do we go now? I wanted to talk about that a little bit.

KIKI SMITH: Well, the first artists that I saw in my family were the Abstract Expressionists. Jackson Pollock died when I was very young, so I don't remember him. But Barney Newman, Ralph Humphrey, people that my father taught, with Bob Swain at Hunter. Some had been his students and then taught there. Others, like Barney, Paul Feeley, spent a lot of time, and they were a little like uncles, aunts and uncles, to us. And then my father's assistants, who had been students of his, were people like Richard Tuttle, who came for a while and worked with my father. His work was extremely radical to me. I had never imagined anything like that, although it fit. Mike Kaiser was someone else. Lots of students of my father's from Bennington, women, came and stayed for a while.

So when I got to New York, when I was 22, it was a time of finding. I met older artists first, and then it took me about a year until I found my generation of people. I met people a little bit older than me and I liked listening to them as artists, and I admired their work and still admire their work, but about a year and a half into it, I met people my age. And the people my age were involved in Collaborative Projects—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: A lot of them had gone to the Whitney program. They were much more sophisticated than I was artistically. I mean, I grew up in art and I have it, like as a primary language in my life. It's something I take completely for granted as a vehicle of making meaning. But I was certainly not knowledgeable about contemporary art. Those guys were much more sophisticated and much more present, even in college. I went to college for a year and a half and I remember Dennis Oppenheim came and that was super interesting to me. And Vito Acconci and other people. But I was in some other world a little bit. When I met people from Colab, that was my generation.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

KIKI SMITH: But before that, I saw Eva Hesse's work, when I was in seventh grade, I think. I saw Lee Bontecou's work at the Modern museum and at the Whitney and at the Jewish Museum. I don't think I understood that Lee Bontecou was a woman for probably 15 years. I just assumed it was a man. Certainly I knew that Eva Hesse was a female. Her work was very moving and playful and experimental. It had a very rigorous aspect to it, a formal rigorousness, but it also brought everything into the body. It made jokes about bodies and bosoms and things. It had a whimsy to it, too. I saw Frida Kahlo's work when I was in my early 20s, before I moved to New York, and that was very striking to me, the painting of her sitting in the chair where she cut her hair.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I know the painting.

KIKI SMITH: And the expressionism in that. Eva Hesse's work had a body expressionism in it that was formal, and then Frida Kahlo's had an explicit physicality, and symbolism, like retablo painting or altar painting in Mexican culture.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: When did you first see Nancy's work? Fairly early on, I think.

KIKI SMITH: I don't know. I think I saw it first—as far as I can figure out, at Leslie Tonkonow. Maybe I knew it before that. I just don't remember because I don't remember much of anything. When Leslie Tonkonow had a gallery over on 9th Street, I remember I went there and I asked if I could have a Xerox of a picture of [Nancy's]. Because I couldn't buy one, but I thought if I could look at a Xerox of it— The first thing I did when I showed at Fawbush and sold work, which was later, [was to buy a work by Spero]. I think that was in '88, something like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: 1988, yes.

KIKI SMITH: I remember I bought a church bell. On Elizabeth Street, above Houston, there was a church there that came down, St. Elizabeth's. There were those salvage places, and I went and bought this church bell, because I thought of a bell as a profound thing, a profound form, with a profound function in society of making a community. But I lived in a five-floor walkup, so I never could bring it upstairs, and I ended up selling it to a woman who made a bell tower in Massachusetts. Then I started buying Nancy Speros.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She was showing at Josh Baer.

KIKI SMITH: She was showing at Josh Baer. But I associate it somehow to Damien something or other, who had a place down the hall from Joe Fawbush, which doesn't make any sense. But anyway, the second I could buy Nancy Spero, I started buying, on time, work of hers, little things from the gallery and then bigger things. And when I could, I bought one of the Vietnam drawings.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, good for you.

