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Oral history interview with Michael Smith, 2018 July 30-August 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michael Smith on July 30 and August 1, 2018. The interview took place at the studio of Michael Smith in Brooklyn, NY, and was conducted by Liza Zapol for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Michael Smith and Liza Zapol have reviewed the transcript. Selected corrections and emendations appear below in brackets. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so this is Liza Zapol interviewing Michael Smith at his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York, on July 30, 2018, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. If I can ask you to actually say your name and introduce yourself, please?

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm Michael Smith. My name and—

LIZA ZAPOL: Where and when were you born?

MICHAEL SMITH: I was born in Chicago, on March 8, 1951. I'm a Pisces. I've been living in New York since 1976, although I was here in '70 and in '73, because I went to the Whitney program. Then, I think around '99, I started to—when I started teaching a lot more frequently, regularly, in '97, I started to go out of town, and in '99, I went to Texas, and then I landed a full-time job in Texas in 2001. So now I'm back and forth between Austin and New York.

LIZA ZAPOL: Gotcha. So let's start at the beginning, back in Chicago. If you can tell me, what are some of your earliest memories?

MICHAEL SMITH: Earliest memories. I'm not quite sure if they're memories that I've kept or I've seen from old films of the family. But a certain—I think I used to like to—I was always a little bit removed, and then I would enter a scene and get some attention or something. [00:02:00] Memories of being—playing with my friends, playing Rin Tin Tin. I always liked to play Rusty and be rescued. I guess I would just sort of lie down on a bench and listen.

I realized I have this ASMR since a young age, because I used to like to watch—I always liked the sound of the wooden spoon on the pans when they were sautéing onions. That was a sound I liked to hear. I spent a lot of time with my mother when I was younger. I was the youngest, so I spent some time with her. She would often give me projects; she taught me how to sew when I was little. I mean, very elementary kind of stitching, I think I made beanbags and some things. Also, she was a big baker, a big cook, and she taught me how to roll out a pie dough, I think, when I was five or six. When I was older, actually, I think in high school, we actually would sometimes cook together.

Food is—Jewish family—is a big part of my family life. I was always, I guess, compensating [ph] some things. I liked to eat. Anything that could go in my mouth, I was happy about it. In fact, I sucked my thumb until I was like nine, I think, and that was the way I could tell left from right, because this, I think, was left—I sucked my left thumb. [00:04:04] That was also the way I would orient myself, orientate myself, on maps and things. I have a very bad sense of direction, probably because I grew up on a grid, but I have to situate myself on a map of the United States, looking north. So I'm always thinking I'm going north. I guess this would be left, because that was the thumb. Anyways, I was very into eating. I spent a lot of time in the basement, watching television. I'd come home from school and watch television. Although I was also very athletic.

I was social with my friends. It's not like I was asocial, but I had a lot of friends. I was also—I was kind of a—I got a lot of checks in class for behavior. They'd have these checks, or they'd have these boxes where they check off, and I remember one report card, there were probably five or six checks in one box where they usually put one, and it was, "Keeps

profitably busy." That I didn't keep profitably busy. I remember having my desk up in front of the class a lot, sometimes next to the teacher. That was—actually, that was heaven for me one time, because I got to sit next to Ms. Flink. I was just introduced to—There was this blonde actress, Kim Novak. I think I saw her—my family would go, every Yom Kippur, we would go to a double-feature, so my father could wait out the fast. [00:06:13] Then, after that, we would go eat. I remember it was always—every year it was the same. My mother would try to fast with my father, and then she'd have a martini and get sick. She couldn't handle it, you know. [Laughs.] But I remember, I think one year, maybe—was Kim—Kim Novak—was she in *Damn Yankees*? I don't know if she was, but she was in some Hitchcock movies. I remember seeing her. There were not a lot of blonde people in my world, because I grew up in kind of a Jewish—there was some. But I was struck by—I think she [Miss Flink] wore white. I just have an image of her white—that could have been a Kim Novak outfit—a white blouse and skirt. But I sat next to her, and I think I was in heaven. One day—I think she may have liked me, because one day she gave me a ride home in her red convertible. It was like heaven.

Anyways, I think I had a behavior problem. I went to Hebrew school when I was younger, and the way they were able to keep the young kids sort of going to Hebrew school is they had a gym. They had a gym program, where we would go for an hour and play sports. My grandmother was an Orthodox Jew, and so I was sort of—it was mandatory that I go to Hebrew school. I did not like it. In fact, I was not very good, and every Christmas holiday period, I'd get invited to remedial school, to catch up for whatever. [00:08:05] So I was athletic, I was social, but I also—I think I was kind of removed. I was the youngest in the family, and I think my mother said I was kind of a pleasure, because I was the first child she had who ate. So she fed me, and I also would—I don't know, I kind of entertained the family. I was kind of a joker.

LIZA ZAPOL: In what way?

MICHAEL SMITH: I would perform in one way. Every year, we'd meet another family and we'd go to this state park called Starved Rock, which was kind of interesting, because my mother hated the country. She grew up in a foster home outside of Chicago. The fact that she did want to go back to the country—she grew up on a farm for 13 years. But we went, and I remember I was on a leash, because we'd take these hikes, and they'd put me on a leash so I wouldn't wander away or fall or something. What was I—

LIZA ZAPOL: Thinking about entertaining your family.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Oh, and then I was reminded by my brother when we talked the other month, I used to stand, when they served spaghetti in the communal eating area. I think it was the American plan, because there was probably three meals a day. I remember the fruit compote. They always had that. Standing—I was short, really round and short—standing and eating spaghetti. [00:10:03] I would stand and pull the single spaghetti. I guess it was kind of cute, but I would get some attention, and I think I liked the attention. It was around food. What else?

Oh, I told a friend the other day, I would also—we took a road trip, a month road trip with the family. Went to California and back. That was hellish—I mean, probably for my parents and all. Our family had this game called Shut Up. So the first one that talked—[laughs]—would lose. There was a lot of humor in our family. My mother had a lot of humor. My father, oftentimes, would be the butt of the jokes. But he was good-natured about it, because he was really—it's funny. I've inherited a lot from him, like my impatience, my oral proclivity. I've inherited a lot from him. He was insane about time. I think that was in the talk [2011 Skowhegan lecture]. He literally had all these different—he wore a different watch for different times of the day, and he judged character by punctuality. So every holiday, when we'd go visit my aunt, or when my aunt would come with their family, she was on another time, and she would always be late. It would make my father infuriated. There was always this edge, undercurrent of anger and him seething. But then once he got it out, he was okay. But he also didn't—he held onto things a lot, and unfortunately I think I've inherited that from him, too, and I think I've become a very—as I've gotten more mature, I think I've gotten to be a very petty, vindictive person—[laughs]—more so. [00:12:04]

LIZA ZAPOL: So what was that like in your house, growing up with someone who was so aware of time, and also had these—sounds like outbursts of anger?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, he had a lot of anger issues. It could be kind of traumatic for a young person. You just didn't want to deal. It was interesting, because he would come home and he would need to unwind. When things would happen, my mother would be sort of the intermediary, and she would—I remember once I broke a window, because I didn't get my mail. I was waiting for something, some toy in a cereal box or something, and I went *bam!* You know, punched out a window. She waited—she told him about it. There was some frustrating—or impatience, anger. I had those, too, at times. I mean, nothing where I was sent away to downstairs or down to the principal or anything. Nothing like that.

LIZA ZAPOL: She told him about it, so she mediated, sort of, how to let him know and—

MICHAEL SMITH: She mediated. Yeah. So she deflected a lot. I learned through her how to deflect anger through humor. That was a big thing. Humor was a—she had a very sharp, keen sense of humor. Christmastime is a way to sort of illustrate it. She had a certain visual sense of humor. We went all out for Christmas. My grandmother was like—*oy*. [00:14:00] She was Orthodox, so when she'd come to eat at our house, she would cover all the plates with tinfoil, and she would not touch the plates. But she let it go. I think they had a tree one year, and that went, but we put out the gifts, and the cards would be signed by C. Claus, or Santa, or whatever, and there was a lot of joking. My mother would—instead of coal in the stockings, she'd put Sterno. Things like that. Her favorite gift, I remember, is when she gave all the kids pencils that just said "Smith" on them. [Laughs.] It was so generic. She loved it. She also had a poster that she would put up every Christmas that would stay for the year. My father was in real estate, and there were the certain companies that he worked with, and they would send him a gift. There was one that sent him this gift box of Maurice Lenell cookies. Maurice Lenell—I don't know if they're in the East Coast. They were maybe just in the Midwest. Not top-end cookies, so really sweet and although my mother was an incredible baker, she also liked to eat a lot of crappy sweets, too. We had teatime a lot, where she would call us for teatime, and there would be her cakes, but then there would always be cookies and stuff around. But there was a poster in the box. Every box had a poster, and it said—it was like a very turn-of-the-century scene of a mother pulling bread or cookies out of the oven. It was kind of outlined. It wasn't even colored. Maybe they thought kids would color it. The title was "A Home Without Cookies is No Home at All." Maybe that was the title of that essay—yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes. ["Muse: A Home Without Cookies," *Art in America*, Dec 23, 2015.]

MICHAEL SMITH: She loved that—she would just put it up by her—she had a very keen, ironic sense of humor. [00:16:07]

LIZA ZAPOL: You also mentioned that she deflected through humor. Do you have an example of a memory in which she did that?

MICHAEL SMITH: Okay, yeah. We were on a road trip, that same month-long road trip. At the time, we followed exactly the AAA TripTiks. So they'd tell you each turn, everything. My father was constantly saying, "Fern, what—where are we going now?" You know, all that. We were driving—I don't know, we stopped someplace, and the TripTiks were not within reach. She couldn't find them. He was so pi—it was, "What did you do with them? Goddammit, Fern, what did you do with those?" You know, we're listening. "What did you do with those?" She said, "Bill"—I mean, she was unflappable. She said, "Bill, I don't have them. I don't know what happened to them." It turned out, after a half an hour, he was sitting on them, and she just roared. She just roared laughter. She didn't get pissed like, "What"—you know, she just laughed. Or I remember we watched—the whole family watching him fix a window. I may have even recounted that, but it was amazing. Our whole family just watching him, with a hammer, proceed to break the window, and laughing. Same trip, I think he also ran over the suitcases. He backed up over the suitcases, because he was impatient. [Laughs.] So she found that very funny. Those are things I've repeated, so I remember it, but there were many instances. [00:18:03] She said that when she first went out with him, he had a brand-new car. I think they stopped for milkshakes or something, and I think she threw it out the window, but the window was so clean, it went—[they laugh]—she said she felt horrible, but I have a feeling she—who knows. I don't know what she was thinking then.

LIZA ZAPOL: How did they meet each other? How did they get together?

MICHAEL SMITH: My uncle had gone out with my mother, and I think—my father's brother. He met her through that, through my uncle. They were very much in love. They had a very

nice relationship, and they had a good life together. It was very sweet. I mean, he had this anger and stuff, and she knew how to—but they really kind of watched over each other. They also, they had a good life where they—I remember, every week on Wednesday night, they would have date night. We'd have a babysitter, and they would go have a nice meal and go to the theater. They went to the—they belonged to the Theater Guild in Chicago, and they went to the Goodman Theater. They were educated. Not higher—I think they went to college for some time. They did a lot of stuff. I remember they took me once—maybe I was 13—but I remember seeing *The Maids* with them, and I think I saw *The Brig* with them, and I think I saw one of the—with the Living Theater. I was really baffled by some of these things, but it made an impression.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you remember from those performances, if anything?

MICHAEL SMITH: Just trying to figure—just try to understand the narrative that was going through. [00:20:03] We had a maid. Not a full-time maid. I was just trying to think about—I probably always thought about things in relationship to my life, so when I saw *The Maids* —and something—Genet didn't do a piece called *The Blacks*, did he?

LIZA ZAPOL: I think so.

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, he did? I think we may have seen that. I'm getting it confused with *The Maids*. I don't know. I was just always trying to follow. I would sort of get into them in some way, just the movement or just—*The Brig*—I think it was *The Brig*—that was kind of disturbing, because it was a very intense kind of script.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's O'Neill? Was that Eugene O'Neill?

MICHAEL SMITH: No, no, no, that's the Living Theater.

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh, that was the Living Theater, okay.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Like I said, I think it was the original. But that could have been—we may have seen those—they belonged to this theater guild thing at the Goodman Theater, which did a lot of more experimental theater, too.

LIZA ZAPOL: And how did they respond to this experimental work?

MICHAEL SMITH: They were—they said, "That was interesting." It was always interesting. Yeah, "That was interesting. That was strange." I think they liked the idea of going to the theater. Then they also took me to musicals. They liked to go to musicals. So I would go to those, too, every so often. Then, every Yom Kippur, we'd go to the movies. I watched television alone, but we would watch—my mother didn't watch television. [00:22:00] In fact, we didn't have—television wasn't allowed—or I don't know if it wasn't allowed, or it was an unspoken rule that you did not watch television until the evening. Although I could watch it by myself downstairs. I'd watch two reelers, comedy, like *The Three Stooges* and those kind of things. And I think *Leave it to Beaver*, something.

LIZA ZAPOL: So I'm trying to imagine your home and this space downstairs, the basement. Can you describe your home to me, what it looked like, and also, by extension, your neighborhood?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was kind of a—I lived on the same block—my father—because my father was a realtor. He had his own company. He didn't like to spend a lot of time when he looked for places. I remember when he found, he would just come home. He said, "Fern, I found something." You know. [Laughs.] I was born in a bungalow, and it was too small. They moved down the block. It was also walking distance from my grammar school, Horace Mann grammar school. This was 81st and Chappel, and then we moved to 78th and Chappel. So it was like three, four blocks away, long city blocks. The school was in between or something.

The place that I spent the most time in was the two-flat that he bought. It was a nice—we had the first floor. It was a big apartment. Then they remodeled the basement, and then they broke through the living room so you could go down to the basement like another room. They finished it, so there was a ping-pong table, there was a kitchen down there. [00:24:00] My mother—and then on the first floor, there was a living room, a dining room, an eat-in kitchen. There were four bedrooms: we each had our own bedroom. There were two baths, the kids had their own, that they were—and my mother had her sewing room, that was

actually probably the nicest room in the house, because it had so much light and windows around it. We had two tenants upstairs, two older women. One was Mrs. Hurnie, and the other one was Ms. Naughton. Ms. Naughton was a single person. Mrs. Hurnie was a widow, I guess. All I remember about Mrs. Hurnie is that she'd always just call up—it would be hot in the apartment. She'd be calling up to have more heat. My father said, "Give her what she wants. She's our tenant. We've got to make her happy." Then Ms. Naughton worked, and she was very friendly.

There was a lawn in front, and there was a backyard. They put a patio out there for basketball. My brother liked to play basketball. And we barbecued out there. But we didn't really use it as a family, per se. Like I said, my mother wasn't really into outdoor life. I remember the barbecue, somebody would barbecue and then bring it to her, and she would make it presentable. The house was very nice. It was a very nice—it was big. A very nice building.

LIZA ZAPOL: Like a 1950s construction, or had it been in the '40s?

MICHAEL SMITH: I would say more like—it was a brick building. It was probably more like the '30s or '40s. I went to the neighborhood—that neighborhood now is like—a little west of it is where they're having a lot of the problems, a lot of tension and shootings and stuff. [00:26:03]

My neighborhood became more and more integrated. By the time I left high school, it was like 45/55 or whatever. [45% Black, 55% white] It became dangerous at places. There was a gang there. I don't know if you know, there was the Blackstone Rangers. The Blackstone Rangers became the P. Stone Nation, and this guy Jeff Fort, who took on a Muslim name, he was in jail, and he'd run the P. Stone Nation from there. But I'm [not] sure that gang is still going on.

My father dealt in a lot of Black property. That was primarily his business. He sold, he managed, he had a company. It's interesting, because his office was in Hyde Park, and it was near U of C [University of Chicago], but a little off the side. It's right in the center of where Theaster Gates is doing his projects. I wouldn't be—when he first—my father met Elijah Muhammad, I remember he told, he said, "I met him," and he remembers meeting him, and he wore a white glove when he shook my father's hand. He moved offices, to Halsted Street. It was across the street from Operation Breadbasket. So he was always in the thick of it, in Black areas. Then, later, he did very well. He made a lot of money. Then, in the '70s, there was this lawsuit where the—contract buyers, and maybe—is it Ta-Nehisi Coates? The writer? The Black writer who did—about reparations, the article about reparations for, I think, *Harper's* or *Atlantic*. [00:28:07] Anyways, he brings up this suit, and I picked up a book. I had heard about this book called *Family Matters* [ph] or something, and my father was in it. He represented some of the—and that was like an eye-opener. Anyways, business started to change after that, when the contract buyer's discriminatory practice was revealed.

LIZA ZAPOL: So tell me where your father was situated. Because in the 1950s and 1960s, Chicago's suburban boom happened—in terms of suburbia, and at the same time, there's [urban] redlining. Is that what you mean in terms of [your father]?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know about the redlining. I worked in his office and I saw how he worked with the people, with his Black clientele, and he seemed to be very fair and generous. People seemed to like him. But he also worked with sleazebags, too, putting together deals and stuff. I need to do more research. I don't know how much there is. That's one project I want to do. Because I kept some of his records and some of the addresses. I got the idea because I teach with a colleague of mine, this African American guy. Very nice man. He grew up in a parallel universe. He grew up in a middle-class Black family, and I think his father was one of the first managers in the Loop downtown. He managed the department store, a well-known department store. His grandfather was active. I think he established the porters' union. [00:30:00] So he was always politically, socially active, and he was a wannabe Panther. John is younger than me. His name is John Yancey. He was involved with the Boys and Girls Club, and he was involved in a lot of activities. So I had this idea of—we had these landmarks that we knew. I wanted to do an oral history with him, where we would drive through the area and talk about it. I still think I want to do that with him. And then go from there and use that as a text, and then try to expand it into a videotape.

[Reading my father's name in a book addressing the issues around the contract buyer's suit was startling, and it took me awhile to accept that he was involved in discriminatory practices. Perhaps it's deep denial on my part, but it's confusing having witnessed what appeared to me to be his generous and friendly relations with his Black employees and customers, and reconciling this with his participation in institutional racist policies. –MS]

Then I was fascinated—it was funny when I read about Theaster Gates's project, because I—you know, it was funny. You learn how, even though—um. My reaction to it. I was almost—I guess more racist tendencies. I was like, I'm aware of that area. I'm aware what happened to my father and the business. There was this certain kind of—how he's [—Theaster Gates has] taken this area—which is incredible. He's like a politician artist. And he's done stuff with it. He's very ambitious. I find it a really interesting project, but a certain—like I always—not always, but then I look at it, just because of my background, my father, I think, I have a little skepticism about it. I wanted to do a project sort of in relationship to that area, but I never had a handle on it. I wanted to do, in a way, kind of an oral history, but then do a video. [00:32:00] Then I realized, why don't I—I think I may eventually do some sort of fictional story with it. Because I talked to somebody who was a city planner, and they said, "Why don't you do that?" Because I've done stuff with putting my character through that. Actually, I had a project—the *MUSCO* project is about bankruptcy, and it was parallel when my father's business was going down the toilet.