KIKI SMITH: It's not one of the best ones. All the best ones were gone, but I bought one anyway because I loved them. I don't really remember a lot of my life, I just remember when things happened. But I remember that I was very moved by her work and very interested in it. It was a proof to me of many things that I was interested in, with the repetition of images and mechanically made things.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Stamped.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, that had nuance and variation in it. They were collaged together to make a larger whole. I can also say, "Oh, that comes exactly from my father," us [Kiki and her sisters] putting together octahedrons and tetrahedrons, gluing them together, taping them together and making larger things. Her work had all of that as well as female content. I would just laugh and think, Oh, she does everything against herself. Making things from paper is marginal, making prints is really marginal, being a woman.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Making things too big to ever fit anywhere. [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: Being a woman is marginal, being. Making things political is marginal. And I would just laugh because she did all of it together, and I thought my work didn't have an overt political narrative to it. I am not that clear in life. I always have loved her work and Leon's work. I think Jane Dickson, I think Jane Dickson maybe introduced us. Jane Dickson took me there once.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I know they were very friendly with Charlie Ahearn.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, Jane Dickson and Charlie Ahearn were married. I remember we went to see a film at the Modern museum that someone had made about Leon wasting all his money scraping his paint off, before he figured out another way to paint. He would paint layers and layers and then just scrape the whole thing off. Al Held did that too—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —but it was just shocking [laughs] to me. But, you know, both of their work. He had a show at Susan Caldwell Gallery, of the big Mercenaries, and that was during the Colab time. It was a time when everybody in the East Village and the Lower East Side, everybody was in a romance with B movies, with being detectives, being murderers, being underground. A lot of the filmmakers made films as if people were spies, or something like that, and I thought we were not. There was nothing dangerous in our lives, whatsoever.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's really interesting.

KIKI SMITH: Except our own self-destruction. In his work it was so clear that violence was not a metaphor. The first images I made of bodies were cut up arms and legs, because I felt like I was thrown asunder. It was like Osiris. You know, like your body parts in different places, buried. There was no whole. And then I saw his work and I thought, this is violent.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Orpheus, being torn apart.

KIKI SMITH: Yeah, but it's Osiris, with Isis and Horus.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In the Egyptian tradition, yes.

KIKI SMITH: Whereas his was about real violence. And not romanticizing it. It was big and scary and reflected the reality of our society, or part of it. Also, you know, at the same time, he was a really great painter and colorist, almost an Impressionist painter, which I didn't get. But then later, towards his death, [Ron] Feldman had a show of the emerald and forest green paintings that he had done, of the colossuses, when they were living in Rome or something. They were like jewel spectacles. But the other ones, in the way that he uses color, are more painterly and rich and luscious and sensuous, The big ones were painted on tarp canvases.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes.

KIKI SMITH: It wasn't that I knew them intimately, but I visited them. I think they had a complicated relationship

with me, which sometimes I accepted. Leon, in the end, was very, very generous to me, in a way that completely overwhelmed me, too, because he had been sort of suspect of me. Because I had a cultural or economic success. I think they felt thwarted, that they didn't get the attention that they wanted.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Always, always.

KIKI SMITH: Nancy, too. But in the end, Leon wrote a letter to propose me for the Hiroshima Award. It was so funny, because it was so paternal, it was so much like a father coming and taking care of you, in a way that really freaked me out. I was very grateful, but it was so emotional for me, and I couldn't deal with it. My father had been dead for at least 10 or 15 years by then.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes.

KIKI SMITH: I admired them, but I didn't want to emulate their life. I always used to make a joke that their life was so strict, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Monastic, I would say. [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: Yes, and I thought, No, that's not me. I'm much fatter, moving, oozing out of everything, and loving fabrics. I like the sensuous nature of the physical world more. I don't want to just be an artist. I want to be a human being in my life also. To me that's important.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well you said an amazing thing I thought, at Nancy's memorial. I went and looked it up. You said she—I'm quoting—"used images that have survived history and used them as testaments to endurance. She allowed them to have agency and free movement outside of their prescribed narrative." And I thought this is not irrelevant to what you've done with the various characters.

KIKI SMITH: No, that's something that I'm really interested in. There's this book, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's wonderful.

KIKI SMITH: I hardly read anything ever because my brain doesn't work that way. But that book was such a revelation. That the characters, like saints, have enough attributes attached to them, then they could move out of those prescribed stories into other stories. That's been popular in the last 40 years of literature, but because I don't read literature, I wouldn't know the difference. But I loved that story because it changed the definition of who this isolated madwoman was. In a sociopolitical context that was heartbreaking. It's also what I loved about all those pieces of Nancy's, and the playfulness of it. She was really irreverent. And much more—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] And very angry.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, and it went in a lot of different directions. But she used it in a way that didn't burn her up. She used it for vitality.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's true.

KIKI SMITH: I think both of them did. I didn't know them that well, but because of Nora York, knew them a little.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's how we met Nora, through them.

KIKI SMITH: And also, my mother lived next door to Leon and Nancy, the next building up.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't think I knew that.

KIKI SMITH: I often visited my mother and I would see them walking in the neighborhood.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the things about seeing the possibilities of a narrative is it seems like you focused fairly quickly on seeing the possibilities for the representation of women, in a way that they hadn't been seen before. There's a nice quote, this is not about you, but by Lisa Tickner, who says that, "One of the first premises and promises of the women's movement was that women would reclaim their bodies from the representations of others. That's one lens that that 1980s work can really receive.

KIKI SMITH: I think for me, the earlier part of my work was to make a nonsexual body, to focus on all the other things that happen to a body. The maybe less glamorous things that happen to a body, you know those more basic physicality of being in a body. I'm sure it was because I was overweight always and very self-conscious. I thought about bodies because of that. My sister told me that I have to bring a stool and urine sample of the cat. I thought, how am I supposed to get the cat's urine? [Laughs.] I guess you milk it.

[They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm not sure about that.

KIKI SMITH: Catch her, make her drink, put her on an IV until she explodes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Actually, this is a picture of you I happened to see.

KIKI SMITH: Oh, from California. That's a nice picture. Isn't that pretty?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Isn't it? I think you look pretty glamorous in it.

KIKI SMITH: Well, it's funny, because I felt so ugly. Girls often feel ugly and awkward. And then you see yourself four years later and think, "Why did I waste all that time feeling bad?" It's all stupid, a waste of time. Then you have to fight for your survival, you have to say, "No, I am legitimate." Not bringing attention to yourself as more important, but just as being one of many possibilities.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: In my earlier work, I was thinking about digestive systems and people being in prison. About the body, control of bodies, and how different aspects of one's life are being controlled by belief systems or inherited belief systems.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: We are continuing them in ways that are to our disadvantage in the long run. When do we try to cut those belief systems? I think it's why a lot of Catholics made a lot of work about bodies. They have a very heavy inheritance about what a body is. There are very contradictory things in Catholicism about bodies that you have to deal with. In other religions, they're non-issues. In Catholicism the body is the primary issue. It's what it means being physical.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: After I started making figurative things, I got into the history of myths of female representation. But in a whimsical, playful way, which comes from growing up with 19th-century Victorian illustrations, playing in them and with them.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Periods have this, like, afterlife, isn't it odd? You know, that they persist in old houses, going back to old literature and visiting museums.

KIKI SMITH: No, it is. When you encounter a lot of big tales when you're young, they make a big impression on you. You have more space inside of you.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You're a clean slate at that point.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, there's more space. So certain things really mean something profound and still hold meaning for you your whole life. Sometimes little details of things hold a lot of meaning, or little bits of narratives. In general, most of my work is like those things, creating more space inside of them, thinking about certain narratives in convoluted ways, to see what they look like.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the things that struck me, you mentioned, "Oh, I went to school for a year and a half," and that's always in your biography. But in fact, you seem to have spent much of the '80s, and even into the early '90s, in this kind of self-propelled education project, learning from your contemporaries, going to classes. I mean, it's really interesting.

KIKI SMITH: Yeah, but I think lots and lots of artists are in a way, using—they make up. I mean, I do it in a very convoluted, loose way, but some artists do research art, do tremendous amounts of research. And in a way, being an artist is like an excuse to learn about something. I did that, and then I could say, Oh, then I can go to Barnes & Noble and buy all the textbooks I want, on anatomy, or all the textbooks I want on animals, or all the textbooks I want on fungi. You know, before they were like popular bookstores, you really had to go to the educational books, to Barnes & Noble's education department, to get textbooks, to find things, or go to The Strand and get books on decorative art history. I mean, I have tons of books. I don't have the slightest idea what to do with them—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —because I don't use them enough to merit having them. They're downstairs and I don't go

downstairs very much. I used to go out every Friday night to The Strand or to Barnes & Noble. I have millions of books on things like what cats look like or weird things about furniture or textiles.

[END OF TRACK.]

KIKI SMITH: I also have tons of books on different artists, because I thought, that's what you should have, books on artists.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Were you ever connected with Group Material at all?

KIKI SMITH: Not really.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You were friendly with Doug Ashford. No, not really?

KIKI SMITH: No. I think Colab did a couple of things and we did a couple things, like a subway project, but I didn't really know them. I didn't really know that many people. I'm not like a shut-in, but you know people if you live here a long time. I had a couple of friends that I hung out with a lot.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So in 1982, you go to Berlin. And is that when you meet Raimund Kummer, or did you know him earlier?