LIZA ZAPOL: In the '70s?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, the project, I did it in '96, but my father's business—when did it go down? It was going down in the '70s, but he maintained it, and then he moved his office, and it more or less was in the '90s, when I was at—I remember going to—and it was more like a clubhouse than a business, because he wasn't doing much. A lot of businesspeople who have their own businesses, it becomes—that's what they do.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, at this moment—I mean, there's a lot that you've brought up that's very interesting, but when you're talking about what happened to your father with the lawsuit, how was that described to you at that time, and what did you see happen?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was never talked about. It was just—talked about the contract buyer. So we never really knew what it was. It was something he did not discuss—he didn't bring work home with him. He would come home, eat dinner, and—he also ate very quickly. He would eat dinner and finish in seven minutes, and then he'd go sit in the chair and read the paper. You thought he'd be in his own world, but every so often he would pipe in, because he was listening. But no, it didn't come up. Hear something about—and he didn't tell my mother a lot. I don't think he actually shared with my mother about stuff with the business, because he—at the end there, he—fortunately, there was enough money and everything for her, but he should have gotten out of there earlier. [00:34:12] Out of work, I mean. Sold the business or just gotten out of there. Like I said, he didn't talk about work at home.

LIZA ZAPOL: You also talked about—so you were in this neighborhood that integrated over, I guess, the '50s and '60s, when you were growing up there. Who were your neighbors? What was your family's relationship to neighbors? Describe this community a little more to me.

MICHAEL SMITH: Middle-class. My parents may have been a little more upper-middle class. I think there were a lot of Jewish people there, but not completely, because we also lived across the street from Our Lady of Peace, that was a Catholic grammar school. They had a sign in the playground. It said "No trespassing." So it always could be construed as "No Jews allowed." There was also this South Shore Country Club over by the water. We were about a mile away from the lake, and then there was a South Shore Country Club that was, I think, restricted. It was kind of ironic, because later the neighborhood became Black. I think, at one time, it was taken—was it taken over by the Muslims? I'm not sure. The integration was very gradual, and it was something that was very natural. It was nothing that disturbed my family. That happened—there were Black people in our lives. [00:36:01] Some of the people in the office would come to some of the parties. His clients—you know. Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Who were your close friends growing up? You mentioned playing games. Who were those friends?

MICHAEL SMITH: When I was first down the block, when I grew up in the bungalow, I was friends with Mickey Donnelly next door. Mickey's family, the parents, they were Irish

butchers. They were directly next door, and they had—so I was friendly with him. Then, across the street—my mother became friends with them, and I think a lot of parents become friends because of the children. The Jordans were across the street, and we were friends—my mother was friends with Tamara. Andy Jordan was this Irish guy. I think his brother was the coach of Notre Dame, the basketball team, and he was a lawyer, and the butcher—they were closer with the Jordans, because professionally, probably. My mother, I think, was totally envious of Tamara, because she was this beautiful Russian woman. They were friendly. They had things in common. The Donnellys were more blue-collar, but they were so sweet and so nice. Then we moved down the block, which was not far, and my mother continued to buy meat from the Donnellys. But Mickey, I think he was a few years older, and then he went away to maybe—he went to a Catholic high school or something. Very nice family. [00:37:59] One of the daughters became a nun. She was very socially active, and then she left the convent. They were cool. They were a sweet family. The Jordans, they had a son, who was a little younger than me, who I never got into. He's probably still around. They're dead, I'm sure. We maintained a social relationship with them. Then, when we moved down the block, there were people next door. I think my father—the Peters—my father was friends with him. He even did business with him, I think. Winky [Wayne Peters] was his name. Something. I think Winky got involved in a savings and loan scam; I think he did a little time. He was a lawyer. [Laughs.] So there were these kind of shady dealings around. Then I remember the Schecters across the street. Then I had my friends from school. Then my friends I went to Hebrew school with. That was a small-knit—we'd walk to school down the block, and we seemed to go through these zones of Catholic kids who seemed to be anti-Semitic, who would try to cause—picking fights and stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: What would happen?

MICHAEL SMITH: Um, I don't know. I think I—I don't know. I think only one time were we challenged. There was Bruce—I think it was Bruce Hervitz. He was kind of a badass. He just stood up to anybody. Nothing ever—maybe we got in one little—nothing really that bad. When I was 13, I remember getting—I went to high school, but they put me in a branch, so I had to walk through a zone further away. Actually, the high school where a lot of the shootings are happening now. They had a branch, because I think the school was getting a little crowded. [00:40:01] But I think I was walking over there to a friend's house at night, and I got jumped by a gang, a gang of white kids. I came home, and I'll never forget that. My father—he wasn't a big talker. I never talked to him. But he was very generous. I came home, and he saw me and said, "What happened to you?" I said, "I got jumped, beat up." The first thing he said, "You want to go after them?" Because he grew up with a lot of gangs. He grew up on Maxwell Street. I think he had a—he said he had a gun when he was 13. A lot of the stories, I'm not quite sure. But I think his father—they had one of the last livery stables, but I also think his father was a gambler. So it was unclear. Anyways, I thought that was very funny. He was also very generous to me in a certain way. I remember he went with me to the draft board, to support my CO claim to be a conscientious objector. He didn't give it a second thought. I mean, he was against the—he was a Democrat, and they were always Democrats, and they were against the war, but when it had to do with me, he was always very generous, very sweet.

LIZA ZAPOL: Just supporting what you wanted?

MICHAEL SMITH: Supporting, yeah. Yeah. My brother, I guess, they didn't like the fact that he was an artist, and he sort of paved the way for me. Then I just learned from my brother that my mother didn't like the fact that I was an artist, too, because she wanted me to have a regular job. But then they actually would—I think they were proud of me. I had a show at the Whitney in '82. I was young, and I had a solo show in that film video [gallery]. They came to town to attend the opening of my—I remember my mother brought cookies. So sweet. [They laugh.] She once took part in a performance, and she didn't give it a second thought. [00:42:00] She tucked the baby in.

LIZA ZAPOL: That was the first Baby Ikki, or one of the first Baby Ikki performances?

MICHAEL SMITH: No, it was more the second, because the first one, I didn't know what the hell it was. So they support—they had no idea what I was doing, but they were supportive.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm going to pause here for a second.

MICHAEL SMITH: Is this too much? [Audio break.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Just to resume, I was thinking that you've illustrated a couple of stories about the line between your Jewishness and assimilation, both in terms of your family traditions, like Christmas, in terms of this neighborhood, where you're identified as Jewish, but it sounds like it's a mixed neighborhood, in a sense. Tell me what that means for you in terms of your family. What traditions, if any, were kept or were explained to you? What was Hebrew school like? What was your understanding of what Jewishness meant to you as a child?

MICHAEL SMITH: As a child, what did Jewishness? It meant a certain kind of things you had to do, Hebrew school for one. There were certain kind of ritual celebrations, certain holidays with my grandmother, Passover. Every Mother's Day, my father would take her to the one kosher restaurant in Chicago. It was just god-awful. I forget the name of it. It was called Segals [ph] or something. It was just awful. My grandmother also ran the mikvah, which was the ritual baths. [00:44:02] She was the attendant there. There was something I didn't quite understand. It was always kind of humid and moist in there, and dark, and I never saw these people. That was very foreign to me, because it was like there was a certain kind of—I thought of Hebrew school—like I said, there was a gym, and then the High Holidays you would go and you'd meet your friends, and then you'd go get French fries or whatever at Peter Pan. Whenever it was connected with my grandmother, there was something very foreign. I remember the same otherness that I felt with that, like the men and the women sat separately. I always found that odd. I didn't get it. But I did go through—and so I had to—once I went through my bar mitzvah, that was what my father would have all the kids do. He didn't even talk about it. It wasn't until later that he said, "I didn't care what you did, just so you had your bar mitzvah for mom." You know, for his mother.

LIZA ZAPOL: What are your memories of your bar mitzvah?

MICHAEL SMITH: My memories of my bar mitzvah? Um. It was an interesting time for me. I was always very fat, chubby, and I went through a physical change. I became thin. I think I may have gone on a diet. Maybe I ate one less donut or something. I'm not sure. I remember my mother was concerned, because my brother had thyroid issues, and he had goiter. It was really kind of traumatic for him, around that same age. So she was worried that maybe I had that. [00:46:01] But I was thin. My memory was practicing my haftorah, going to the cantor and learning that. I had a long one, but I learned it. I think I learned to read Hebrew, but you know, you just—with the melody and stuff, it gets so ingrained. I remember walking to the temple with my father in my new suit. I was very into clothing then. I was kind of a—I was into a certain preppy look. I remember he took me to his—Al's. Al Koralchek, this place near—this garmnto guy that sold suits, where he bought all his stuff. I remember they made a—I really wanted a three-button suit, but Ail didn't sell them. Basically, what I probably would have wanted was to go to Brooks Brothers or something. My father—"We'll go to Ail's." I remember he made a two-button jacket into a three-button. They added another button. The cut was wrong, but it was—and I don't think it was about the money. It was just that's where pop, dad, went. Later—it's funny how—it's interesting what I'd call my father. I used to call him dad. Then, later in life, I'd call him father, and then I'd call him pop, too. Then we started to refer to him as W.F., because that was his—W.F. Smith and Company. W.F. had a certain kind of ironic kind of sound to it. Anyways, I remember walking to the temple and being in this suit with my father. I don't know, it was kind of a moment, because I was with him, and we didn't do that much—do that that often. [00:48:05] Why were we walking? I'm not sure. Maybe—usually, he drove everywhere. But maybe—I don't know. Was my grandmother with—maybe that's it? It was Saturday, so if my grandmother was with us, you wouldn't drive. I'm not sure; I think we walked in a group. I don't remember. Anyways, the next thing I remember—I remember three things: going to the temple, being at the temple, and doing my haftorah and looking down at my mother and brother in the first row, and them laughing. I think it was then—they would laugh when I was welcomed into the bar mitzvah club. [Laughs.] I had no idea why they were laughing, but I was aware of the mirth in the family, and the humor. Then I remember the party. We had a party at our house, and make-your-own-sundaes, there was that. The adults and the kids; that's what I remember. And I remember being through with that fucking Hebrew school. That was a lot—I'd go four or five times a week, so that was a lot for a kid.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, a serious commitment. So then what did you do with your time after that?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, I went to high school, and I got involved with a fraternity. So I think we played sports. Then I guess I became more interested in girls, although I didn't—what did

I do? I liked to gamble. We used to go to the bowling alley and gamble. On the weekends, we'd go to the bowling alley, and bowl, and gamble. That was one thing I shared with my father. He was a big bowler, he belonged to a league. Then, every Thanksgiving, we had father-and-son bowling. [00:50:00] I still have my trophies, it's kind of sweet. Then, at night, we'd go to the track, or play cards. So I don't know. I'd play sports with my friends. Played baseball and football. The fraternity played football and baseball, so I would do more of that.

LIZA ZAPOL: What is a high school fraternity? What was that fraternity?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was kind of ridiculous. It was like a club, but they had, obviously, some sort of traditions and model, modeled after fraternities of college. There was a rush week. I remember going around to different fraternities, trying to get in. I forget what they call that, where they invite you. There was a cool one. I ended up being in Eta Lambda Phi. I think my brother was in Tommies. I don't know what their—Tau Omega Mu or—I don't know. It's all these Greek letters. And so that became my friends. A lot of my friends were in that group. But then they had this ridiculous—where they put you on the hell chair and ask you questions. I remember a series of questions—rate, in order of importance, God, family, and [. . . fraternity –MS]. I think those were the three, and maybe one more. Maybe school was in there. I'm thinking—and so you try to answer these seriously. I mean, now if someone asked me that, I'd say, "Are you serious?" God doesn't really figure in my—I really don't believe in God.

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MICHAEL SMITH: So it was kind of funny. Then, I remember playing sports with the fraternity. Then we did a dance. Our fraternity hosted the dance, and you raised money for charity, and then they would do this—it was called the Sing and all the groups would do these communal singing projects, thematic sing—like sing some songs, and they had a theme, with costumes and stuff. We raised money, so we were the host. I remember once we raised money for Little City, and they rewarded us by inviting our club—I don't know what they were thinking—to an autopsy. I think we brought some friends, girlfriends and stuff, to this thing. We went to an autopsy. We were raising money for—I remember one year, we did Little City, and I don't know what we were raising it for. I still have that smell of formaldehyde in my—most of us were like—then we went out afterwards and had—we went to Paul Bunyan's and ate big cookies. [They laugh.] I remember that.

LIZA ZAPOL: As you do after—[laughs]—going to an autopsy.

MICHAEL SMITH: I have these little memories. Then I just lost interest. I think my last year, I didn't renounce, I just left it.

LIZA ZAPOL: The fraternity?

MICHAEL SMITH: That thing, yeah. Then when I went to college, I thought, who cares? I didn't give a shit. They had some at my college. I could give a shit.

LIZA ZAPOL: And you mentioned also girlfriends, or girls. When did you start—when did your friendships—did you develop friendships with girls in high school? [00:02:00]

MICHAEL SMITH: In high school, I had this one friend that I had a very close phone relationship with. When my brother went away, I had my room, and then his room was there, and then there was a bathroom between us. The children's phone was in his room. I would talk to this girl named Aileen Urkov, and we had a phone conversation at night. We weren't girlfriend, boy—but we had this phone relationship. To this day, I have a lot of very close women friends, and usually very strong women friends. A lot of my relationships have been with very strong women. My mother was always very genteel and refined, but strong in certain ways—I mean, directed. In other ways, not; that was interesting as she got older, to see the fear in her. I didn't really go out. I would go during the Sing, or the prom, I would go out with a friend or something. Or maybe I had crushes with—I remember I had a crush on a couple girls in grammar school. They didn't go anywhere. I never was dating them, but I had these crushes. Also, I was kind of insecure, because I was a little butterball. Although I looked at some pictures and I thought—before I got really fat—kind of cute. I was a little butterball. [00:03:57] Then you go through that awkward age of a little acne or whatever. So I had the phone relationship with Aileen, and then I went out with somebody who lived in the suburbs, like my last year. I remember I would drive on the weekend and visit her. I forget her name. Lynn. Lynn Novak. I remember, when I moved back to Chicago, I was delivering

pizzas, and I delivered a pizza to a friend of hers, and she said, "Oh"—you know. I'm sure it was very impressive that I was delivering pizzas. That was after I stopped working for my father.

LIZA ZAPOL: After college, when you came back?

MICHAEL SMITH: I came back to work with my father.

LIZA ZAPOL: A couple things. One is, I interrupted you before when you were talking about going down into the basement and watching television. Of course, that's—television seems to have been an important influence on your work, so I think it would be remiss not to talk about television. What shows you watched, who you liked.

MICHAEL SMITH: What did I watch? Um, I watched *The Three Stooges*. They had these, usually, children's shows, and what they would do is they'd draw upon those two-reelers. They were for free. I don't know, there was probably other kind of two-reelers. Maybe there were some *Laurel and Hardy*. I was never a big *Laurel and Hardy*—but I did like *The Three Stooges*. I watched *Leave it to Beaver*, although that family of *Leave it to Beaver* was everything that was not my fam—it was very "other", the family. It was a suburban life, and it was—here was this kind of family that talked with each other, and shared things. But there was a dynamic with some of the kids that I could relate. It was always the same thing. Beaver would get in a little trouble, and then it would get resolved, or Eddie Haskell would do something that caused problems. [00:06:00] The Cleaver parents were always very understanding and level-headed. This was foreign to me. There was a certain kind of format that kept me involved. Maybe I liked the fact that it was—I was fascinated by the suburbs in a way. What else was there? I think, on the weekend, I'd watch cartoons and *Sky King*. Also on the weekends, we would go to the movies, because you could see a double-feature for a quarter, and my mother would just give us money. We'd go to the theater by ourselves, and you had enough to buy candy, a quarter for candy, and go to the theater. I think, depending who you're with, you either sit and watch the movie, or you'd run around, act like little idiots. It was an old movie theater. It was beautiful. I think it had an Egyptian theme or something. It was great. And the basement, but it was a very alone time. I usually would watch by myself, and occasionally I'd watch with my sister. I watched *Soupy Sales*. I liked that. Have you ever watched—that was a children's show. When I was a child, I watched *Ding Dong School* with Miss Francis. I watched that later. It was very slow. Very slow. Miss Francis would—I remember she introduced me to the idea of celery and—certain snacks: Celery and peanut butter. I think I would try those things after. Like I said before, I think I may have watched a cooking show.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm going to pause for a second. Sorry. [Audio break.]

MICHAEL SMITH: —watched *The Ed Sullivan Show* on the weekends. There were certain time—I would watch the Disney—*The Mouseketeers*, I think, in the afternoon sometimes. [00:08:00] Then the weekend—Sunday, that always indicated the end of the week, or the beginning of the week to me, the Walt Disney show. *The Mouseketeers*, I think, was a different show. I'm not sure. But there was something about Sunday night and the certain time of day that I found very frightening and depressing. It was like—I don't know. There was something very lonely about it, and it also indicated the beginning of the week.

LIZA ZAPOL: And you would be often watching television during that moment?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know if anybody was interested in watching the Disney show with me. My sister, she was four years older than me, so she really didn't want to—I wanted to hang out with her, but she didn't really want much to do with me. My brother was eight years older, about eight. He was much friendlier to me, but by the time I was older, he had his own friends. But they were always nice to me. He was nice to me. My sister would always fight with me. What else did I watch? Ed Sullivan. Variety shows. Maybe I watched Sid Caesar once in a while. *The Academy Awards* once a year. And maybe a movie.

LIZA ZAPOL: And what of those—or what did you think of comedy, that world? You talked about trying to be the entertainer in your family. Was there a kind of borrowing that you were conscious of, or are conscious of now, that was happening from the shows you were watching?

MICHAEL SMITH: I think with comedy, there was also a period when the first comedy albums came out. Shelley Leonard. I think he may have been the first comedy record that came out.

We had those. And Bob Newhart. So we had those records. Allan Sherman. [00:10:00] I also had a cousin who played piano, who was a lawyer. They had this thing called—the lawyers would do—every year, they would do this kind of satirical sketches, and he was the one who was very—he'd spend more time on that than his law practice. We would go to that—occasionally I'd go to that. He'd do that. He would come by and he would play the piano. I remember always telling him, "Could you play the cat song, the kitty song?" He called one song the kitty song. Humor was in the family. I think I watched other sitcoms. I'm trying to think. *Dick van Dyke*. I watched that. But I don't know if I laughed that much. I think more the comedy records. It was more directed like that. And some of the comics on the shows.

LIZA ZAPOL: As you were listening to that—I'm curious about this entertainer child who is eating spaghetti, and then what happened—

MICHAEL SMITH: It's nice you call me an entertainer, but it was about attention.