KIKI SMITH: Raimund Kummer was an artist from Berlin who was here on a DAD grant at PS-1, when PS-1 used to have artists. Juan Muñoz was there then, Raimund Kummer, Peter Kowald, who was a free jazz musician. I met Raimund through Juan, and then I went to visit him. I went with a neighbor to Kassel, to *documenta 7*—Fashion Moda had a kind of store there, where we had multiples and things like that. That was completely mind-blowing, because I had never seen European art, contemporary art.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Is that when you saw Beuys for the first time?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, I saw Beuys, I saw Lothar Baumgarten, I saw tons of work that I had no reference to. I realized that certain people I knew in New York did have a reference and were making work in relationship to it. I could see all of a sudden, oh, there's a connection, these people have seen that work, they've been to Europe. But I had never been there and the difference of European art was very radical to me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you describe how?

KIKI SMITH: I only knew about Abstract Expressionism, or what my friends were doing. A little bit about post-conceptual work. People painted—you know, I saw Polke's work—they all painted like butter. It was like Germans were born with some—it was just like buttering bread or something, how they painted.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: I was just like so shocked at how playful the Düsseldorf people were, or Imi Knoebel. That was also the time of Immendorff and Salomé.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sort of that early '80s German Expressionist thing.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, the young wild painters.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Neue Wilde.

KIKI SMITH: ter Hell was a Berlin artist also, but also seeing Sylvia—oh, no what's her name? What is the woman's name?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Bächli?

KIKI SMITH: No, I don't mean her. I mean Katharina Sieverding. There were these big women artists who were serious contenders, involved in photography. Also Roni Horn's work. It was sort of mind-blowing for me. I knew Bruce Nauman's work, from when I was young—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's a connection there.

KIKI SMITH: We would go to the Whitney and to the Jewish Museum. I knew Larry Bell's work and Bob Morris's work, but it was American and it has a Protestant austerity to it. A lot of American work had a Protestant austerity. There is no gushy Baroque-ness to it. You know, like Serra's work—the material, the colors of the material were made by the material. The material is the medium. And also the confidence—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sounds like Donald Juddism. [Laughs.]



KIKI SMITH: Yes, no, but there's a clarity about American work in the '70s that was clean. It's not messy. Somebody like Paul Thek, who was Catholic, is messy, and his work is very strange. His work stood out very radically to me, when I saw it at the museums. It was just completely shocking, but it was closer, in a way, to me. Something I felt an affinity to when I was young. I was very taken by him.

Also the scale, the privilege. Like my friends Raimund and all the people that I met through him—I mean I was, I think, 28, and they all were showing, they had catalogues, because there was a support for art outside of gallery support. It didn't rely on gallery funding, it relied on Kunsthallen and Künstlerins, and they made exhibitions and were artists in a different way. Raimund and Hermann Pitz and this other guy, Fritz Rahmann, had a group called Büro Berlin, which was different but similar to what we had as Colab, where they invited artists to make exhibitions.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Is that where you made the bronze baby?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I don't know when that was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '86-ish, somewhere there.

KIKI SMITH: Maybe. I met, through Raimund, Geneviève Cadieux, who is from Montreal and whose work I really loved and still love. Her work, when I first saw it, I thought it was the best thing I had seen in about a year. I was coming from Europe. We were both together in that show.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She was in the Büro Berlin show?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, we were both friends with Raimund, whose daughter is living with me now. All those people, like Hermann Pitz, were much more individualistic. In Colab, there were sibling aspects to it and competitiveness. People said, "Oh, you're copying me," or "Oh, no, I won't tell you how to do that."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This was Colab?

KIKI SMITH: Colab. It had a smallness to it. And then I went to Europe and I thought, who cares about this little group? The world is so immense and the art world is so immense. Artists were so much more individualistic, like Hermann Pitz, who was part of Büro Berlin. His work was very hermetic, and at the same time very unique and personal. Fritz told me, you had to make your work so people could see your deep personal investment in your work, could access it. For them to care about your work, they had to see that you cared. But at the same time, it couldn't be so egocentric that it was impenetrable by others.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: You know? It was part of the culture, to support art, which is very different from American culture, which is hesitant because of the detrimental aspects of Catholicism. The Protestants tried to get rid of idol worship, but also all the selling of penances or whatever. I forget what it's called.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Indulgences.

KIKI SMITH: Yes, indulgences. The Protestants who came here were very leery of object worship. In a way it's been tremendously liberating in our society. But in Germany, even in Canada, the culture really supports art, and that is really different from America. My friend Geneviève was having shows in museums, and having a support for her work that to me was unimaginable. I didn't show my work until six or seven years later than a lot of the people I knew in Colab, just because it wasn't ready to be shown. You know, it didn't make any sense to anybody. Maybe I was, and still am, going in too many directions at once.

So for me it was enormous, to get away from New York. I realized that in New York you could know people of multiple generations and you could know people whose work you weren't really that interested in, and you could still appreciate them. I wasn't endlessly interested in what some of my friends were doing, but I respected them and what I could see they were doing. Whereas in Germany it was much more severe. People had many more opinions. I thought Americans were trying to individuate with little common ground, and they try to individuate through stances or proclamations.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's interesting. I'm always struck by the way Hans Werner [Holzwarth] expresses himself: "Oh yeah, that's not so interesting."

KIKI SMITH: Yes, you can just say, "That doesn't exist."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: So when I first went to Germany, people didn't know who I was, but I was from New York, so I might

be someone or other. I was nobody from nowhere, but I got to go to all these different artist studios.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you meet Polke?

KIKI SMITH: I met him several times because I went with Christoph Kohlhöfer, who had worked with him and was my neighbor.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was he like? Anything special?

KIKI SMITH: A grown-up man, I don't know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm so curious about him.

KIKI SMITH: I was like 20, so they were grown-ups to me. I remember I went to visit his children and his ex-wife, and they were very nice.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But apropos of what you were saying, I remember just running into Alex Katz at the opening of the Polke show at MoMA several years ago, and he was doing one of his standing in the doorway watching everything things, and I said, "So what do you think?" He said, "An American artist could never do this." And what he meant was, you know, once an American artist started down a certain stylistic path—

KIKI SMITH: But the Germans cut that. And I always thought it was a trap. I remember artists who felt trapped by their work. They had made a work that was very distinct and they felt trapped by that, and I thought, I don't want to do that. I remember Brooke Alexander came over to see my work and he said, "Now Kiki, are you going to be"—I was making tie-dyed paintings and painting with bleach and paint with projectors and stuff with animals and different things. He said, "Now Kiki, are you going to be doing this in a year?" And I said, "I don't know," and, like, twirled my hair.

Artists like Jonathan Borofsky went in lots of directions. Walter Dahn and [inaudible]—and the bad one, I forget his name. Who was the bad young, bad guy? It was very bad acting. But they went in different directions and changed their styles all the time. And then I realized that a lot of women's work had a lot of space in it, and had all different kinds of expression. And I thought, I have different impetuses for doing things. And it goes in all different directions. For the most part, I'm not trying to control the narrative about it. I just try to follow my work at best. When I don't follow it, when I try to lead it, it's like a disaster area immediately. But when I try to follow it, then life is okay.

Sometimes I felt like, "Oh, why do I have to make this corny stuff or make things that are so sweet," and then I thought, like, "It's just not your business." You're giving what you're given. I'm a big believer in that, that you don't necessarily always like it, but you are given what you are given, and what you are given is sacred and precious and you have to honor that. You have to honor that in other people, too, that they are given something else. I know sometimes, at my worst, I want to be everything and do everything and have everything. But if you just feel like what you've been given is so infinite and such a gift, and that if you just try to honor that, it's okay.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You said a while back that printmaking had been enormously important to you. One of your—I love Wendy's book [Wendy Weitman, *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books and Things* (The Museum of Modern Art, 2009)]. I don't know if you like it or not.

KIKI SMITH: I do, I love her. We're still working together.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are you? Oh that's nice.

KIKI SMITH: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I had a little bit of a contact with her a year or two ago. I don't know what she's doing now. Is she working on a book?

KIKI SMITH: No. We made a show in Oklahoma, with Bill Goldston. He has a connection; he's from Oklahoma, and the university there. That's going to travel to university museums.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was wondering about how you segued into working with high-end printers, like ULAE and so on, which is, I think, around 1989.

KIKI SMITH: Yeah, I started in 1989. Charlie Ahearn taught me, in 1982, how to make silk screens. I took the corrosive label off of a package and I had it shot, and I made it as a Times Square show commemorative t-shirt. Then I did ones of poison and danger, different things. I realized I liked silk-screening, but I was bad at it. But Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood had sort of invented punk aesthetic, and part of that was utilizing the bad aspects of printmaking, like when you flood a screen and then you print it off and it bleeds underneath.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIKI SMITH: You would just think something is completely ruined and wrecked, and what are you supposed to do? Throw out a t-shirt that cost a couple dollars? Because of them, I realized, no, just use all of the badness of it to your advantage, so I started silk-screening images. There used to be a Brooklyn print biennial, and I had this big, long piece called *All Souls*, which were these photographs of fetuses that were just printed on this Thai [?] tissue and all glued together.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's incredible.