LIZA ZAPOL: So how were you continuing to get attention, then, as you were getting older, into high school?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know, I joked, and I had friends. I was never—I hung out with the smart kids, but I was never a good student. I don't know how smart I was. But I seemed—that was my clique. They accepted me. Maybe I made them laugh. I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: But there weren't necessarily formal places, like talent shows in high school or things like that, that you would perform at? [00:11:58]

MICHAEL SMITH: No. I think I mentioned the other night about being in a—I had a nice voice when I was a kid. I sang a duet in front of the PTA with Nancy Seren. I mentioned that, right?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, but go ahead. You can tell that story again if you'd like.

MICHAEL SMITH: I had a very nice voice, and I sang the high part. It was in sixth grade. Evidently, I showed some proclivity to art. I was able to—they said, "Oh"—I had a nice voice, or I could draw—not draw, but, I don't know, do something. Make a collage. But I never pursued it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you remember—so did you go—was that in art class in particular?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, for art class.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you remember from art class? Did you like making stuff?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was less—it was a little easier. I didn't have to think too much. It was kind of crafty, so it reminded me of being with my mother, I think, because I made those bean bags with her. I remember making a mirror, decorating a mirror–maybe that was in Cub Scouts–an ashtray. My mother saved all of my drawings when I was a child. I don't remember them, but some of them are—I basically draw the same way as I did then, which is kind of great. Some of the drawings are really great, and I use them in my work and my lectures. I enjoy it more—that's probably where I get my most pleasure in my work now.

LIZA ZAPOL: Is—

MICHAEL SMITH: —drawing, or coloring. I think when I first met you, I was in a coloring time. [00:14:00] Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Then, also, as a family growing up, what visual art did you see? What are your memories of looking at art, and your reaction?

MICHAEL SMITH: Visual art. I can't—that gets a little vague. Visual art came more into my life when I was turning 10, because my brother went to college, and he came back interested in art. He used my bedroom for his studio, and so I'd watch him paint, and I was fascinated by it. Kind of intrigued. He had a whole dance. He had a dance when he did it. He had the same—it reminded me—he had a great bowling style. We all bowled. He had a great form. There was something similar to the way he approached a canvas, because he was doing some AE work, kind of Action painting. He had an approach to the canvas, too, that he would use. Probably kind of funny, and tease-able now. For me, it was fascinating. I never even thought about it that way. I would occasionally get to the museum. My parents were members at the Art Institute. I remember seeing certain paintings that I remember that always—two

paintings in particular. The Seurat, the *Grande Jatte [A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte].* You know that one? I remember that, because that's there. Then I remember a Balthus painting that always intrigued me. Then when I got older, I became a serious painter, and I would go more.

LIZA ZAPOL: Did your brother explain to you what he was doing? [00:16:03] Did he teach you? What was the conversation that you would have?

MICHAEL SMITH: No. When I went away to college, he lived in the same town, and I became his—I lived with him in my second semester my freshman year, and I took a class with him. He taught in a branch of the University of Colorado there. I got into it in a big way. In fact, I became like a little clone of him. I became—but I was kind of precocious, and I developed very, very quickly. I mean, good enough that, in one year, I got together a portfolio and I got accepted to the Whitney program in my sophomore year. I was probably the young—I was 18 when I went. I turned 19 when I was there. But I had a very—I was into a certain kind of AE painting, and then it became more reduced. I don't know how conceptually based it was. It was more a visual thing, tactile, visual. But I was good, I was pretty good.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you remember from your teachers that year? Were there any particular critiques or assignments that you remember when you were starting, sort of developing?

MICHAEL SMITH: I took the drawing class with my brother, and that was the one that just got me engaged in drawing. I never learned any academic drawing or anything. It was just a matter of engaging with the material. Then I remember there was a model, and they would deal with lines. He wasn't looking for—he's an abstract painter. He would deal with that, but he would ask—he just wanted you to engage with what's in front of you. I sort of got into that. [00:18:02] I started to understand about composition and things. I didn't really take any painting classes in school. I remember—because they were teaching figure drawing, figurative painting, and that was like—I wasn't interested in that. It's really curious, because this is early 1970, when it's the rise of Conceptualism and stuff, and I was kind of ignorant of that was going on. When I came to New York, I was kind of interesting, even though the seminars at the Whitney were with a lot of those people, but they were with other people, too. I remember one class that I took, they let me—after I had been to the Whitney program, like sophomore year, and I left school a couple times after that, they left me alone. I just did what I wanted to do, and I basically did everything on my own. So I didn't really take art classes, except for my one drawing class with my brother. The other ones I just did. I think, because I got credit from being in the Whitney one semester or whatever, so that took a lot of my credits or whatever. I remember I took one class with a teacher, and I was probably—I don't know, arrogant. You know, if you're in the Whitney program—I was arrogant or whatever, at that age. I remember they were giving out free canvas. I never went to class. They were giving out canvas, and the teacher said, "I"ll give you this canvas, but it's figurative. You've got to use it"—I said, "Oh, okay, I will." I remember I didn't do anything with it. I had a studio. So I really didn't take classes. And I actually did not really learn about critiques and that stuff until I'd started teaching. [00:20:08]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, Colorado College. What—how did you get there in the first place?

MICHAEL SMITH: Because my brother went there.

LIZA ZAPOL: I see. By then, you were already interested in what he was doing? But—

MICHAEL SMITH: No, I became interested then. I had no idea what I was interested in. Then I became a very serious artist.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you also mentioned the conscientious objector story. Did that happen around the same time as—or before you went to college?

MICHAEL SMITH: No. That happened—this was the height of Vietnam. I went to college in '68, and then they started to do the lottery system. I forget the year. And I—

LIZA ZAPOL: I think '69 was the beginning of the draft.

MICHAEL SMITH: I was in school, so I had a 2-S, a student deferment. Like a lot of other young people, I was kind of politically involved my first semester. That was what took up a lot of my energy; I would go to protests. Surprisingly enough, they had a branch of the SDS

at Colorado College, and I belonged to that. We'd go to protests and stuff, it was absurd. Some of them were very active. And it was curious, because I remember going to a protest—not a protest, but a convention of SDS in Boulder. A lot of the main people were there. Then I remember Up-Against-the-Wall Motherfuckers were there, too. They were like a motorcycle gang or something. It was really intriguing. There was a whole bunch of personalities. [00:22:01] I don't know how much I was into the whole belief system or whatever, but I was into the whole atmosphere around it.

Then I got into art, and so I kind of left that, although—so I was in school, and I was in the Whitney program. Then, I don't know, I was having a problem in school, I couldn't concentrate. I think I was depressed or whatever, I didn't know what I was doing. I had been to the Whitney program, and then I came back, and I didn't like being—I went back for a semester, and I left school. I took a leave from school. It was a big—and I thought, okay, I'm going to deal with the draft. I have to deal with this. I was in Chicago, living in Chicago with my parents. I mean, that's enough to make me depressive. I was driving a cab. I was driving in an all-Black garage on the South Side of Chicago. I was seeing an analyst, who—a friend of mine was going, and supposedly this guy—my friend was—he had some issues. So he was seeing this analyst, but he also told me that this guy helped people get out of the draft. So I started seeing him. I was having some problems. I saw him for about seven months, and I went for a physical. Oh, I applied for conscientious objector. I went to a for an appeal, I went to the state level. So that took some concentration, some work, I evidently did it.

I also started going—I became friendly with—there was this guy named Herving Madruga. He was a total character. He was this French teacher. My brother was friendly with him, I was friendly with him. He was this queer language guy; we never talked about the queerness. He lived with his mother. He was so funny, and really an eccentric guy. [00:24:01] We were—I was good friends with him. I hung out with him a lot, and my brother hung out with him a lot, when my brother was there at school. He was part of the Quakers, and I started going to Quaker meetings. That was the basis of my conscientious objector claim.

LIZA ZAPOL: That was in Colorado?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Where he was, and where—

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I think I started doing it—I was going to Chicago. So it was interesting that I had no interest in religion, but this interested me. In fact, I continued going to Quaker meetings here in New York. I remember I met somebody there, and that's how I found a place to live in New York when I was in the Whitney program. This guy named John Tusa, who was like—I lived above Katz's Deli. I paid $50 a month rent, and I paid the entire rent. It was unbelievable. A tiny two-bedroom apartment.

LIZA ZAPOL: That was in 1970 or—

MICHAEL SMITH: '70.

LIZA ZAPOL: So tell me more about that moment in New York, coming to New York, and what the ISP was like, what you were learning.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was a very different animal then. They didn't have—I don't know. It wasn't as rigorous, theoretically rigorous. People would gather around Ron [Clark]'s desk, his little acolytes, and they'd talk, stuff, but I would just sort of sit and listen. I used it as independent work. I had my own studio, and I worked all the time. I think Ron liked me because I swept. I was very tidy, and I kept my area clean. That's, I think, how I got back.

LIZA ZAPOL: You mentioned that some of the lecturers were people who were Conceptual artists, and [being introduced to –LZ] other things than what you had been working on in Colorado. How did your view expand or shift in terms of the kind of work that was happening? What do you remember from that summer?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, it was a whole semester. [00:26:01] What do I remember? I remember it was kind of like it was us against—I mean, it was always us against them or something. Usually, if I didn't understand something, I thought, that's fucked up. I didn't give it a lot of thought. I was interested in a certain kind of painting, so anybody that was—I remember we did a—we met Malcolm Morley, and he was talking about his griding system.

He had a conceptual way to talk about it, and kind of, as I realized later, fairly druggy way to look at it. A lot of the artists, a lot of them were pretty stoned when we—we had a studio visit with—Brice Marden, I think, was the first one we did. He was—let's say he was not that animated. I mean, he was very friendly, and he was doing these kind of very matte, kind of monochromatic things. John Tweddle. I remember he was totally stoned when we got to him. Robert Morris. Carl Andre. He was kind of an asshole. Oh, I think a friend of mine had given me a brownie. I said, "What's in it?" He said, "Nothing," and it turned out it was a hash brownie. It was one of the more enjoyable seminars. Morris. Lawrence Weiner. I was kind of baffled by—I didn't know what a lot of the—I didn't know what the conversation was. There were some others I forget. But I painted a lot, and I looked at a lot of work. A lot of work.

LIZA ZAPOL: In New York, when you were here?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. [00:28:00] I remember one day, taking an excursion down to Philadelphia. It was actually kind of a magic moment. I went down there to see the Van Gogh show, this blockbuster show. It was so crowded, and of course I need to spend—I couldn't look at it—I had to be centered with a painting and at one with it. So I was very annoyed with all these people there. I just walked around the museum, and I had no idea what was around the museum. I remember ending up in this kind of side gallery in the corner. There was a little hole in the wall, this kind of oaken door. I looked in, and it was the Duchamp piece, with the woman—that androgynous kind of—it was a magical moment. It was very funny, that I was peeping in, in relationship—I had just found it. I just happened on it. I'd heard of Duchamp and all, but that was—so there were some—occasionally, I would see that stuff. Also, there was a lot of minimal dance going on, so I would go to these performances. I was seeing this stuff, and I was also—and then I went back to school. I went back to the Whitney. But I did see some performance, and then I took a dance class at school. There was a woman who was a well-known modern dancer named Hanya Holm. I think she choreographed *My Fair Lady* or something, one of these Broadway things, but she was also in the same—some German immigrant who moved in the war. She was right around—after Martha Graham, but was considered kind of—she was historical. Every summer at Colorado College, she would do a dance program. I took it once, it was interesting.

LIZA ZAPOL: What did that feel like? Was that your first time taking—

MICHAEL SMITH: —dance? Yeah. [00:30:00] It was interesting. I remember I took a choreography class, and also technique class. I got sort of into my—a little more aware of my body. I was always athletic, and I liked to dance, I would dance at parties. I grew up on Motown, grew up with Motown. I used to dance at our dances. I liked that, but this was different. You'd learn first position, second position. You wore these ridiculous tights, and then you'd warm up. Then I remember the composition class. I guess I was influenced by what I had seen, like minimal dance. I remember them calling my dance "pedestrian." I would always respond—we did it in the basketball area, and I brought in a basketball and stuff. I think I saw Grand Union with some balls, and I brought that in. I just accepted it and ended up—we did a program. I was part of some folk song, I liked it. I was intrigued by these people. I was interested by these dancers that were really into their bodies, but they smoked more than anybody, and they also partied hard. At the end of the year, we went out and danced. It was fun. It was a nice break, and it was a good way to go back to my final year at school.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you returned after—your final year of school was when, in 1972, '73?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I was supposed to graduate in '72, but I took a year and a half off. I think I took a year and a half. I went away. I failed my draft—my physical. I got out with a mental deferment. [00:32:00] They found me—they gave me a 4-F. Did I get a 2-Y or a 4—whatever. They found me mentally not fit for service. That was scary, going down for that physical. That was really scary.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you remember?

MICHAEL SMITH: I just remember seeing a lot of people of color I knew that were going to be going away, what I remember is feeling privileged. I also remember that I didn't know if I was going to fail it. I was thinking, am I going to go to Canada if that happens? I knew I wasn't going to go to Vietnam, I mean, I didn't want to go.

It's funny. I didn't even do it on purpose. I filled out—as usual, I was careless, and I think I

filled out my form with those big, black pencils they used to—and I did it wrong. Then I erased it. It was a fucking mess. So it looked like I was disturbed. I remember talking with the guy, their psychiatrist or whatever, taking the physical, which is kind of dehumanizing. You're in with a group of guys, and they're looking at your ass, and they're—it's just—um. I just wanted to get out of there. But I met with the shrink—psychologist. I remember him writing, big letters, on my thing, "Schizoid." I mean, huge letters. Then he gave it to me, and the next thing I know, I failed. And I felt so much better. Then I went back to the shrink who I was seeing two days a week, and I said, "I think I'm finished." He said, "No, you can't. You're not." I think it was—he said, "You're sick, kid. You should be here." [00:34:00] I probably was, but I felt better, and I had gotten [over] that huge hurdle. That was huge. That was a big thing in young people's lives. So then I actually went back to school, and then I finished up.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then what happened after you left? You said you had a studio in Colorado, in Boulder.

MICHAEL SMITH: I did. I bought—well, I rented above someone's garage, this psychology professor who I became friendly with, who, turned out later, was actually—I think he was forced out of school, because I think he was doing experimentation with some drugs, and I think he was caught doing them. He was kind of a behaviorist. I think he was doing a lot of coke. Anyways, he was a nice guy, and he was very supportive of me. I took a class with him. Had to deal with the eye. I took it twice, I could not get into it. I felt really—I was not able to concentrate, and I remember taking a couple classes over again. I remember taking a philosophy class over, and it took me—I took this philosophy class—Plato. I took that—did I take that twice? I took the psychology class twice, and I never passed it. I wasn't—it was funny. When I first went to school, when I first got there, I was sort of, I think, admitted early so that I could sort of catch up, because I didn't do very well in scores. But because of my brother, I think they thought, okay, maybe let him in. I think Colorado College is a good school, and it's got a good reputation. I didn't like it, but—and I got very good scores, very good grades, my first year and a half, and then I discovered painting. [00:36:00] I didn't give a shit. Then they went on pass/fail. So I could—I got by.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you had that studio.

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, I had the studio.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was your first studio—

MICHAEL SMITH: And then I bought a—I lived in a grocery store. I rented a grocery store that was across the street from where I lived in Colorado Springs with my brother. The woman rented—it was very inexpensive, I think it was $100 a month. Maybe at that time, it was—I don't know. I could afford it. It was this beautiful—it looked like a Hopper kind of building. It was just this kind of clapboard thing that was just long, and big windows in the front. The woman wanted to get rid of it, and I said, "You're going to sell it?" She said yeah. She offered it to me for like $10,000. I mean, I didn't have that kind of money then, that was a while ago. The terms were a $1,500 down payment, and I continue paying—she held the contract—$100 a month. So my father lent me the $1,500, and I owned this building, and I had a studio there. I think I had it for a couple years. Then, when I left Colorado Springs, when I moved to Chicago, I kept it, and I rented it out. I think I made an extra $100 a month, I rented it for $200. A hundred dollars plus—that paid my rent, because I think my rent was $100.

I rented from my father. I was on the second floor of an office building. Very long office building. It was like 120 feet long—120 feet hallway, and all these offices off of it. [00:38:00] I fixed it up a little, and then I moved in, and then a couple friends moved in. We were all paying $33 a month. So I didn't need a lot of money. I lived on split pea soup, and jug wine, and bread. It was actually one of the best times of my life in terms of—it was like discovering the wheel. I was learning what I did. I came. I was a painter. Then I stopped painting. Then I started doing what I did—what I do now, in a way. So it was a very exciting time.

LIZA ZAPOL: So let's talk about that transition, stopping painting, or what happened when you dried up, or what that felt like. Then where you went from there.

MICHAEL SMITH: Where did I go from there? I think the loneliness of the studio was too much for me. I'd get incredibly anxious. I also didn't know what to paint anymore. I didn't

have a Conceptual practice. I was a little ignorant of where to go. All these things I had seen, like the performance events—I was living in Chicago. It was a time when performance was happening, so I would go out. It was a time when I could see people, because I lived alone in this area that was—now it's kind of a very gentrified, fancy area, but then, it was kind of heavy.

LIZA ZAPOL: Where were you?

MICHAEL SMITH: I was over at Ogden and Milwaukee, so it was a little west of the Loop. Do you know Chicago?

LIZA ZAPOL: A bit.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was about 800 North. It was this crossroads, and it was a really heavy area. It was also very trafficked. I didn't have a job, really. I worked for my father, and that didn't really work out. He was happy I tried it, but I—that's when I started delivering pizzas. [00:40:02] As I say, I made a lateral move to delivering pizzas. I didn't need a lot of money. I had that little bit of money coming in from Colorado, and I did that. But I saw more guns when I was living in that place than I had seen ever. Working for my father, I remember I was shown a shotgun once, checking out a stolen water meter at a house. One time, the Illinois Bureau of Investigation busted into my place. There was an attempted robbery downstairs at a currency exchange. I heard this door open, and I went to the hallway. The next thing I know, there were a bunch of guns pointed at me. It was a strange time. But it's funny, because my father found me that place. He knew I wanted a studio, and he found—he also, when I was—I didn't mention this, but when I was in high school, I was like 15, I owned a store. He set me up in a store. I remember going to him, and there was an Army Navy Store that had gone out of business. Bud's Army Navy. There was all this stuff that they left. They were back rent like six months. I went in there, and he said, "I've got to clean this place, and I've got to rent it again." I said, "What are you going to do with this stuff?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "You could sell it." He said, "You want to?" I said, "Yeah!" So I partnered up with two friends. I said, "Let's have a store." Ted and Steve. My father said, "Okay, you can have a store." He found me a little store down the block from a blood bank, in the heart of the ghetto. [00:42:02] This was like 63rd and Halsted—or Union. Heavy, heavy area. The center of the East Side Disciples. I lived in Blackstone Ranger territory. I got beat up once. Someone pulled a knife on me there. I sold knives, and I stopped doing that when someone pulled one on me. My father, I guess he figured it would build character. The shop was funny. We sold fishing tackle, long underwear—this is the middle of the summer—and knives.

LIZA ZAPOL: So what actually sold? [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: I think we sold—I think I saw, for the entire summer, $176. [They laugh.] And my partners never showed up, so I'd go there and—it was funny.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah. So your dad found you this studio.

MICHAEL SMITH: Found me a studio.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was that transition of—it was lonely in the studio, it was hard to be in that space. So where were you going to see work there?

MICHAEL SMITH: I would go to the museum. I would go to the movies. I would go to—there would be performances that would come through town. Even though it was the Second City, they'd get people you'd been hearing about. I met Vito Acconci, I assisted on his performance there. Maybe even then, I drew the line when there were lines. I remember there was a big Chris Burden performance, but I didn't feel like waiting in line for four hours to get in. I was more seeing dance performances, I was curious about them.

LIZA ZAPOL: Like what?

MICHAEL SMITH: There was a group called MoMing, and there was a guy named Jim Self. I remember going to see a lot of his stuff. He may even have gone on to dance with Cunningham. [00:44:00] Do you know of him?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, I think so.

MICHAEL SMITH: He was good. And, um, what else did I see? I don't know, maybe some theater groups, maybe I saw Mabou Mines. Then there would be these group shows. I saw them. I remember seeing Bill Wegman's work for the first time in Chicago. That was a big influence on me.

LIZA ZAPOL: What did you see? What do you remember from that show?

MICHAEL SMITH: Of Bill's?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was a group show, but he had some of his dog paintings—or dog videos. The stupid stick one. Just dumb, short pieces, maybe it was even the modernist chair? I don't know. I thought they were incredibly funny. Then that was the time I also—I was reading and writing some. Probably horrible, horrible writing, but I was writing and reading. I remember, every day I'd read—I'd have the dictionary and read 10 or 20 pages of *Ulysses*. I don't know—I think I read 300 pages or something. Then I was reading some other—I think I was reading some Pynchon. I don't know what I—I forgot everything. But I was reading, and then I also started doing these audio recordings, because I started going to this comedy place, and I was intrigued, because I liked the idea of—I thought it was intriguing. This comedy thing was intriguing. Also, I probably thought, "Oh, that would be kind of cool. People ask what you do. You say you're a comic." Anyways, finally someone asked me, or told me, "Why don't you do one?" So I said "Okay," and I did, and put together something. It was very arty. A lot of the things, I'd look at it, and there was some influence of Nauman. I don't know if I would be following what was going on, but it would be distilled. [00:46:00] So I'd get distilled versions of what was going on. I also had friends who were going to the Art Institute, so I'd see their performances that were going on at the Art Institute. I'd get a sense of what was going on, and I'd pick and choose. Then I filtered it through a certain kind of anecdotal, kind of non-sequitur of a stand-up. It sort of was this odd blending. I don't know, it kept me—and I was doing audio recordings, and I was recording stuff, talking about traffic, or trying to come up with narratives, and I'd talk about these absurd situations and try to make them—if they were humorous. Or talking about walking down my hallway.

LIZA ZAPOL: What would one of your recordings sound like?

MICHAEL SMITH: A lot of dead space. A lot of the discussion would be—I guess I was possibly influenced by Cage. A lot of discussion would be about the static—I had a shitty recorder, so it would be talking about getting the recorder to work. It was really in-process kind of thing. Or I'd sort of look out the window, and look at a policeman and start talking about his job. One of them, I'd get these ideas for a joke, and you'd hear this—sounded like me kicking or hitting something, and I'm just—there were daily chronicles. I'd say, "Oh, it's March 25th. It's 3 a.m. in the morning. *Ugh. Ugh. Ugh*." A couple minutes. I said, "That was me kicking a dead horse." Then I did it again. Then I said, "That was me—kicking a dead horse with my right foot." Then I did it again, and I said, "That was me kicking a dead horse with my left foot." Pause. Pause. Pause. "It doesn't seem to be working." Over.

So I tried to come up with these kind of slow, slow jokes. [00:48:00] So I was working—then I started to work on my timing. That's when I started remembering Jackie Vernon, this comic I would see on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. So I did watch *Ed Sullivan*, but there were some things that made an impression, and they came—oh, I also started seeing Keaton movies. Maybe that was when I moved to New York, that could have been when I moved to New York. Keaton and Jacques Tati, I don't know. I was seeing anything—I'd go out. "I'm going to go out. Meet people."

LIZA ZAPOL: So these recordings—

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, I also—maybe I smoked a little pot then. [Laughs.] It's possible.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's possible. What was this community of friends who may have been living—did you have friends who were living with you, did you say, in that place?

MICHAEL SMITH: I had two friends. One friend that I went to college with, this guy named Michael Bull. We had a falling out, a very strange falling out. He was a strange guy. I thought he was going to be a really interesting artist. He had a very strange, conceptual mind. But he got really heavy into Go, the board game Go. You know, that—I mean, really heavy into it. We had a falling out. It was really strange. Then another guy, who was a photographer,

named Bob Goldberg, who I went to high school with. They were my roommates.

LIZA ZAPOL: Was smoking something that you did with them, or was that a part of your process, like—

MICHAEL SMITH: Part of my process. I would do it—can we stop for a minute?

LIZA ZAPOL: Sure. [Audio break.] Okay, so we paused, but you were talking about process, about kind of—

MICHAEL SMITH: —the early work. [00:50:05]

LIZA ZAPOL: —discovering your process and the early work.

MICHAEL SMITH: A lot of that stuff was observational. I would notice. I carried a little notebook and a pen. It's funny. Maybe that became part of—maybe a fountain pen or something, but maybe it was after getting involved with materials with painting. There was a certain kind of connection with the material, or the actual physicality of writing. I would just go out, and when I'd go out, I'd just go out and observe stuff and daydream. Look at things. Sometimes that—and I would take notes. I would make drawings of these things. A lot of times, it would either be—I'd go back and look at them. It was a way for me to make like I was making progress, even though sometimes I didn't know what I was talking about. But it would be little notes, little things I observed. But then sometimes I would step back on that, and like, taking notes, I eventually wrote a little song called "a Hammer a Notebook" It was like, "Take a hammer, a notebook, wherever you go, and put it down real fast. A hammer, a notebook, wherever you go. Never say 'at last.'" It was part of this medley I did in that—I sent you the link. It was just sort of playing off this idea of the pen is mightier than the sword, but kind of indirectly referring to that. That's what I was intending.

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MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know if people get that. I was also dealing with a lot of punning at that moment, which now I hate. I mean, I've always hated it, but I was dealing with it, and it was popular in the art world. I would play off of word—there would be word play, and I would just play off of that and do that. Maybe that was from looking at *Ulysses* or something, getting involved in that. I doubt it, but maybe.

I would get these ideas for things. What about—at one point, I thought of this idea of Bland Man. I thought, "What's blandness?" I would take things indirectly through osmosis. It was also the time—it was post-Nixon. Nixon was elected with the silent majority, I think. It was him. Then I was thinking, what is this silent majority? And then, what is this blandness, and what's this demographic? There's a certain kind of taste and a certain kind of—and it's also judgmental on my part, but a certain kind of blandness. But also, that's how you think about the suburbs, the other. To me, it was the other, because I grew up in the city, it was something I didn't know. Some of these things that were happening in the world would feed into it who knows how. Then I got the idea of Bland Man, so I started thinking of what is—then I thought, I'm doing this thing—maybe it was from going to the clubs, or thinking about a character, or whatever, a voice. A bland man. And then I wrote friends, "Who's Bland Man?" A lot of time it just came back to me, "It's food." They would tell me food. They couldn't really define—maybe they'd say a job. So then I had these things. [00:02:00]

Same thing with the baby. I had this idea of a baby, Ikki. I had the name. The baby came out of probably reading *Ubu*. I really liked that play. There was something about Ubu. It was Ubu and Ikki. They're palindromes. So I was thinking something—no matter how you look at it, forward or backward, it's always a baby. Or Ubu was like—and he went through this range of experiences, and they always approach it in the same way. There was a certain—I don't know, it fed into feeding this character of a certain mindset, or a baby. Then I asked people why they have children, why they have babies, and again—and these would help inform these characters that happened later. The baby I developed early on, '75. That was interesting. The first performance was talk—he talked. It was—ugh. I cringe. Then I stopped talking, and I just put him at 18 months and left him there. But I don't know, I would get these ideas. Maybe this sort of thematic idea or conceptual idea, and then I would deal with it.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's interesting, as you're talking about honing in on these characters, but that seems like that was a leap. I'm interested in why you decided to create characters in the first

place, or what that was—who were you looking at that made you want to do that at that moment?

MICHAEL SMITH: I realized a lot of my early work was referencing things I'd seen in the art world. [00:04:00] A lot of the references, people didn't get. "Oh, did you get that? Did you see that?" And they didn't, and then I realized, wait. I started thinking about this—trying to make something humorous. Does it really matter if they get it, just so they get something? The response is a laugh or some sort of—something, and I can't control it. I also got tired of just doing these—at the same time I was doing these kind of—stringing together anecdotes or non-sequiturs, just compiling stuff, assemblages, I also wanted to give it some sort of greater structure. I was getting—I felt—I don't know. At the same time I was excited, it was making me feel inadequate that I couldn't structure it. Developing a character gave it a sense of wholeness or something. Then I started developing character, and then the character started to get more focused, like in terms of who the character is or where it—both of the characters are usually—well, the baby responds to its environment, and the Mike character is sort of a product and defined by his environment. He's a follower. So the context I set up for these characters creates a situation that I respond to. Make sense?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah. It doesn't necessarily have to be scripted.

MICHAEL SMITH: No, but I scripted my stuff very tightly, even though it didn't look that way. I mean, who know—the scripts are *fakakta* scripts, but—some of them—but then they got a little simpler and more character-based.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm sorry, I said that because you said [the character] "is responding to the environment around him." [00:06:01] But you're setting up situations for Mike or for Ikki to respond to?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, and I did—yeah. You said scripted, right?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. They became—they set up—and then I started to deal with—I don't know if out of lack of how to deal with them, I started dealing with more traditional arcs or structures. Then someone told me, said, "Oh, you come in with a bang and go out with a bang." Then, one time, when I started developing Mike, I liked the idea—"You know, I like the idea of performing this character always in my underwear, starting in my underwear." That's funny, because it was interesting to see how the perception of underwear changed, because it used to be like *Life of Riley*, an old man kind of idea. Then Marky Mark came around. It was different.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] Yes, right. I'm interested in exploring those early iterations of Baby Ikki, let's say. Was Baby Ikki first, in '75? Mike was—yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: Although Mike came about—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: Can I—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't want you to—but the idea of Mike—I did this performance where I had an audio recording. It was kind of very influenced by Richard Foreman. I found his work hilarious. I'd have an audio recording that would say, "Hey, Mike." It would always talk to me and give me instructions or direction on what to do. It was always, "Hey, Mike." Mike also—my family called me Mike also. When they called me Mike—my brother would call me Mike—it was kind of a dig. It was kind of derogatory. So it was funny. It wasn't until my friends started to call me Mike, or the character, that Mike entered it. I always thought of Mike as outside of myself, and it was kind of setting quotes in those early performances. [00:08:02] So that also led into it becoming my name, character.

LIZA ZAPOL: So Mike was, in a way, this external voice that piped into your performances, or that you piped in?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, it was an external voice. The voice who referred to Mike was a

different voice, but Mike was this external vehicle. Then this whole idea of Mike, this kind of every—Mike is also the most common name. Michael is one of the most common names, and then Michael Smith became—I thought, why do I have to come up with some sort of name? I'll just use that. Mike, Mike Smith. That's not my name to begin with.

LIZA ZAPOL: Why do you say that, "That's not my name to begin with"?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't think Smith is a very Jewish name. My mother was Rosenberg, and my father—I asked him what our name was before Smith, and he—I remember, without missing a beat, he turned to me and he said, "Sutton." So it was like my grandfather had gone through from Eastern—from Lithuania to England, then down to South Africa, so he picked that up along the way. I think he stowed away on a—the story is supposedly he hit the rabbi over the head with a candlestick studying for his bar mitzvah, and he thought he killed him, so he ran away, moved to England, and he got involved—he stowed away down to South Africa and met this older man who kind of took him under his wings. He got involved in the Boer War, and then some diamonds, and he got in the livery stable business with this guy. The guy's name was Smith, so it became Smith and Smith Cab. Then, supposedly, my grandfather was a gambler, and then he gambled—traveled around the world, looking for maybe a woman, or gambling, and lost all his money. [00:10:07] Then he moved to Chicago and married my Orthodox [grandmother]—I don't know what to believe. It's a funny story.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's interesting that you say, "But I don't think that's my name to begin with."

MICHAEL SMITH: I think it was a name that they invented, or somebody gave it to them. Smith is very WASPy.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so you are now interested in taking on Mike Smith, or exploring that character.

MICHAEL SMITH: Eventually I was. This stuff came slowly.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right, right. Let's stay in Chicago, because—

MICHAEL SMITH: I love that period.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] Okay, okay.

MICHAEL SMITH: That's fine.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so Ubu and Jarry—how did you start getting into Jarry? What was that character—what was funny about that, or interesting, or what was fertile for that—

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, I was intrigued that it started out as puppet shows that he did when he was a child. I don't know if I'd read about it or—I was just curious. And I responded, because it was incredibly stupid and funny. Did I see a production? I'm not sure if I did, I don't know. People suggest things. I had no real focused way of looking at a lot of this stuff, or how it came to me, I would just happen on it.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then you—so leading up to that first performance—I think you showed me one of your notebooks, where you said, "That was for one of my first performances." [00:12:02] How did you script your *fakakta* scripts? How did you lay out what you were going to try, even with language or whatever? How did you lay that out for yourself, and then what was that first performance?

MICHAEL SMITH: They probably would go back and forth from how I would—I remember how I worked is I would take notes, and then I would go through the notes, and then I would make lists of these notes. So there would be repetition. The lists would also give you a sense of accomplishment, because then you'd fill up your book, but also you'd get a better sense of the review. Then I would sort of pair these things on the paper. Then, eventually, I would start performing them, working them out in space, so then you get a sense how they move. The structuring device, how I held it all together, was the audio tape, where "Mike"—similar to the Foreman. I had that piece, where I would come in and push that, and it would tell me, and then it would start. I forget if I ended it—if I continued the audio or—but then I would speak. So I'd go back and forth on this stuff. Then I would just all of a sudden do this, like define the space, this kind of Nauman thing. It was like figure ground references, or a

Nauman reference. I also did a lot of picking up of—not garbage, but I'd find things. Things I'd find, and I'd deal with props. It was like prop humor, too. I was dealing with absurdity, without knowing it. [00:14:07] Even though I didn't like that kind of work, I was dealing with this kind of surreal kind of humor. Or I would make these odd things that would—the humor was absurd, surreal. I also started some of the audio tapes, then I started making more story-like—I tried to make up stories. I was all over the place, just trying to continue, fill up my notebooks, do stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: What would indicate to you that it was something that you wanted to continue working on? It sounds like you're throwing a lot out there. So what sticks?

MICHAEL SMITH: What sticks? Something that feels like it goes together. Something that—I don't know, some of the—I don't know. There was always something that was either just enigmatic enough, or I also found quirky. Sometimes I'd find them humorous, even though they may not be humorous, but I just found them humorous. I also liked the idea—was a comedy routine. I wanted to add what I felt were different aspects of comedy, or different ways of approaching comedy. I wanted to have physical comedy. I wanted to have a pie in the face, some tropes of that. So I tried to include that in what I thought was—it was kind of a meta-comedy routine. All these ideas were informing it. I didn't really know about press releases then, so I didn't really come up with it, so it was just about putting this stuff together. [00:16:05] I was making collages, basically.

LIZA ZAPOL: Literally, you were making collages? Or in space?

MICHAEL SMITH: In space, yeah. That was the interesting thing about the stand-up, is that they would just keep going forward, and I liked that. It gave me a certain liberty to do that. Plus there was also this—I found it intriguing—also, comedy was starting to have a resurgence then. Steve Martin, Albert Brooks. I was aware of that. *Monty Python*. And I was intrigued by that stuff. I also thought it was a little—I thought there was something interesting about trying to combine that with performance art, and they were not that far—intellectually, I didn't understand it, but there was something that intrigued me.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was the first "Baby Ikki" performance?

MICHAEL SMITH: That was in my loft. That was my first performance, and I invited a bunch of people. I remember I wrote out the—I can show you later, the card. I sent out postcards to people. The first "Baby Ikki" was—the baby talked. So it was basically me thinking what it is to be a baby. I had the baby smoke the cigar, because there were cartoons of babies smoking cigars, so I did that. I had the baby talking about what people told me about why they wanted children. What else did the baby do? The baby drank some. The baby crawled. I was also getting my sea legs with the baby; I was trying to figure out how to do it. I had just realized that I could do some of the movements, but maybe I didn't do all of them, I was just getting comfortable with the idea. [00:18:00] Also, I had an outfit, but it wasn't complete. I don't know if I had the glasses then. When I reviewed the talk, the video, and I realized I was talking, it was so uncomfortable. I just got rid of the talking. So it was just a baby that didn't talk.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was the baby—can you describe for me the baby? What the baby wears, and what it feels like for you to be in that costume.

MICHAEL SMITH: The baby wears all white, and some nappy kind of towel that's just pinned together. I didn't have a diaper. I don't know if they sold Depends—maybe they did. I had white suspenders. So I put them all—like, pure. A friend of mine knit me a bonnet. White suspenders, white towel, white bonnet, and white baby sunglasses. That was the thing that—that was really important—also a pacifier on a lanyard. I think the lanyard—I don't know if someone gave me, but that was like a connection to camp or something. It was something about the lanyard. But the baby—the glasses separated me from the audience. I remember thinking about doing my first performance, and getting ready for it, and I thought, okay, it was this idea of a baby, and this idea of this kind of unformed being, and then bringing it out, almost like an idea, giving birth to something. It was kind of a metaphor for that. [00:20:00] But then I realized, I've got to do this. So then I got down on the ground and started moving around, and then I realized—I just started figuring out how to do it. I don't know. People said, "Oh, you must have observed babies." Maybe I did. Maybe I did. I also remember, when I was a child, I think I had a Halloween party once, and I remember—I think I was a baby character, and I remember a similar—my activity was similar to when I played games. I think

I just sat on the couch and stared. I don't remember what I was wearing, but maybe it was white. I have no idea. I have this vague recollection of doing that. Anyways, the baby—I think, in the first performance, I may have had the glasses, I'm not remembering. But I did get on the floor, and then I started moving around, and, I don't know, I guess maybe finding my inner baby. But I'm fairly double-jointed in my hands, and I do that. I realized, oh, maybe I can do this. Not to sound like a braggart or anything, but I do it pretty well. I also liked the fact that I—if I'm going to do this—there are not many people that do the baby like that. They usually go to those cartoony things, the cigar, or smoking, or *wah-wah*. These kind of exaggerated, cartoon-like—so I put it in this weird place, where people—it makes people really uncomfortable. Some people.