KIKI SMITH: Bill Goldston saw it and he called up Joe Fawbush and wanted to come visit me, and I was like, "No, can't you go to my gallery?" Like my house is always messy. I had all those birds flying around—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —and I was just like terrified, and he was like, "No, I want to come to your house and see you and speak to you." And then like me being like an obedient, good girl, I said, "Okay, okay." But I didn't know who he was. And then Joe Fawbush said, "He makes Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg prints. Shut up." Bill Goldston always worked with women, from Tanya, who started ULAE—you know, they always worked with women artists, with Marisol and with Elizabeth Murray, a lot of different women artists. It was always a mixed bag of people.

So I started going there. I had taken print classes. A friend of mine from Hartford in '76 got a job at the Lower East Side Printshop, and I went there and took a class in photo etching. Then I went to Blackburn and took a class for a couple of days, but I didn't know how to do things. I had made two editions. I made a linoleum cut with Fawbush, called *How I Know I'm Here*, after my sister died. No, that was after my father died. *Possession Is Nine-Tenths of the Law* might have been after my sister died, because that was about thinking about prison, about the control of the body. I went to ULAE and I learned about printmaking. But, you know, most of it I still can't do. Then I went to Harlan & Weaver. I had made a couple of big etchings at ULAE, but then I went to Harlan & Weaver and I really started etching. I needed to hire them as a shop. At ULAE, I would make about a print a year, whereas at Harlan & Weaver, I could go there every night, until they would kick me out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because they were close by here, right?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, they're on Canal Street. So I would ride my bike down with my plates, and we would work until eight, ten o'clock at night. They had their day jobs, I had mine. They did mostly Louise Bourgeois's work at that time. I hired them to do work and then after a couple of years, they published something of mine. But sometimes they would say, "No, you can't come here for a while." I think for a year or two I didn't go there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A fellow named Craig Zammiello that you worked with—

KIKI SMITH: He worked at ULAE.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: ULAE? And he also did some photography of you?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. They would help me make prints, and I had wanted to make a print of my head unfolded, and I wanted to make a puppet of my head, and I did it by making photographs and making Xeroxes around my whole head and then putting them together as a 3-D. He said, "Oh, why can't we get to England, to the British Museum, and use their cameras?"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Is that how you made *Blue Lake*?

KIKI SMITH: Yes, because they had cameras that were developed for Shell Oil, for photographing core samples.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

KIKI SMITH: So object—me or the core—is on a lazy Susan. The British Museum used them for amphorae, and so they could photograph the friezes on the ceramics.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

KIKI SMITH: We went and did that. I've spent 20, 30 years traveling. A lot of time going to colleges making prints. I went to a college this year making prints, I'm going to go to another one in the fall to make prints, because they're just free places. Nobody is watching you.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Also in the '90s, you started making sculpture editions. Was it Dwight Hackett and Art Foundry edition in Santa Fe?

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I had done a couple of sculptures and he came to visit me and asked if I would come there and make some editions. I made a couple and then I stopped making editions with him and just worked there. I thought it was better for me just to pay for my work than to give away so much, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

KIKI SMITH: I would rather own my own work, and by then I could afford to produce it and own my own work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: But I really loved working there and I used to go a couple of times a year.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We took a little tour not too long ago, to Modern Art Foundry in Queens, that was arranged because I was doing interviews for the Easton Foundation, for Louise Bourgeois, and I wanted to see this place. And then we interviewed Bob Spring, who did much of Louise's casting. That was really interesting. He is a real storyteller.

KIKI SMITH: I bet. They've had many people. My father's work, all his bronzes, were made there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Were they?

KIKI SMITH: They still are. They have that nice bronze that Louise Bourgeois used, a very special bronze, a golden color; it's warmer.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There are a lot of interesting crossovers between you and Louise. Going back and forth between mediums, sculpture being primary but printmaking being very important.

KIKI SMITH: Printing and sculpture go really well together. At ULAE, I was the only sculptor there. Marisol was a sculptor, too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There is also maybe an oblique echo between religious sensibilities. I mean, religion was coursing through the work at a lot of levels.

KIKI SMITH: Of course hers have a totemic quality.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Again, interestingly similar to you.

KIKI SMITH: Her figuration is very moving.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Debby Wye is doing a show at MoMA this fall, of Louise's prints and also some sculptures. One of the best sequences in the catalogue is those *Sainte Sebastienne* prints that she made, where the figure has long hair, but it's being poked by arrows, but it's got a big grin, and there's a cat coming from behind.