LIZA ZAPOL: Maybe you studied babies, but somehow, the physicality of a baby, you discovered that, or were exploring that in this first performance?

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm getting down on all fours.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah. Talk about the review of the tape, and deciding, based on that—was it—

MICHAEL SMITH: I never had a tape to review. [00:22:05] Maybe I saw the baby—a friend of mine—not a close friend, but somebody had just gotten a Portapak and they wanted to use it, so they came and recorded the performance. But I didn't really see the baby, I don't think, until a number of years after I had been doing it.

LIZA ZAPOL: I see. So when you said, "When I reviewed the tape, and it was really uncomfortable when I heard the language," that happened later?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I reviewed it when I was working on this DVD thing, digitizing stuff and looking at that early stuff. I went, "Ooh."

LIZA ZAPOL: How do you understand that the baby speaking doesn't work, for example? How do you—

MICHAEL SMITH: It's just a sense. That made me really uncomfortable. Rather than being the baby, it made me playing—trying this idea of a baby. There's something different. It's like—I don't know. It's like when you're around somebody who's talking baby talk. There's a certain kind of ambiguity when I'm playing the baby. It enters this world of something that could be real, or in an infantilist world. It's this kind of weird place—I think. I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: That understanding that it makes some people really uncomfortable. So what was the reaction that you got after that performance?

MICHAEL SMITH: The fact that I got dressed up as a baby, I think people found that funny. What the baby was doing, they probably thought, what the hell is he doing, or why is he doing that? [00:24:02] I sort of explained it, and they probably got a sense, because it was very broad and cartoony. But it was also really kind of janky, because I was using props that were left in that place, and broken things I found, and for some reason they'd end up there. It was odd. Very odd. Odd collection of things and movements. I was still trying to get the movements to—I would—it was like—

LIZA ZAPOL: You're showing me how—you're expanding your hand and grasping.

MICHAEL SMITH: I remember watching the baby doing it. It's really apparent that I don't know—I don't quite have a—now I—once I put that outfit on and do it, I'm in that char—I can do it. I can do it. But then, I was not knowing the movements of the baby. I just learned. Also, well, the talking was odd. The reaction time to the baby was slow. It was a different kind of timing than my other stuff. It was curious.

LIZA ZAPOL: What came next? What came after that for "Baby Ikki"?

MICHAEL SMITH: I had a skit. I did three routines—three performances. I called it *Comedy Hour*, and I did the comedy routine, which is that first performance that I thought of as a stand-up, or this meta-comedy routine. I did the baby. Then I did a thing called *Seesaw*. That was the second piece, where two—I built this really dangerous seesaw, and my friend and I would go on it. I was reading Beckett then, and there was a lot of repetition. [00:26:04] It came out of minimal—so it was like I'd get on the seesaw, and it would be, "Hey, Don. Do you see what I see?" Then he'd go up. "Mike, do you see what I see?" And it just kept going like

that. Then we'd get off. Then there was this strange kind of male bonding kind of gesture, where every time we'd get off it and we'd turn it around, we'd change sides, he'd go up to me and he'd go—in my arm, and then I'd go—in his arm, and then we'd resume—

LIZA ZAPOL: You'd punch each other in the arm.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, like—

LIZA ZAPOL: A little punch-nudge.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. That kind of male—it was funny. I don't know. I became aware of these kind of gestures through watching dance, minimal dance, and that would end up in my pieces. But it was all about lang—that one was about language, and really basic punning. "Do you see what I saw?" You know, just like that.

LIZA ZAPOL: Essentializing. But there's also other references to Beckett, it sounds like, with the tapes and—

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. "Don't let me down, Don. Don't let me down." You know, things like that. I also work with my—for some reason, I was surprised how Don performed. When I experienced it—I don't know, maybe I didn't want to share the bill, or maybe I was uncomfortable watching him. But watching the video later, he was fine. He was probably better than me. But it was like I was—I felt—I don't know. I was doing solo, and that was interesting. I didn't perform with anybody else for a long time.

LIZA ZAPOL: So that was the *Comedy Hour*, was those three [parts]?

MICHAEL SMITH: Those three. [00:28:00] I charged 99 cents and a bottle of beer, so made sure people had beer.

LIZA ZAPOL: They bring their own.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So that was in that space, in that—

MICHAEL SMITH: In Chicago. The office place, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So then what happened next?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was like a dam breaking, and I continued to have ideas. Then I got crazy ideas for—not crazy, but odd ideas for other performances. I did a *One Size Fits All Fashion/ Stunt Show*. It was probably—maybe I had read about—I was thinking about the one-size-fits-all show—I mean, fits-all stores. One-size-fits-all store. The men, big men, small men. I've always been conscious of my size or whatever. There was a poet named Robert Kushner that was doing these *One Size Fits All* fashion shows, and maybe I had read that, but I don't remember. I remember I came to New York and did it at the Collective here. Mine was also the stunt show, and it was very different. There was a similarity to what I—and he called me, and he said, "Why are you doing my show?" I said, "Well, excuse me, I'm not doing your show. I'm doing my show." I was a little offended. I was a little annoyed. I mean, here was a young artist, and he was established and well-known in the downtown scene—and I thought, that's—ugh. I didn't forget that. I made an announcement. I said, "If you're here to see his show, if you're getting mistaken, it's not that, and you can have your money back." But I didn't forget that. I thought it was ungenerous. Anyways. Maybe I read it, maybe I didn't, but I was in another city and I never saw his thing, so I don't know. [00:30:02] I don't know. Things happen through osmosis, too.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was that work? What was that piece? What was the *One Size Fits All Fashion/ Stunt Show*?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was basically a lot of stupid stuff I put together with props, like the stunt thing, or the aftermath of doing stunts. I had a wheelchair. I had crutches. There were some dances with crutches, with the wheelchair. Then it was a lot of the music I was listening to—music I put together. I wasn't in New York yet, but kind of Danny Stiles. "Chattanooga Choo Choo." "Don't Get Around Much Anymore." I was putting together some of these nostalgic songs. I was playing off the words of the song with some of the outfits. But they were absurd. I found things like zippers, and I would just hang zippers. Or I have shades, and I'd do things

—I was doing a lot of fashion poses like that. That became part of the dance. It was similar to the—it was kind of a carryover from the *Comedy Routine*, where I'd do posing and dancing, and things with jackets—oversized things. I did a revue, the *Busman's Holiday Revue*. It was playing off puns of the art world, the "stable of artists", and the "corral"—I think stable, corral. This idea of, again, punning. "Long-range", you know. I don't know. I forget all of the word play. But I put a revue together. That's where the hammer notebook—then I put medley in. So it was this idea of a show.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so you're putting together these—

MICHAEL SMITH: —skits.

LIZA ZAPOL: Skits, these pieces. [00:32:00] Why do you use the term "skits"?

MICHAEL SMITH: Because I really never—I don't know, they're skits. Also, it's the same thing as "Mike". It's a certain kind of—somewhat belittling me. I don't know what they are. Pieces. Whatever. For lack of understanding what it is, I do that.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you did it in your studio. You started doing them.

MICHAEL SMITH: I did in my studio. I was in Boulder that summer, and I did one in my apartment there, and I actually—and I did one at a dance class of Barbara Dilley, who was one of the Grand Union people. These were the people—you know. Maybe I had seen her perform. Then I had met some people there. I did one in my apartment, and then I did that *Minimal Message Movement* piece there, which was—I realized I was parroting things that were going on in the art world. I think I read about Trisha Brown's performance on rooftops. I thought that was absurd. How do you exp—they have an idea of what it is, and I thought about it. That's where I got the idea of the couch in the *Minimal Message Movement*. Everything is couched. Everything—these couch terms. You know, it's punning. Then the—did you see that piece?

LIZA ZAPOL: I think I've seen clips of that one.

MICHAEL SMITH: The idea is that you're—

LIZA ZAPOL: I remember gestural—from gestural, playing off of gestural work.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Everyday movements. But also, it starts by saying, "This is a piece called *Minimal Message Movement*, and I originally thought of with two other people, but I couldn't find people with legs as short as mine, so I want you to imagine two other people doing exactly what I'm doing." Then starting out with a whistle. Then I played some games, like—I played a series of games with myself, and I told a joke, and I played the three parts. [00:34:02] Then I did this skit that I did in Cub Scouts about crossing the railroad track, going through, "Any trains coming from the east?" Then we go through—I go—we—me and the three people. I play all them. It's very slow, like minimal art. Then we get to the end. "No trains coming from the south. I guess we can cross now." Then the skit, routine, is over.

LIZA ZAPOL: You're talking about the slow pacing. We've talked before about playing with timing. What's happening now in terms of your thinking about how—

MICHAEL SMITH: [Takes a sip.] That was me drinking something. [They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: A gargle. —of how you are playing with what you want to be doing in terms of timing, and in this space?

MICHAEL SMITH: Now?

LIZA ZAPOL: No, at that time. With *Minimal Message Movement*, with *Busman*.

MICHAEL SMITH: I guess, in relationship to the context I'm working in, I think it's very speedy, but I look at it, and it's really slow. So I'm thinking of slower pacing in relationship to more mainstream comedy, but I'm thinking of faster pacing in relationship to an art context. Basically, I don't know what I'm after. Something that feels—I'm actually thinking of a certain kind of rhythm that feels comfortable to me, that I'm looking for. Trying to figure it out. That's kind of—yeah, timing.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's kind of what?

MICHAEL SMITH: That didn't really help. I just—a sense of timing.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you're in Colorado. Now where do you go from there?

MICHAEL SMITH: I go back to New York. No, I go back to Chicago. Then I do—I live in Chicago for a year, and then I realized—I did another couple performances. [00:36:02] I came up with some new performances. That winter, I went to New York for a month, to—I don't know, I was ambitious or something. I thought I would show some of my performances there. I didn't perform publicly, I did all my—in Chicago, I didn't perform publicly, but I thought, oh, I would go to New York. I stayed with my brother, and I had friends there. I thought, maybe I'll perform. People were responding to this stuff. So I thought I would try performing. I did a private performance, I learned that I could—just by asking people. There were certain places you go. I think Helene Weiner from Artists Space, she said, "You can't really perform there, but there's nothing going on in—but you can use the space. You could rent it. You have to pay for someone to open it up." I remember who was there to open it up was Paul McMahon. I didn't remember until later.

I rented the space, and then I got in touch with a lot of people, one of the people being Martha Wilson, and Jacki Apple. Because she was friends with my friend Power Boothe, who—so she went to the performance, and she told Marcia Tucker, who was organizing that *Four Evenings, Four Days* of performance, the first performance event at the Whitney. I guess the word got out that—or misconception that I was a stand-up in the art world. I didn't realize it, but Marcia had a theater company and was interested—she was intrigued. So, amazingly, after doing this private performance, I get a call from Marcia Tucker from the Whitney. [00:38:01] "We'd like to meet you. Come up and talk to me." I remember this meeting with Marcia, and she said, "So you're the stand-up." I said, "Well, sort of." Then she put me in the program.

That was like being certified. That was huge for me. So I performed in the Whitney. I'm on the bill with all these people I had heard of. It was a big deal. How old was I? I was like 25. I mean, now, that doesn't mean—people are performing when they're—whatever. But for me, it was a big deal, because I'd only been performing maybe two years, if that. Then it sort of certified me. I thought, I think it's time to leave Chicago, like most people do. So I went back to Chicago, did another performance in my studio—still hadn't performed publicly—and then moved to New York and lined up—I had met a bunch of people, and then lined up gigs, and did stuff at the Collective. That became a regular spot. Was in a series at Artists Space, a public series, another performance series there. And started—and then I performed publicly in Chicago. They thought, okay, it's been cert—performed there. Then I just started writing around and going to places. I was friends with Mike Kelley, who went to CalArts, and he told me who to write there. I wrote Baldessari. Helene told me to write, and I wrote him, and he wrote me back. "Yeah, come do something." He paid me a hundred bucks or whatever. So I went out and did performances there, and then I did some other spaces there. There was a circuit of alternative spaces. So then it just kept going.

LIZA ZAPOL: And snowballing at this point. [00:40:00]

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: You've officially entered the art world, it sounds like, when you arrive in New York. Where are you living? What's your community in New York? And where are you getting your ideas from?

MICHAEL SMITH: Where am I living? I first moved to New York, I sublet for my first year. The first place I lived in was an apartment on East Seventh Street, across from Tompkins Square Park. I think I paid $175. There was one of those slanty apartment parquet floors with a certain kind of smell that I never could determine. But it was fine. Then I sublet a place the next semester, the next season, same year, from a friend of mine, David Dunlap, who had a loft on White Street. Beautiful place. Then I had a roommate that I met somehow. That didn't work out. Who was I hanging out with? Well, I met Martha [Wilson]. Martha was running Franklin—she started this place called Franklin Furnace. We became friendly. I remember I moved to New York, and that summer I met her. We got together, and I remember meeting her. We went out, Martha and I and—I met Lynne Tillman. So it was Lynne and Martha and me. I didn't realize until much later that I think they were incredibly stoned. Lynne was giggling a lot, let's say. We went to a ballgame. I think we went to a Yankee game. It was fun. Then I met people through Martha. I met three people through the Collective. I was

dating this woman. I met people through her.

Also, my friend Dike Blair, who I had met the summer before up in the country. [00:42:02] Before I moved to New York, that friend of mine who was my roommate in Chicago, the guy who played *Go*, was in New Hampshire. His family had this incredible house on the water, a lake. I stayed with him, and that's when it went a little weird with us. I felt, actually, at one point, unsafe. Then I moved down to the city. At that time, my friend who I did the seesaw performance was going through town, and he was friends with Dike, because he had gone through graduate school with him, and I met Dike. Then Dike was in the Whitney program, so I met Dike, and then through him I met some people—I met Ericka Beckman. I met Donald Newman. I met people—so it would just extend. It's a very small community, so a lot of these people that are in the Whitney program are also—and then some of the people I was in the Whitney program with who were performing. There was Julia Heyward, "Duka Delight". She was there. She was—Robin Winters. He was in that performance program. Then I met Robert Longo, who was up at Hallwalls. You network. Then I was going out with a woman who I had met when I was gone to Michigan. I had gone to Michigan because I was going—I met someone in Boulder who went to Michigan, and I was going out with her, and I went up to perform at their school. It's just extended.

LIZA ZAPOL: So the work that you're performing as you're going, is it these pieces that you developed in Chicago, or are they starting to develop further? Looking here, in 1976, it's *A Night With Mike* at the Collective. [00:44:04]

MICHAEL SMITH: That was something I—I started thinking about Mike, but it was probably something I started thinking about in Chicago, the Mike idea, the Bland Man. Then I started to work on that. God, that was slow. Wow.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was that like?

MICHAEL SMITH: It's unclear. I don't know how to explain it. It was a guy frozen in space. There was some jokes—I mean, a few gags where I did this getting dressed thing. I had ink stains on my—unaware of them. So every shirt I had on was ink stains. Then I put one on—a shirt that had no pocket. I turned around, there's a pocket on the back with an ink stain. So it was like that, some gags like that. I think I was going to work, and there was a pipe hanging —. It was very slow. What else did he do? I think he made some Jiffy Pop. I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: At Franklin Furnace, you performed *A Day with Mike*.

MICHAEL SMITH: *A Day with Mike*, or I did a bunch of—that's probably—Franklin Furnace, I read some of my writings.

LIZA ZAPOL: *A Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall*.

MICHAEL SMITH: I did that. I had this idea of "A Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall," so I did my version of it. Which was funny. I heard later that Andy Kaufman had done "A Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall" around that time.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you were reading your writing?

MICHAEL SMITH: I was reading my writing and doing these little performance ideas, little—

LIZA ZAPOL: There was the tape in that as well.

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, you saw it?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: That's online. Some of it I kind of like, because it's so baffling, but some of it is—I don't know. Bits. [00:46:01] I think Carl Andre had canceled, and Martha said, "Do you want to do some readings?" There was a slot open, so she shoved me in there. I thought, okay, people do readings there; I'll try doing a reading. I had done some of those fart poems and stuff, so I thought, okay, I'll read some of that. I read these little—I don't know. I was doing it. It was stuff I had written, I think, in Chicago.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's what it sounds like. Although I thought it was interesting because you started with, "I believe the appropriate place to start is in medieval times, with the knights of shining armor." You said that, which also seems like that's a theme that's come back up

again.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Knights, yeah. Right. That was a little better than I thought it was, that little essay. Stupid. Didn't go anywhere, but there was some funny little moments in it. I guess the—

LIZA ZAPOL: And the farts, yeah. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: The farting thing. That probably came out of Ubu. Although I've always been a sucker for poop humor and that sort of thing, really stupid humor.

LIZA ZAPOL: That year, '76—you move to New York in '75. '76, it looks like you're having Ikki's first birthday party. You're performing *Busman's Holiday Retreat Revue*. There's *A Day with Mike*. All of these things are in play, it looks like, right then.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I don't have a handle where I want to go, but at a certain—yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: And the *Stunt Show*.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: You don't know necessarily—keep going—where you want to go, but—

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm just doing. There was also, when I moved to New York—it was funny. I performed at a couple parties, and this guy saw me at a party. His name was Peter Livingston [ph]. He came up to me, he said, "I'm doing a comedy record. I'm doing an updated version of *The First Family* record." [00:48:01] Remember the Vaughn Meader? Vaughn Meader had this act where he did a spot-on impersonation of Jack Kennedy. They did a whole album. It was called *The First Family*. It was big, very popular, and the shot of the family looking like Jackie and everybody, and some of the administration, in front of the White House, and then they would do these comedy routines. Well, it was a short-lived career, because Kennedy was assassinated shortly after. He was doing a version with—Jimmy Carter was about to be—there was an election. So he had this comedy routine called *Jimmy Carter, Jimmy Carter*. So he asked me if I would warm up—I think I performed at—it was funny, because I performed at a party. He saw me perform at a party of Ed [Friedman – SM], I think, who was part of that [Robert] Kushner thing, scene. I'm wondering if I actually saw something—He saw me perform at a party, because people would do parties, and they would perform. Performance was popular. It still is, actually. He thought, this is an interesting comic. He thought of me as a comic, and he asked me to perform. It was at a CBS studio, with a Foley artist. It was kind of great. I don't know if people knew what the fuck I was doing, but I did it. It was—

LIZA ZAPOL: So you warmed him up? You did one of your routines?

MICHAEL SMITH: I warmed up for their comedy album, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you remember what you performed?

MICHAEL SMITH: I think I did some song. I don't know what I did, I don't remember. I just remember doing it at a fast pace, like keep moving.