KIKI SMITH: And then aren't there stamps on some of them?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Exactly, in one the interior is filled in with her father's monogram, and then there's another filled with her monogram [laughs], and you can just parse that for about seven hours. You know, and you've got your *Sainte Geneviève* figure, which I know is not the same thing, but a little bit of a heroine.

KIKI SMITH: No, it's different.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Saint-like heroine.

KIKI SMITH: Yeah, that is different.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Where did that come from, *Sainte Geneviève*?

KIKI SMITH: *Sainte Geneviève*? Just a little painting in Paris of Sainte Geneviève. She's the patron saint of Paris and she brings the wolves and the lambs together. She brings peace. One of my best friends is Geneviève, so I thought, "Oh, that's a good thing, I can make a drawing of Geneviève with wolves." It came from doing the Little Red Riding Hoods, because then I thought, "Oh, Little Red Riding Hood and the wolves is the same thing." I thought I could make a version of the wolf and the woman together.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We've been going on now for just about an hour and a half, but I did want to ask you a little bit about dealers you've worked with, somebody that you've had a bond with. I was curious about Joe Fawbush and how you—

KIKI SMITH: Jane Dickson and I went to Fawbush. He had worked for Brooke Alexander and came out of

printmaking.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I didn't know that.

KIKI SMITH: We wanted him to publish collaborations between artists, different artists in Colab, making prints together. He said, "That is not going to happen," because, he said, nobody likes collaborations. You know, unless you can rip it down the middle or something—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: People are not interested in collaborations in the art world. Artists might be, but collectors aren't. But then he asked me if I wanted to show my work with him, and I said yes. I had been in group shows, but I had never had a single show. I showed with him for two years, maybe, before I had a solo show. I would show things in the back room. I made *How I Know I'm Here*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was Tom [Jones] working with him then?

KIKI SMITH: No, I don't think Tommy was working with him. I don't know who worked with him, but I don't think Tommy really started working with him until he moved to Grand Street. Nothing I say may be true. I remember I was making glass stomachs and other weird stuff and no one would buy it, and then I thought, "Okay, now it's not for sale." Like the second nobody would buy it, I thought, "Fine, that's it, that's over, I'm keeping it." They had their chance—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: —and that's over. I would wonder, why don't they want it? And then I would think, "Kiki, look at it." I remember he said, "Your work is for museums."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Interesting.

KIKI SMITH: And then he sold my work to museums. Eileen Cowin bought the glass jars of fluid that I made. A couple of people bought things.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Didn't they end up at MoMA?

KIKI SMITH: No. I made a couple of different versions. Some that were from new jars and some from older jars. Yeah, he said, "Your work is for museums." We had a good relationship.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I can picture him, you know, kind of a big guy, a little heavy.

KIKI SMITH: Yes. I liked Ann Messner, who showed in that gallery, and other people whose work I liked. And then when he moved to Grand Street, to a really beautiful space. It was a very theatrical space because you walked in low and then it opened into a large room that was still very intimate, with tons of natural light. It was a very beautiful space to show in. Chuck Close came at one point and asked me if I wanted to be in Pace. I was horrified by the idea. I had only ever been in one gallery and I hadn't left them. So it was a very big emotional thing for me to do. My mother sent me to astrologers and they both said, either you can go to your destiny or not; you can either be comfortable or go do what you're supposed to be doing. I thought that I had to do it, whether it was comfortable or not. I only talked to my mother and my sister and that was it. I didn't talk to anybody else.

Since then, I've primarily worked with Susan Dunne, since 1994. I've also had the opportunity to work with Lorcan O'Neill, who worked at Anthony d'Offay and now has a gallery in Rome. I love working with him. I've loved working with Susan Dunne. Barbara Gross, who I love, Barbara Krakow. I've had very nice galleries. I've very much appreciated them at different times. I worked with Shoshana Wayne Gallery in LA. They treated me like I was like a child. I would go there and they would take care of me. They were my age, maybe like three years older or something like that, but I was really like a lost person much of the time. Yeah, Barbara Krakow, too, was very good to me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's in Boston, right?

KIKI SMITH: And she is somebody who really supported multiples in printmaking. I'll have a show there this May. All my galleries, for the most part, I have had good relationships with. It's been very beneficial to me, to have the stability and the organization. Pace for me has been like being in heaven. I told them that I'm not going anywhere. They're stuck with me [laughs]. They are really orderly and not emotionally nutty. They don't bring emotional dramas to the gallery. They are respectful of artists and they are very businesslike and they pay you on time. A lot of galleries don't pay you on time. I've also had a good time working with Lelong Gallery.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In Paris?