LIZA ZAPOL: You had that sense that you had to change your pace for that audience.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, keep it moving.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's your first taste of kind of the commercial world there? [00:50:03]

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, I guess, even though I started thinking about it in that context, because I went to the club all the time, looking at comics. I didn't really talk about it, but I've talked about that before.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's happening simultaneously with these other pieces that you're developing further. We haven't really spoken too much about the development of Mike, of this Bland Man character, and how he starts to crystallize more. Can you go more into how and why you decided to go deeper into that character, into that world?

MICHAEL SMITH: I did this piece called *Let's See What's in the Refrigerator*, and I had

various characters in it. I don't know what it was. I had some reason I was thinking—but look at it now, and it's kind of weird. Did you see that? Is that online?

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm. Mmm?

MICHAEL SMITH: Where did you see that?

LIZA ZAPOL: I've seen—I'm not sure. I've seen photographs of it. I feel like I have an image in my mind.

MICHAEL SMITH: I did that at The Kitchen. That's when I brought a refrigerator there.

LIZA ZAPOL: I haven't seen a video of it. But yes, you have a refrigerator. There's the eggs. There's like—

MICHAEL SMITH: Props in there. I pull out my props and I do—it's this thing with a white—a chef and a black hat. Adversaries, some way. I provide narration. Oh, there's another character, Mr. Everything, who's basically a glorified stagehand, who does nothing. He's a stagehand and he just—

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MICHAEL SMITH: —flies. He's got a little cape, and he just stands on the table. And he's got a theme song. "Hey there, Mr. Everything. Yes, sirree. Hey there, Mr. Everything. All he does is everything." Then I come out and I do him. And then, "Let's bring in Mr. Everything." I bring him in, and then he leaves. Then it resumes. It's like—

LIZA ZAPOL: —a commercial break.

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know what it is. Yeah. I made a little cape. It was an excuse to wear all these ridiculous things I found. This bag with these leather, plastic things, and a cape, and this pink shirt. Stupid outfit. So I put these outfits together, and they get named or something. Like the prop stuff, things you find, scavenge out of the dumpster or something. I also lived one summer on Crosby Street, which a lot of the fabric scraps and stuff were there, so I'd pick up these fabrics and stuff there.

LIZA ZAPOL: Just like garment remainder stuff?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: There's this—you talk about *Let's See What's in the Refrigerator* in "Mike Talks to Mike about 'Mike,'" [in *Mike Kelley: Interviews, Conversations, and Chit-Chat (1984-2004),* ed. John Welchman, JRP Ringier, 2005] I think where you say, "I was more of a hat rack than a defined character in that piece."

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, I like the way I put that.

LIZA ZAPOL: It sounds like "Mike's" still—you're still trying to find what that frame is.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. Usually, I'd define him in the kitchen—I'd create a kitchen context, or I'd create a day-in-the-life situation, where I'd fake going to work and coming back. [00:02:02] Very depressive, the *Day with Mike*. I think, at that point, it also got to the point where it was so slow, I thought I had to do something. I don't know, it needed story. He wasn't going anywhere, really. He needed meds or something. I don't know. I wanted to bring it in and make the stories a little—have more of a narrative.

LIZA ZAPOL: You talked before about the silent majority, about kind of that moment. I guess now we're even getting almost to where it's [Jimmy] Carter. This sense of this disgruntled middle-class that voted in Nixon. What was your understanding of what was happening politically around you? What was your perspective on that moment? Why did you want to take that on?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know if I wanted to take it on. I guess I was still feeling the aftermath of Watergate. I remember watching that. I was impressed with that, and a certain kind of hypocrisy—certain kind of—huge hypocrisy and deceit. Like I said, I've always been intrigued by the suburbs. Maybe before I started doing video, maybe that was a way to try to deal with that in this character, although I don't know if Mike is a suburban guy. He's maybe

a middle-class, more lower-middle-class. [00:04:00] I took him out of that area. I just made him middle-class. His first outfits were kind of working-class, and I decided that's not right. I don't know, I just tried to put him maybe more in the world, to deal with it. I wasn't going to make—I didn't want to deal with political work, maybe more social stuff. That slowly seeped in as he became more defined as a character. That came with the territory of him as a character, a person in the world. I really have to stress that I wasn't really clear what I was—I was working more like maybe a stand-up who was just piecing together these things. I don't see the forest for the trees. So I would have a bunch of trees together, and then I'd say, oh. Oh, I have a little forest here, maybe. I have a routine. Oh, I have a character in this routine. Oh, wait, where's the—maybe the character can define what he's seeing rather than looking constantly. Maybe I can bring stuff into me. So maybe that was it. It was about being—I don't know, being more controlled, thematic, about some of it.

LIZA ZAPOL: With Michael Kelley, you said, "Mike's value systems have become clearer to me. The discrepancies in the world seem like real fertile ground." But it seems like that starts to take shape as you continue making. I'm looking at the timeframe here. [00:05:56] Was *Secret Horror* your first video, in 1980?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, it was my first piece that I wrote for video.

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh, but *Down in the Rec Room*—

MICHAEL SMITH: That was documented. *Down in the Rec Room*, by doing that—it's documentation—that's what I applied to do that project, that TV project.

LIZA ZAPOL: You used the video of that to apply to get funding to do *Secret Horror*?

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so let's talk about *Down in the Rec Room* then, since that also sounds like it—

MICHAEL SMITH: That was a major—that was an important piece.

LIZA ZAPOL: Talk to me about the arc of that piece. How would you describe that now?

MICHAEL SMITH: It moved from something that was incredibly turgid and slow and not doing any—it was the first piece I did at—I call it now *Notes for Rec Room*, but I did at Franklin Furnace. It was basically a sound collage, with me doing some activities in it, with some props. Some blinds I would open and shut. Some children's records that were playing. I would do some activity. It was also sort of site-specific, because it was at Franklin Furnace, and her [Martha Wilson's] toilet was there. So I would go in and out of the toilet, and flush the toilet, so it was a recurring motif of flushing the toilet, him coming out. I'm flushing the toilet a lot. Maybe doesn't feel well. It's this kind of visceral, this kind of bodily thing. He's in and out. Mike doesn't feel well. He's coming in and out. He's in his underwear, because Mike's supposed to start in his underwear. So he's kind of slow getting going. Then he gets dressed. There's a door here, and then there's some blinds here, hanging in the middle of the space, and he walks behind. Then there's a sense of inside and outside. [00:08:01] There's some newspapers that get delivered. I mean, evidently, because there's a stack of newspapers. A lot of him moving stuff around. It's kind of enigmatic, bizarre, slow, and it's unclear what's going on. But somehow, I dealt with the repetition of that. The motif of this toilet thing, of flushing. Is *Down in the Rec Room* online?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, it is. "What's my toilet doing on the television?"

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Is in both, right?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I like that line. It's like a punchline, so I would build stuff around it. I would build a lead up into that. It's like a way of organizing or telling a joke. It's also dealing with these—whether it's a refrigerator or whether it's a toilet, these very everyday objects. So I was dealing with that every day.

LIZA ZAPOL: So the set of *Down in the Rec Room*, was that sort of structured off the space of Franklin Furnace in some way?

MICHAEL SMITH: No, the set was actually organized of the space at Artists Space. A combination. The toilet came in at—

LIZA ZAPOL: —Franklin Furnace?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. But they had some windows there. We put a door on a doorway, so it was indoors and outdoors. I put the mailbox in, the kind of suburban mailbox, and then the TV we brought. Then the idea of the neighbors. I just added some extra stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: So this installation, that space, was that the first time—no, it's probably not—but of your creating that kind of a space, of an installation? [00:10:00] And why? Why did you feel like—or what made you want to build a world around this character?

MICHAEL SMITH: It's like putting him in some sort of—for lack of—playground, or something to respond to. I'm a reactive person, and Mike is a reactive character. So he would respond to these things that are also—these are sort of prompts to indicate a space, or some sort of a response that people would have to these things. It also indicates a certain process. If you see a lot of egg cartons on the wall, somebody ate a lot of eggs at some point. It's also a really bush league way of sound protection. Then the egg salad comes in later. So there's a certain kind of anticipation of that. Very slow, kind of dumb, very matter-of-fact, flat-footed humor. Or it's not even humor. Story—you know. Exposition. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: It's like you're staging, but you also—for the live audience, but it also very quickly becomes this stage set for a film, for TV.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. Also maybe something I could draw and sort of visualize myself in. I was doing drawings, but this is something I could draw out and think of Mike as patterns going in and out of there. I did a lot of drawings for the refrigerator piece, arrows and stuff. I don't know. [00:12:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, I've seen those, and I've been trying to figure out how you understand—and then you make a list afterwards of one, two, three, four. This is how it's going to go.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, a lot of times it's not about understanding. It's about making it look more interesting to look at, visually more compelling. Give it some movement. Some velocity. [They laugh.] Looks like it's—whatever.

LIZA ZAPOL: But these are these still sort of storyboards of your movement through space.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Not so much story—yeah, compressed storyboards. They're working notes that I'm thinking about. A lot of times they get repeated, because I always come back to that same thing. Let's make some lines and make it look different. Then a lot of times, like with word play and stuff, coming out of different words, a lot of times ideas come out of bad drawing or spelling. I'm a pretty good speller, but sometimes I'll think, "Is that right?" I'm a good speller. "Is that right?"—I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you give an example of an idea that came out of a bad drawing or a bad spelling?

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm trying to think. It will come to me. Maybe next session. I'll look at the drawings.

LIZA ZAPOL: I may pause for a second now.

MICHAEL SMITH: Okay. [Audio break.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, um—

MICHAEL SMITH: We were interrupted.

LIZA ZAPOL: We were interrupted, rudely, by a toilet. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Toilet mishap.

LIZA ZAPOL: Toilet mishap. Totally apropos. We're in an interesting moment in terms of talking about *Down in the Rec Room*, to get into *Secret Horror*. Like, really to get into the meat of your work. So we'll resume in two days to dig in further.

MICHAEL SMITH: I think—yeah. I think, also, maybe when I started doing those sets, the composition started to enter into it. Balance—you know. Filling out a set.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean in terms of composition? Like visual composition?

MICHAEL SMITH: Visual composition, yeah. I think—yeah, I think. Because I think that some of the work is visual. The humor is visual, too. The storytelling. That gets filled out.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, very much so. It sounds like you're going from more literal punning and language-based work to something that's becoming more visual.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. I tend to be kind of literal, too, in my real life, in my looking at the world, to a fault.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know. I have a tendency to feel the need to know what's going on with a lot of things. If it doesn't make—it's funny. Work—although I sometimes have to remind myself that maybe something that's more open-ended and not concise and shaped, it can be okay, too. It's also a good way to give you an out.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, it sounds like, even in this conversation, but also in other things you've said on the record, that you also don't necessarily want things to be pinned down, or this—so it's that tension between the literal and mysteriousness.

MICHAEL SMITH: For myself I do, so I'm clear in what I'm thinking. But then sometimes when I see that, and that's all you get, it can be a little limited.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, well I look forward to continuing the conversation—

MICHAEL SMITH: Good.

LIZA ZAPOL: —in two days. Thank you.

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, please. Thank you. So—

[END OF TRACK smith18_track04.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay. This is Liza Zapol for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Oral History Project. It's August 1, 2018. I'm here with Michael Smith, in his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. How are you today?

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm okay. And you?

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] All right. So actually, we just laid out and talked about which of the pieces we were going to talk about, or which of your videos, installations, and work we wanted to talk about today. But actually, before that, I wanted to ask you, what makes you laugh?

MICHAEL SMITH: That's a tough one. I guess I need a setup. I need some sort of lead-in. Oftentimes—well, it depends. I can be very moved by a gesture, a shrug, a certain kind of indifferent—or just sort of removed acknowledgement, but totally someone who's sort of pointing out something, but in a very low-key way. It depends. I laugh—physical humor I'll laugh at. Extreme, just silly humor. Then sometimes a good shit joke.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm. [Laughs.] [00:02:00] You've spoken about, before, Jackie Vernon, and speaking specifically about his slideshow piece. If you can indulge me, what makes that funny to you, if you were to take it apart?

MICHAEL SMITH: What makes it funny is—it's getting caught up in rhythm, that delivery. It's monotone. It just stuck in my head. I didn't really remember the punchlines or anything about his routine. I just remember his delivery and the timing, and that really pulled you in. Also, it was interesting that afterwards, I realized that it was very self-deprecating humor. I don't even know if I find that always that funny, but I would respond more to that, let's say, rather than Andrew Dice Clay, who I found obnoxious. It's his delivery, and the sound of his voice. Very musical, rhythmic, and just pulls you in.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, that piece in particular—I mean, he's slow, and he takes the space. He's talking about his family vacation—or he's talking about his vacation by showing a slideshow that doesn't exist.

MICHAEL SMITH: Which is kind of brilliant. It's so conceptual. It's like art. I didn't even realize it. Then the clicker. I don't remember the light at *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I think for his club act, he added that, because he could. I just found that really intriguing. It worked. [00:04:00] It worked as comedy. It worked like an art performance.

LIZA ZAPOL: You also said, once you came to New York, you started to reference more and learn more about Tati and Buster Keaton. What about them, or any particular situations or comedy in those, that come to mind?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, for both of those, they're physical comedy. Also, the tightness of the way they do their gags and the way they set things up. It's funny. One of them has sound and one of them basically doesn't have sound. Tati's use of sound was brilliant. His sound design, brilliant. His composition, beautiful. And his way of moving, hilarious. Very observational of people and of his character. I just really was intrigued, and it made me laugh a lot. Totally impressive.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then Buster Keaton—how did you discover them? Or you came back to them. Why do you think you came back to them in the '80s, or '70s, as you—

MICHAEL SMITH: I discovered them—I was told about them in the '70s. Maybe it was the same friend who told me about—Power Boothe, who is a friend of mine. He built sets. He built a couple sets of mine, some projects. I don't know. When I first started doing my work, in the beginning, I would go to see a lot of films more, and I would go see work of people who I had heard of. Keaton—I don't know. [00:06:00] I don't know why I—I think there was a lot of festivals going on in the city, and I saw one, and I thought, he's really good. There was also that character, that sad-sack kind of character, and his way of moving, and even constructing his gags in his films, they were brilliant.

LIZA ZAPOL: As you were watching them, was there any note-taking or kind of trying to emulate any of these particular creations or comedians, directors?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't think I tried to emulate. Probably without knowing it. I probably came up with a character similar to the Keaton character. I don't think it's a funny coincidence that—I mean, it's funny, I should say funny coincidence—that my character doesn't speak a lot, and that those two characters don't speak a lot. In fact, they don't speak at all. There's also a deadpan to both of them. There's a kind of shorthand to their—Tati sort of combines all of his movements very compactly, and then they just kind of explode out. I don't know. They entertained me fully, and there was joy in watching—getting joy and laughter from their work that I was really happy to see.

LIZA ZAPOL: Also, there's just this acute physical comedy, very studied in a way. I wonder—you said with Baby Ikki, you hadn't really—or you're not sure if you studied babies and where that came into your own physicality. But it seems like it was a process. [00:08:01] But I see in your work that there is a kind of a showman there. You have these particular talents that you display, like tap and so on. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your learning of physical comedy.

MICHAEL SMITH: Both characters are very much in the body, and there's a certain kind of place I go with them, a physical—with the baby, it's a certain sense of tension. With Mike, it's a certain kind of—I don't know. I let go and I focus on the voice, so the body becomes this kind of vehicle. I mean, not a vehicle, but just a container that's sort of—and then delivering a voice. He's very—almost sedentary, and the baby is always active. Then when he's not active, he's very active in his looking. So he really directs audience and viewer to specific points, whether it's pointing up to nothing. Basically, the baby is kind of pointing out nothing, and it becomes something, which I kind of like. The baby—in the last few years, I was asked to do a performance, part of this John Cage *4'33*" show they had [at MoMA]. I did the baby performing *4'33*" with somebody at a piano. You expect the baby to do that much, and all the baby did was stand in front of a music stand with the score, pointing and looking. [00:10:06] Sort of underlined that idea that Cage was pointing to the environment. And very literal. The baby literally would point to things around the space. It was over, and then the baby left.

LIZA ZAPOL: Then you talk about Mike, this vehicle for this voice, but Mike also doesn't—he speaks sometimes, but a lot of times, he's sitting and thinking.

MICHAEL SMITH: And he expresses it through his expressions.

LIZA ZAPOL: So alone in the face.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I'm not sure if that's because I had the ability to do it, or most of my stuff is underwritten, and it's easy to do some mugging. Also, I think I got into that more because of the first person I collaborated with, in terms of video, Mark Fischer. He picked up on that, and he started focusing on that. It became something he would ask me to do. Reaction shot. Reaction shot. My defining feature are my eyebrows, and I have an ability to work them. I guess I milk it. You have to be careful. I try to be. Often, I'm not.

LIZA ZAPOL: Why do you have to be careful?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, anything—doing schtick or whatever, you want to make sure it's—I don't know. Within balance, within reason.

LIZA ZAPOL: Let's talk about that first produced video work, *Secret Horror*. Mike is alone at home with his TV. [00:12:03] You're horrified by the drop ceiling, and the iron marks on your shirt, and the ghosts come in. Why did this video happen? How did that video happen?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, the opportunity to do it happened because there was—SoHo TV, which was—Jaime Davidovich had this organization. They did cable shows. Also, I think he was working at the time also with this woman Carole Ann Klonarides, who I became very close with. Afterwards, she—they worked with Automation House. Also this man named Michael Owen. They had this—liaison—setup with a place called Automation House. I didn't even know what that place was, but they had a TV studio. Somehow, they finagled to do some projects there. They had a grant that went out, I think they asked me if I could come up with something.

I was working on a performance, *Secret Horror*, and then they shot it in the studio. The *Secret Horror*, the basic idea of that piece came up—the drop ceiling, that recurring motif, that literally came out of me going to my bank, this beautiful bank. I think at the time it was Manufacturers Hanover. It was at Canal and Broadway. Or maybe it was at Bowery, the branch at Bowery and Grand. I went in there one day. It had been this beautiful, vaulted place, and then there was a drop ceiling in there. This renovation. [00:14:00] It was like waking up and—what the hell did they do? Why did they do that? Such a beautiful building. It's gone. That got rolled into the idea of—I was making video, so I'm thinking about television. That idea of this blue glow, of walking around and seeing blue glows coming out of people's homes. I started thinking about walking around suburbs or places like that and seeing these blue glows coming out of people's homes and wondering about it. These ideas get put down, I make these drawings, and all of a sudden then I put Mike into it, and then I start thinking about practical things. How do I move things around? Then I started thinking about ghosts, I think. Also, there had been a—I'm really sensitive to horror movies and stuff. I don't think I'm great to watch movies with, because I have to control the volume. I need to shut it low, or move ahead, and just make—stop the—I don't like getting scared, and I'm very easily manipulated. Anyways, I think I had seen that—in Connecticut, with some friends, I saw the first movie where—*Halloween*, maybe. I went with some friends, and it scared the shit out of me. I was also, I think, delicate. I think I had broken up with somebody at the time, so I was a little delicate, and then that. So I thought, a horror show. Then I was thinking, what's a horror show? Then I thought the renovation. Just these things. I go from very literal to sort of—from thematic to bigger things. They get all jumbled, and it somehow came up.

LIZA ZAPOL: And so these ghosts kind of come into this world, and you also—it's interesting, because you'd said, in the seesaw piece back in Chicago, that was maybe the last time you had done a collaboration with other people. [00:16:11] It sounds like, here, you're sort of forced into collaboration when you're in video, in a different way.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Who were you collaborating with here? You talked about some of the producers. What did that feel like to be in a video production with so many different parts of —

MICHAEL SMITH: It was mixed. At times, it was exciting to be able to do this, because it was a very professional place. Overwhelming, because I didn't know what the hell was going on. And wanting to please these people, because I felt like, oh, this is an opportunity, and deliver. Then I was working with this collaborator, Mark Fischer, the fellow who had been working—who had shot this *Down in the Rec Room*. I hired him, because I heard about him. I hired him to shoot that. Then I asked him, "Would you like to direct—work with me?" and he did. He set up the shot, and he had a really good eye. He would move me around. Not a lot of talking. He wouldn't talk about motivation or anything. He would just move me around and set up these things, and he did a beautiful job directing it. There's some gaps in between. It's really chunky, or clunky. It's one of my favorite videos. It's kind of a stoner piece. Also, I used music in a certain way, to put out ideas, like Muzak, because I used music, and certain kind of pop songs. So there was a certain kind of feel for it. As somebody wrote, a sort of pop effluvia about it. You know, general feeling. So there was a comment about pop culture, but using pop culture, and then sort of putting the character Mike into it, but also having him be sort of manipulated by it, but a little bit outside of it, and in it, and out. [00:18:03] You know, stepping in and out.

LIZA ZAPOL: A lot of people collaborated on that piece, and I noticed Eric Bogosian is one of the voiceovers in there. How did that come to be? How was this collaboration different from prior ones that you had done as well?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, Eric was a friend of mine then. We were buddies. He had a good voice, and I asked him to do this voiceover. I was doing a lot of the voices, and I thought, I've got to have some distance. Sometimes it gets confusing. Even today, I get confused about the voiceover, the voice, a certain omniscient voice, and then my voice, and the confusion of the characters. I still haven't worked that out completely. So I asked Eric to do it. He did it. Then a lot of the ghosts, they're characters, but they're covered. They were people I knew, friends. "Could you come down?" They said sure. That was what a lot of collaboration was like. You helped out one another. You do that. That's how—they help you, you help them, and you're friends. It's part of your social scene. It's an exchange.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you would show up for them in other ways?

MICHAEL SMITH: When they asked, I'd show up. I did some film work with—I did a couple films with this filmmaker, Charlie Ahearn. His film that's most known is *Wild Style*. Before he did *Wild Style*, he did a film with me that was one of his [more ambitious films –MS]—it was called *Twins*, where I played both twins. [00:20:02] Speaking of chewing the scenery, I really chewed the scenery on that. There were some moments in it. That was kind of a feature New Wave thing. Super 8 or 16. I don't remember.

LIZA ZAPOL: So this video opportunity that happened for you is simultaneous with a lot of other video work that's happening around—artists are starting to use that form. Can you talk about—it sounds like you participated in other work, but what were you aware of in terms of the other video that was being made? Were you in dialogue in your work as well?

MICHAEL SMITH: I was in dialogue with the work I was doing. A lot was always in reaction to. Like that piece *Down in the Rec Room*, that title of it was actually kind of in response to a lot of the work that—I guess I didn't understand the philosophy of punk. It wasn't about the polish. It was about the doing of it. It was also in response to commercial music, and a certain kind of slickness. Then I just thought about—I just looked at a lot of performances. Every other artist had a band, and they—I mean, three chords or whatever. When I came up with the name *Down in the Rec Room*, it's like, "Let's go down to the rec room and do something." It's very spontaneous. No one ever understood that, because a rec room also has a lot of associations with America and a certain kind of middle class. It had this layered kind of intention. [00:22:02]

LIZA ZAPOL: What were you seeing in terms of the punk work around you?

MICHAEL SMITH: Not a lot, but I'd go to some shows at CB's [CBGB]. I sort of missed out on a lot of music of my generation. When I was in high school and college, I listened to jazz. Then, when I started making my work, I wasn't really listening to music. I guess I'd use Muzak, because I was dealing with—I'd think about music in terms of thematic flow or whatever, or pop music. I wasn't able to think and write with music playing. I would get distracted. I also have this kind of affliction in terms of lyrics. I can't really hear lyrics. I mean, I don't hear them. It takes me a long time to understand what they're saying. So I

don't know if I ever fully appreciated the thrust of a lot of rock and stuff, even though they may have been simple. Thus, I was always a little bit—missed out on what my generation was taking part in.

LIZA ZAPOL: But did you have a band as well?

MICHAEL SMITH: I was in a band. It was called the Social Climbers. It wasn't my band. Some friends of mine who I worked with, who did music with me—did music for me, and who I was friendly with. There was this musician/composer Dick Connette. We were very good friends, and his alias—he wrote under A. Leroy, and he did a lot of music for dancers, and he did stuff—he worked with a guy named Mark Bingham, who was a very good musician. [00:24:00] He had a band called the Social Climbers. I think they were put out on—they re-released their record, I think on Drag City or something. But I played with them for about six months, and I wrote a couple songs, and I toured—I helped line up some gigs. I remember we went to Europe together. Mark was from—he wasn't from, but he'd studied in Indianapolis, at the music school there, and so we did some gigs there, and Chicago. Between the two of us, we did some—we performed here, I think at CB's. I played the pocket trumpet, and I played one song, the second line. Then I sang, I wrote a rap tune that was—again, I was always in response to—when I heard rap music, it was always about cocks and cars and certain braggart. I thought—I don't know, I thought, hmm, that's odd. I wrote my rap tune about my autobiographical upbringing, my Jewish, really bland—not bland, but you know—self-absorbed upbringing.

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you remember any of the lyrics?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, there was a countdown, where I count—there were some things where I counted from one to a certain age. I think I went up to 43. I was in my 30s when I did that. I think when I started working with the band, I was 29, 30. Then I went up to age 43. That was a very important age, because I think my father had his heart attack. [00:26:00] So I talked about the heart attack and how it impacted on me. There was counting up and down, and every year I would talk about certain things. Thirteen, of course, I had to mention my bar mitzvah. [Laughs.] And going to college. I don't know. Talking about wearing corrective shoes, and husky pants. Really not—but formative things, important things, but maybe not of total interest to everybody.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you didn't stay with the band after that?

MICHAEL SMITH: No. They worked with me by writing music for a lot of my pieces.

LIZA ZAPOL: In your interview—there's an *Artforum* interview from 2004—

MICHAEL SMITH: With Dan?

LIZA ZAPOL: With Dan Graham. You talk about the Time Square show in 1980, which I think you were included in—

MICHAEL SMITH: I was.

LIZA ZAPOL: —as being important and sort of a turning point in terms of how you saw what was happening in the art world right then. Can you talk about that show and your impressions of it?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. There was a period of time where I was sort of peripherally involved with Colab. Colab originally was a group of people, artists, to help one another. Collaboration, collaborative work. It was also a way for them to get some money, if they registered as a nonprofit. This man named Alan Moore, who was an art historian, who wrote, actually, about the downtown scene in his Ph.D., he helped apply for money, and so they got money. They did the Real Estate Show—various things. I went to some meetings, and I was amazed at—there was a lot of grandstanding. I mean, talking about politics. [00:28:00] There were people concerned, but for me, I was amazed at the—I mean, we were all ambitious, but I couldn't put the theory and the practice together. A lot of the talk about this—just about, I don't know, a system or—maybe it wasn't so much directed at the gallery system, but it was always talking about a certain kind of—the man or whatever. A certain kind of—I don't know. They were always—not always, but a lot of the people were very socially aware, and always trying to—they were critiquing the powers that be. New York was at a strange time then. And also, the mechanisms of the art world. So it was not only a

strategic organization to get some money, but it was also a way to critique, and do public work and stuff. Some of the stuff was good, and some of their issues. I remember going to the Times Square opening and seeing all these dealers there. Soon after, some of these people that were big voices in Colab were now showing in commercial galleries. Brooke Alexander, Mary Boone. I thought, huh, that's curious. I found it—I don't know if it was hypocrit—I found it a little baffling. I was as ambitious as them, and I started showing at a gallery, too. I didn't hook up there. And I had aspirations like them, too. But I just found it interesting that their—I didn't expect them to so quickly move over to those places.

LIZA ZAPOL: Because their critique was related to—

MICHAEL SMITH: —a system.

LIZA ZAPOL: The art systems, yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: I think so. There wasn't in place the—I also think they were looking for opportunities, but there wasn't as much—the art world has changed drastically. [00:30:08] But they were kind of like Young Turks. They were trying to appear as rebels.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's interesting, because you also, at this time, are starting to operate both in the art world and the commercial world. Or when does that—

MICHAEL SMITH: Tangentially. I never really operated in the commercial world, but I was intrigued by it. It set up a challenge. I talk about starting out by looking at stand-up in the clubs, because I was doing that in Chicago, when I had time on my hands. I found the overlap with what was going on in the performance art community kind of interesting. Similar aspects. A lone performer, being in front of a crowd and responding to this crowd. I was also interested in how they constructed stuff, this kind of non-sequitur way of construction. For someone who's not really that skilled of a writer, that was a good place to go.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, we talked about that last time, that it was a good way of creating a kind of collage. Next was *Mike's House*. We said we might talk about *Mike's House*, *It Starts at Home*, which I think was in confluence with a show at the Whitney. Is that right?

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. I was at the right place at the right time. I started to make work that I think funders were curious about and interested in. [00:32:01] It had a kind of pop feel, and it was different than a lot of the laborious kind of documentation of performance art. I got some attention for that. There was funding back then. I quickly learned about that. I think this curator—not I think, but this curator, John Hanhardt, who was a curator at the Whitney, saw *Secret Horror*, I think, and he called me to his office and he said, "Would you like to do a show here?" I said, "What? Performance?" He said, "I'm thinking about, we have a space, and maybe you could do something in the space." Then it turned out, what do I fill the space with? I was working on a production. "What are you working on?" He was interested in the idea of cable, because cable was popular. He said, "Maybe you could do something." Then I think it was Carole Ann Klonarides—we were dating then—who was also very interested in television. She was going to the New School, about media, and was active in that. I think she may have suggested, "Well, you've got the set. Do that there" or whatever. I thought, oh, okay. I thought it was kind of easy. We reconstructed the set there, and it was popular. It worked.

LIZA ZAPOL: So the set for *Mike's House* existed, and then you reconstructed it in the Whitney space?

MICHAEL SMITH: Reconstructed it, yeah, in the space. And showed the video on the video—the same monitor.

LIZA ZAPOL: I see. Were you also in the space at the Whitney?

MICHAEL SMITH: At times. We shot some documentation of it, but I really didn't think about how to use it. [00:34:04] It's basically documentation of the video. Very slow documentation of what's in the space.

LIZA ZAPOL: So it's more of an installation that was at the Whitney?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. It wasn't—I didn't really perform. The performance was happening in

the video. Then I'm starting to realize—now I have two videos under my belt—three or so. Then I'm getting opportunity—now I have two videos, or three videos, and I have a body of work now. I can get—you know. So I'm looking to get funded for this. It started just accumulate, accumulate.

LIZA ZAPOL: That work is so interesting, because it's so—you already had this before with *Down in the Rec Room*, like, "What's my toilet doing on the television?" But here, it's so referential about being filmed, and this character sort of unwittingly plugs in his television and is on the television.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you talk a little bit about kind of trying to explode the public and private, or what was interesting to you about that?

MICHAEL SMITH: I wouldn't say that I was deep into media theory. But I was aware, by just being in the world, of security, and big brother. Very aware of that situation. I was also aware of—public access had a sense of this kind of—people basically went on and showed their lives. You were very much a part of their—so I had this idea that—also, in a way, it's a continuation of *Secret Horror*. [00:36:04] It's like this kind of force that's sort of driving Mike, or controlling Mike. I also was able to—my work has been influenced by TV, and this was a way to talk about TV, and this was a way to insert myself into it. I just sort of naturally kind of gravitated to it when it started to work. Also, I was intrigued by making video. I liked doing it back then.

LIZA ZAPOL: What did you like about it?

MICHAEL SMITH: I liked that I got a product from it. Not a product, but I got something to show I could look at and see. It was a way to get my work out. Even though I was making drawings or whatever, I wasn't thinking about—I don't know. I was also getting some play from it. People wanted to see them. My work was being shown.

LIZA ZAPOL: You say—yeah. It's interesting. It does start to snowball. You say you have this body of work now, so now it can be shown as a group. It seems like, the next year, your work is being shown in Antwerp and Brussels. It seems to be more now seen internationally by then.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. There were festivals. It would get included in festivals. I don't know. It just—yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So then, let's see. We have *Bill Loman: Master Salesman* happens in '83. The *[Government Approved] Home Fallout Shelter/ Snack Bar*. And *Go For it, Mike*. [00:38:00] Can you talk about what the evolution—what you're trying to put Mike through as you continue?

MICHAEL SMITH: All three of those pieces are really—let's see now. *Loman*, *Fallout Shelter*, and *Go For it*.

LIZA ZAPOL: *Go For it* is in '84, right? Yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. All of those are really putting Mike in relationship to a cultural moment. I mean, putting Mike in the world rather—so it's interesting. Through television, he—I grew up with Vietnam, and we experienced the war from television. So I put Mike through this, but with other issues, whether nuclear proliferation, Reaganomics, or—what was the—and Bill Loman was a certain kind of mourning the '80s. It was mourning this kind of rampant capitalism. I also liked the idea that Mike looks upon Bill Loman as his mentor.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, is that the first time Mike becomes cast as a salesman?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I don't know, I think I read somewhere—I thought I had read somewhere that Miller thought that *Death of a Salesman* was his funniest work. It may have been wrong, off, but I don't know. I was intrigued by redoing that. Also, people appropriated it, and I thought, well, that would be interesting, to redo that. I actually tried—I did it at The Kitchen, and I wrote to the Miller estate to get the rights to do *Death of a Salesman II*. [00:40:03] They said no. It was funny. I realized that I was in line with certain thinking going on. Then, shortly after—months, or within a year after—it was on Broadway with Dustin

Hoffman, and Mike Nichols directing or something. I was on the same wavelength with other people. Anyways, *Death of a Salesman*, again, another underwritten piece, but in a very depressive—I don't know if it was ever quite together. I drew upon people I was working with, the music, Mark Bingham and A. Leroy. The soundtrack is interesting. Then Power Boothe did the set. It kind of looked like it had a sense of a radio drama, with the microphone. It was all about the voice, too, the way I delivered it. I don't think it was a successful piece, but I think there's some good things in it. I remember, I caught people really off-guard, because it was really depressive and slow. It was also—I talked about things that I was noticing, like coffee or cars. I would talk about products, and then cars, through the eyes of a younger generation, which is kind of curious, because now coffee is huge. This was '83. I guess you could start to get a good cup of coffee around then, but it was still a long time ago. Anyway.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you're looking at these different products in a way. [00:42:00] Why a salesman? We've talked a bit before about your father. Was that a part of what was interesting or intriguing about salesmen to you?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know at that point. I was mostly drawn in by the idea of death of this iconic work, that this depressive, tragic character—I found it kind of, for lack of a better word, humorous that I'm looking to him. I questioned myself. By making him Mike's mentor, that seemed a little too much, but I thought, okay, I'll do it.

LIZA ZAPOL: When you say you're not sure it was successful, that's what you mean?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, or maybe it's exaggerated too—maybe an obvious place to—an extreme place to go. But I don't know. The piece didn't work, so it didn't matter to me.

LIZA ZAPOL: Because that piece had a couple of lives after that, but then one that seemed to really take off was *Mike Builds a Shelter*.

MICHAEL SMITH: And I did that the same time. It opened around the same time. I can't believe I did this major installation, this big—I don't know what I was thinking. I had deadlines. I worked on deadlines. I had these opportunities. Then I had this opportunity to do an installation at Castelli. I was working with that gallery. They were a well-known gallery, and they gave me an opportunity to do this piece that was really, in a way, critically very successful.

LIZA ZAPOL: What made it successful? What do you think?

MICHAEL SMITH: Probably what made it successful is the people I worked with. Alan Herman. I collaborated with Alan Herman, was a professional set designer, a great set designer. He did high-end commercials, Super Bowl commercials. He was able to work with me and design the set. I think the idea was pretty tight. I think the irony of it, that they—here we are, talking about—Reagan's negotiating with the Russians about nuclear disarmament and all this, and they're disseminating this absurd plan from the '60s about a fallout shelter snack bar. [00:44:20] Something that was only created in maybe photo-ops, for like Rocky—Rockefeller. So I found that absurd. I thought, I'm beating my head against the wall trying to come up with an idea. I have a deadline. I've got to get something. I thought, I'll just do this. Why not just do this? Then I did this, and always I'm thinking, this is not enough. There was a lot of stuff in there. A lot of research went into that. The crackers and the water were from the municipal fallout shelter that was still hanging around, and Rockefeller's fallout shelter that—Jill Moser, who was working at the Materials for the Arts, I think, she told me. She said, "Oh, you want to come up there?" and I went to Rockefeller's townhouse, across the street from MoMA. They said, "Take them out of here." I'm really upset that I did not save a box that had his name, "Governor Rockefeller," with the address. I don't know why I didn't keep that. But I kept the crackers, and they still are in the shelter. I always say, when I talk about the piece, it was interesting from the municipal building, where the municipal workers—the middle class, or the lower class, and these aristocracy, they're all eating the same food in that kind of horrible situation. It's a kind of great democratizing device.

LIZA ZAPOL: When you have a nuclear war, you all eat the same thing. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Then I also worked with—I had this idea about doing—because I didn't think there was enough—well, no. [00:46:04] That was just propping and coincidence. I had a video game. Years later, it's now been designated the first artist-designed video game, because this guy, Paul Slocum, they did a show about video games, and *Mike Builds a*

Shelter—something about that. Really slow, but I had this idea that it's the metaphor for the piece, where it's programmed to lose, just like nuclear war. I worked with a graphics guy, Dov Jacobson, to do the graphics. He knew a high school programmer, who did it on a Commodore 64. So it was a coin-op game. It was like an arcade game. Then I had the setup. We had the set, and then we started shooting a video, which I didn't really want to make a documentation. I wanted to set up some sort of narrative, rather than showing it how it worked, and dealing just with the obvious irony. I set up a very strange narrative that took three years to make.

LIZA ZAPOL: I see. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: And then I didn't show it for 18 years, or 20—I didn't look at it for 20 years, because I was not happy with it. Then I looked at it and I thought, hmm. I mean, speaking of stoner tapes. But this was kind of—and then I looked at it. There's some good things in this. I kind of like this. Then, recently—I showed it in the last five years, and it had a good response.