KIKI SMITH: In Paris. I showed at d'Offay in London. So I've been very privileged in the galleries I've shown in. Some shows sell more works and some are mom-and-pop operations; some are big. Pace is an enormous operation but, you can admire and appreciate all kinds of things in your life and get different things out of each. You have different experiences with each person.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right.

KIKI SMITH: Fawbush once said to me, "You could make things a little bigger." I made things like stomachs, and I said, "I'm not going to make things bigger." I thought, "I'm not doing what he says, I'm not going to make anything bigger." And then I thought, "Well, maybe I can make something bigger, you know, maybe that's an opportunity." Pace never tries to get me to do anything. But some people say, "What about this?" or "What about that?" or have an opinion about this or that. And you know, if it's to your advantage, it's good to be open to it, because other people have a tremendous amount of experience. Often, as an adult, your friends don't come by that much any more. Everybody stays at home when they're 40.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: You have to make special dates. I went to see a friend of mine's work yesterday. And you know, we made real dates. It's not like we're spending hours just roaming around the streets, going from one person's house to another, spending five hours talking about what we're doing. It's less and less like that, so sometimes your gallerist is the only person. For the most part, it's only my assistants who see what I'm doing, and sometimes they don't even because I'm working in foundries. So often there's no witness. Sometimes your gallerists are witnesses to your life.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Speaking of your assistants, I was interested to note that they tend to stick around for a while. You seem to have had your first assistants starting in the late '80s and they stay seven, eight years.

KIKI SMITH: Most of them stay nine or ten years. I'm not easy. I can be crabby and not really on the highest spiritual level some days. I like sticking forks in people, which is not attractive.

[They laugh.]

I have been okay, too. I really appreciate my assistants. I really have enjoyed knowing their work. The best thing for me is that they know each other outside of work. I have had almost four generations of people now. And they all hang out and see each other apart from me, and that makes me happy. Then I was successful and they took pleasure in that. I hold most of them extremely fondly in my heart. And when they left, my work changed.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's interesting.

KIKI SMITH: I could do certain things with some of them that I couldn't do afterward. They knew how to do something or we developed some way to do something together. Now, being upstate, I don't have anyone, so I sit and make little abstract paintings, just because that's what I can do there. I work with a girl at the foundry in Kingston and make things with her. Also, I've worked really extensively in other places—you know, like in the Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt, this stained glass factory.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

KIKI SMITH: I spent 20 years working there and trying to learn, and I have learned just the tip of the iceberg. Or in print shops, working with Carol Weaver was really profound for me, because of her generosity. They nudged me and taught me how to do things. I can teach printmaking, loosely, because of them.

But also friends like Valerie Hammond, who I teach with at NYU and Columbia. We have a lot of interests that overlap, so we are companions. We can speak to one another a lot. We've made prints together. It's nice having a companion and you're both doing your thing. Sometimes we're sibling and scratchy.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's an interesting parallel here maybe, just a little bit, with Rauschenberg. Thinking about how important collaboration and interchange with other people was for him and so on, and the moment I was interested to note that the MoMA show, when it was at the Tate, was simply *Robert Rauschenberg*, and that's what the catalogue's title is. But here it's *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*.

KIKI SMITH: Wow. A lot of painters sit in their studio by themselves and paint. You know, it's very singular.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But you've never actually had a separate work space.

KIKI SMITH: Once, but it was just a big garbage can in about two seconds.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: My father didn't have one, and so I just work at home. I didn't have any money and I just worked where I lived. When I moved here, I said I'm not working with toxic materials and I'm not having wax in my house if I can avoid it, things like that. Sometimes we do wax outside, but I don't want to have anything toxic in my kitchen anymore.

I love working with people, because you get all of their insight and vitality. It's not like being a vampire, but I enjoy the exchange. I also enjoy working places where I see other people's work. I go to my foundry and there are big pieces by Chris Wool, and I love his sculpture. I'm happy every time I see them, and it's not that I glean his knowledge about sculpture, but I like that it's there every time. When I go to ULAE, there are all these great, just great, great printmakers. It's just astonishing to me. They are in the cabinets or something like that, but you can slightly sort of look sideways and can peek at them and think, "Oh, that's how you—"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

KIKI SMITH: That's how you learn, from looking at other artists' work. I think it helps you as a human being to have good things around you that are inspiring.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well that sounds like a nice place to stop.

[They laugh.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

[\*] Referring to Lyon's proposal, several years earlier, to make an e-book about Smith's work.