LIZA ZAPOL: There's several different situations that are happening in that.

MICHAEL SMITH: I also picked up the thread on *It Starts at Home*, of the TV show within the show, and Mike's show and stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right. [00:48:00] There's a classroom of children that are talking about saving the leaves. There's the mailman, which is Tim Maul, who's coming to visit you, but also to do laundry. You're going to the dairy to get a glass of milk. There's so much happening. Then there's also this setup of two women who are watching you at the same time.

MICHAEL SMITH: Implying that he does have an audience. The children watch him on television. The women watch him on television, and Skip, the mailman, can see him in his own house, watching it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right, I see.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was a way to continue that idea, to make it—extend it.

LIZA ZAPOL: But I didn't realize that that wasn't seen publicly then.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was shown once. I think it was shown in a festival in Bonn, in '86. But I never really showed it until—I don't think I showed it until there was—Ei Arakawa did a show at Bortolami, a group show, that had to do with nuclear issues, because he came from a town where there was that nuclear accident—or around that area, not the town. And they showed the piece. There was a good response to it.

LIZA ZAPOL: The next year, you—that was 1985 when you created—or actually, it might have been even earlier, in '83. I see *Mike Builds a Shelter*. *World of Photography* is in '86, with Bill Wegman. Can you talk about that collaboration, that friendship, a little bit?

MICHAEL SMITH: Bill was—he was like this kind of role model. I was a huge fan of his work. His work was very influential on me. I talked about Tati and Keaton, but Bill also was master of deadpan, and at times, pee-in-your-pants funny. [00:50:06] And very stupid, but really—he had a really good sense of time. He had a certain expedience with his work that I was impressed with. I remember seeing his work the first time in Chicago, in a group show, and it sort of gave me a certain kind of encouragement to continue this idea of making humorous work. Then the opportunity—I had this idea that I wanted—he did a collaboration with somebody else. Mark—what was Mark's last name? It was kind of a how-to tape. Maybe it was how to draw. Then I said, "Would you like to do a piece, and maybe"—I didn't want to, probably, acknowledge the fact that there was this other how-to tape. But it was very simple and very frontal. Then I talked to him about doing it. He said, "Well, okay," because he was getting back into making video. Not dog ones, but just videos. We slowly started to meet. Then I think they got—somebody got wind of it who worked with *Alive from Off Center*. That was this national show, PBS show. There was a thing called the CAT Fund. Kathy Rae Huffman got wind of it, and she put some money behind it. They said, "Okay, try to do this." It took a while to sort of get this thing going. I remember we would meet and have these meetings, and oftentimes we'd just nap, and then—

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MICHAEL SMITH: —meet again, and just nap. I'm not sure if Bill—and then we did the video, and I felt Bill kind of pulled back on it. He did something, and I think he felt that—and I kind of took it to make sure it got finished, and made sure [it got] edited, and I also was involved with the production. He used somebody who worked for him to build the sets. But I brought in my people, my music people. I brought in my director, Mark Fischer. I brought him in to work on it. To make sure it went—and it sort of became a Mike tape. I set up this thing where he was my mentor, and he was—I loved his character. It was very funny. Then I brought in a person to edit it, Shelly Silver, who's a great video artist herself, and also an incredible editor. She really pulled that tape together, because we gave her a lot of material, gave her storyboard, and she was the one that kind of tweaked it. I think she was not happy with me, that we kind of put this—she felt like she really shaped this, and she did, because she's a great editor. But I had the wherewithal to work with her, too. Anyways, I don't know if Bill—how he felt about it, because it kind of became this—I did the music almost like a little music video in there, and then he sort of pulled back, and then it just happened. I don't know. He doesn't—it gets out, and he doesn't—it's still part of the reel.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, the music—there's a song, "You've got a camera and an outfit and a portfolio, but what will I put in my one-person show?" [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Is that what you mean in terms of the music video? It's more centered on Mike and Mike's character?

MICHAEL SMITH: At that point, yeah. And it becomes about their relationship. There's one scene where he comes back. There are 10 rules, I think, and the last one is save your receipts or whatever. [00:02:03] Then Mike, at the end, decides—the first question posed to Mike and the audience is, "Do you have the aptitude for photography?" Mike realizes at the end, he doesn't have the aptitude. I think it's used—a lot of people who know about the tape, who teach photography, use it in their beginning classes. Which is kind of great.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] That is great.

MICHAEL SMITH: I know Stephen Shore uses it, and I know Tim uses it, and some people use it in their classes.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's great. That's perfect.

MICHAEL SMITH: Tim Davis uses it.

LIZA ZAPOL: What happens next? Because we said we would talk next about *Mike's Talent Show*, so I'm curious how we get from you're making this video work, and also having these live performances, to a leap to *Mike's Talent Show*, which is—and *Mike's Big TV Show*—which is at Caroline's at the Seaport, The Bottom Line, and then becomes this Cinemax special.

MICHAEL SMITH: I think those big projects, like *Mike Builds a Shelter*, the piece I did with Bill, *World of Photography*, they kind of got away from me, and they extended over time. Also, I'm not a patient man. Working on things over time and having this patience to let them just happen and things, I'm understanding that things take time and they get worked on in the editing room, and new things come from that. But I think I also—I don't know, I got impatient with wanting—just keeping busy or whatever. There was a lot of activity in the clubs then, and Paul McMann had this party club, and then I got—and there was other variety shows. [00:04:09] I thought, maybe Mike could have a variety show, and I know people. Then I got this idea for *Mike's Talent Show*, to do it as a short form and host it. I don't know, maybe it was like the song. Thinking about Ed Sullivan, or just thinking about that variety show sort of format that I came out of. I put together this show, and I also started—at the time, I started working with this man, Steve Paul, who saw my—I think he saw the talent show, and he saw commercial potential with it. He had a club in the '70s called Steve Paul's Scene that was very popular, like the Warhol scene. It was a really great music venue, but it was a hangout. I remember going there when I was in high school—high school or in college, or sometime. Who did I see? I saw Charles Lloyd and Howlin' Wolf on the same bill. Just happened in one. They had major acts going through all the time. He was really in the thick of it. Then he started a record label, and he started managing acts. He managed the Winter brothers, Edgar and Johnny Winter. He managed David Johansen. He managed Tiny Tim for a short time. Then he had a label, and he was doing it—anyways, by the time I met him, I think it was kind of quiet, or quieter. He saw this, and he got this—hmm. Sometimes people I'd come

up—I think I'd mentioned that Jimmy Carter—people would see what I did, and I don't know, they saw something there. They weren't quite sure what it was. I remember he met with me, and he said, "I'm interested in working with you." [00:06:07] I remember he had a driver. At one point, his driver was Fran Lebowitz, way back in the day, and then she wasn't then. But she was in one of the early talent shows, when we did our thing for Manhattan Cable, she read. But I was kind of impressed. He came, and then he—he was very funny, kind of crazy. Speed-talker. He came over and he sat with me and he said—we talked about—"my gallery" and he talked about—his boyfriend, his partner, was an artist, so he knew about the art world, and he knew about the—and then he said, "I'd like to be involved. We can do this." He saw the show at 8BC, I think. Manhattan Cable offered us a show. We did that. Then they offered us a series, but after they saw the talent, like Harry Kipper and Karen Finley, they said, "No, we don't want to do a series." I already lost some money. They put some money in, and I already lost money, and I didn't want to put any more in, or put any more work in. That was in '85. Then '86—what did I do in '86? Oh, I did a—did I do a film for *Saturday Night Live* then? I think—

LIZA ZAPOL: *Mike* was in '87, I think.

MICHAEL SMITH: What was in '86? I think the photography came out, maybe, or maybe not.

LIZA ZAPOL: *World of Photography* was at ICP—

MICHAEL SMITH: It probably aired, then, in '86.

LIZA ZAPOL: *Mike's Talent Show* at the Public Theater—

MICHAEL SMITH: I continued doing *Mike's Talent Show*, and then I think around '87, Steve came to me and he said, "Look. Allan"—I forget Allan's last name, who ran The Bottom Line, which I don't know if you know about The Bottom Line, but that was a very popular—a major music venue by NYU that a lot of the record companies would show their acts off at. [00:08:05] I think I talked about it earlier.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm not sure we have.

MICHAEL SMITH: Anyways, we did a show there, and it got—it was funny. When I first did the show at 8BC, we got a centerfold in *The Village Voice*, a big caricature of all the acts, and we got some attention. That got the attention of Manhattan Cable. It was funny. I think one of the Kahn sisters, who did the graphics on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*—they were working at Manhattan Cable and they brought their boss there, and they said, okay, maybe they were interested, because they were looking for programming for their new pay channel. Then, when we did the Bottom Line show, I think in '87, we got a—Stephen Holden wrote a piece about it, did a sort of profile of me. The people at Caroline's saw this, and they saw the show, and they liked it. The show was tight by then. We did a couple at The Bottom Line. I learned how to produce a show.

LIZA ZAPOL: Tell me about that.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was a lot of work, but it was kind of exciting. I was a stage manager, and the host, and the booker, with Steve, co-producer. It was at a point in my career where I was—I think I had just finished doing this—I did this one-act musical with children actors that was kind of the book-end piece of *Bill Loman: Master Salesman*. [00:10:03] This was right around the crash time. I think it was in '87. It was at Dance Theater Workshop. It had music and dance—a choreographer. This woman Maria Lakis choreographed it. I think Mark Bingham and A. Leroy did the music. The band—the Feetwarmers became the band of the talent show. They played the music. We had a pit orchestra, a small pit orchestra, live music, and then there was some AV material. The story was about three little yuppies who were teaching Mike about using the computer. It was called *Keeping Up With the '80s* and the '80s were almost over. It's sort of Mike's celebration of the '80s, when they're obviously over. I thought it was a good book-end for celebrate—I mean, to mourn the '80s, when they're beginning—and then celebrate—it was good Mike timing. Anyways, I worked with a man named Howard Mandel, who was a music writer, an old friend of mine, and he sort of directed it out of default. As my friend Dick said, it was the Howard Mandel school of directing, where he just would talk louder and louder to the kids until he was screaming at them, to get them to move around. [Laughs.] It was very funny. Anyways, working with children, it was not easy. Dealing with the stage moms and—but we did it. I pulled it off, and it was not—it was, again, another under-written thing. It should have gone through some

iterations, and it didn't. I didn't want to do it again. But we did it. [00:12:00] And so it was a time when Steve got this idea about let's remount the talent show. He said, "Are you interested? Allan is interested in doing it at The Bottom Line." I said okay. We do a bunch of them. The next thing I know, we did one in December, early December, and it got this spread in the *Times*. It became a thing. All the bookers started to go there. All the TV—I mean, a lot of the television cable stations were coming to that and looking at it, and Caroline's. I knew this woman, Peggy Reid. What was his name? McClain [ph]. I forget the booker. I wanted to say Malcolm, but it wasn't Malcolm. Malcolm McLaren [ph], I think his name was. Was that the Sex Pistols guy? Anyways. [His name was Cambell McLaren –MS.]

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm not sure.

MICHAEL SMITH: Peggy was the one who brought him, the booker. They saw the show, and then they called me in for a meeting and said, "We want to do a version of that show, but we have a new club down at the seaport. We have a video screen. We'd like you to include video." So I came up with the idea of *Mike's Big TV Show*, a new theme song, and pared it down to one piano player from the Feetwarmers, the band that was the pit orch—they had a band at the talent show. Then it was *Mike's TV Show*. I was basically doing one show every month or so. I was busy. Because it was at Caroline's, all these bookers would come, and I was sort of in the thick of this comedy thing. But I was also a producer. It was curious. At the same time I did the show, John Head, who was a big Wegman fan, saw our piece, and then Steve, Steve Paul, lined up—I did a short film with them. [00:14:00] I remember going up to —presenting a bunch of ideas. I presented that coffee routine. They said, "No, you can't do coffee, because they've already done a coffee thing," although it was very different. Then I did this kind of Mike lifestyle piece. It was sort of based on the Calvin Klein ad. It looked just like the Obsession ad.

LIZA ZAPOL: This is the *Saturday Night Live* piece?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I don't know if they ever aired it. Some people said they saw it. I don't think they did. But they paid for it. I remember auditioning for John in—what's the guy's name?—Lorne Michaels's office. It was kind of funny. Going through the thing. Then I started doing the talent show. The talent show, and then HBO came to us. There was this woman, Carolyn Strauss, who was into the show. She was their street person. They said, "We'd like to do a show with you, but you need a famous co-host." We spent like nine months trying to get a famous co-host, writing people. We wanted to have somebody in contrast to Mike, and somebody I could respond to. I remember we wrote Danny DeVito. We wrote Schwarzenegger. We wrote to Charles Grodin. We wrote to Cyndi Lauper. Through my agent, or through our people, we went to their people. And, "No, no, no. Who's Mike? We can pay you $15,000." We had a budget of, I think, a couple hundred thousand dollars to do an hour special. To me, it seemed like a lot of money at the time. "No. Who's Mike?" Finally, the West Coast—Betty—what was her name? Betty—I forget her last name. She came from the West Coast and saw the show, and she said, "No, I like Mike. He can do the show. We just need a couple of famous people." [00:16:01] They hooked me up with a producer, the Kaminsky brothers, who was an HBO-approved—we had to have an HBO-approved producer. They did a lot of music stuff. I think at that time, I started working with an agent. I got hooked up with an agent, this comedy agency in LA, and Bob had done stuff with them. He had worked with Lyle Lovett, and he knew that Lyle Lovett was a fan of Steven Wright, the comedian. He was quite popular then. He got the idea, which was really smart, for them to do a duet. So they did Lyle Lovett's song that was popular—I forget the name of it—and it worked out really well. So that was the hook. They said, "Okay, deliver in six weeks." It was unbelievable. We had to get our talent, we had to get the thing, and we had to do this. And then we did it. I remember I got invited to Japan to perform there. "No, I can't go. I'm doing this show." It was funny, I got invited to go to Japan when I—was that musical. I remember mentioning it to the guy, "Oh, look"—I told him in advance, six months in advance, "I'd really like to go. Could we put this off a couple weeks?" He pulled this heavy thing, "Oh, you do that and you'll never work with me again." So I did the show. It was really stupid. As a result of two—I haven't been to Japan yet. But I'll get there. Anyways. So we did the show. I don't know if the producing—they hired this director at the time, Jay Dubin, who directed it. [00:18:00] It was kind of out of my hands at that time. I don't know if I liked how it was shot or edited. Then they cut out some of the acts in it. That really upset me. I almost—I really balked at that and pulled back. It was the Thunder Thigh Revue. I kind of caved, because they said, "We won't do the show." I had to tell these people. One of them was this artist named Joyce Scott. I felt horrible. Something that was kind of edgy sort of became a little bland. Then they optioned it for like a year. Then after the year, they said, "No, we're not

going to do original programming at Cinemax." But we got some response. It got a B in *People*, a rating of B. Somebody said they saw a Matt Lauer commercial for *Mike's Talent Show* on a plane going to Europe. I have some of that stuff on my reel. It was a good experience. Then I started to work on the variety show idea for—I did *Mike's Kiddie Show*. Then working with *Mike's Kiddie Show*—it was funny. It was like another variety show, but for children. We had people like Pat Oleszko. Blue Man Group was in it. We had a group of people that worked together, like a—it was sort of under-written, but the most important thing that came out of this, I started working with Doug Skinner. Doug and I, we did this segment where we would have this exchange, which was a lot of double entendre, like fart jokes, talking about, "Would you like a stool?" or—you know. Both Doug and I realized we were not really interested in doing humor for kids, but we were interested in doing juvenile humor for adults. [00:20:06] Then we started doing our puppet shows.

LIZA ZAPOL: Awesome. I think this might be a good moment to pause for a second.

[Audio break.]

LIZA ZAPOL: All right, so just resuming. We were talking about your collaboration with Doug Skinner and your puppet show, your puppet show in progress, and then what came from there. Why a puppet show in the first place? He was a ventriloquist, right?

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: How did you start trying your hand, so to speak? [They laugh.]

MICHAEL SMITH: There was this performer named Jim Turner, who did a lot of work with MTV. He did a puppet show that I saw. He did one in my talent show. It was so funny and so stupid. He moved objects around, and he would just—he didn't even try to fake anything, but he had these objects. Mr. Hammer. It was kind of violent, but very, very funny. I just thought, that would be funny to do a puppet show. Kind of interesting. Doug and I had worked together on the kiddie show, and somehow we—I don't know where the idea—maybe I said to him, "Do you want to do a puppet show?" Or, "Do you want to do a show together?" and then the idea—maybe the name came up first, *Doug and Mike's Adult Entertainment*. And then maybe the puppets.

LIZA ZAPOL: Tell me about that work and why you think it was successful. [00:22:03]

MICHAEL SMITH: The success was limited to a downtown, live audience, to the crowd at Dixon Place, or—we did some in the art world. We did some in a couple galleries. We did one at LA, my friend—Mike [Kelley]. We did one in Mike's backyard. I don't know, they were very—people liked them. We had a little cult—a little following. Even the Hensons, the Henson family, saw our show, and then they asked us to be in their—they did these puppet festivals. I don't know if they're still doing it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, I think so.

MICHAEL SMITH: These international puppet—the first one, they asked us to be in. We were in that. I think we were in two or three. Then they asked us to host the fringe aspect of it. I think we may have hosted one or two of those at different venues. I think ours was a little—I remember Cheryl [Henson] was a big fan. Maybe it was a little too potty humor for them to get behind, or maybe—I don't know. The timing of that—maybe this is just a rationale—but the timing of the puppet shows was pre-*Beavis and Butthead*, pre-*South Park*, and pre-*Avenue Q* or whatever. It was a funny time. But I look at those tapes now. I mean, now that I've been working on this DVD project and putting together—they're funny, and I'm very proud of those things.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, they're really funny. There are these various setups. There's the characters of Mike and Doug, who are in an acting class with these two other puppets.

MICHAEL SMITH: Shane and Cory.

LIZA ZAPOL: With Shane and Cory. Mike and Doug are these swinging bachelors who—

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, yeah. They try to present themselves as that, yeah. [00:24:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: Then they also are—they watch porn, or gay porn, and commentary on that.

MICHAEL SMITH: That's unclear. It's like, why do they have those tapes? Because the nephews happen on them. We never even went there. We just put—it's like almost confirmed bachelors, but they're always interested in going out with Shane and Cory. Or maybe it's Mike—it's weird. It's like the uncle—the duck.

LIZA ZAPOL: Scrooge?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Is it Scrooge?

LIZA ZAPOL: No, no, you're right, not Scrooge.

MICHAEL SMITH: It's just the confirmed bachelors are—you know. They're roommates. It's odd.

LIZA ZAPOL: You said it's limited success, but to you, what was successful about those pieces?

MICHAEL SMITH: Before I say that, I just wouldn't say—it was not odd. It was just unclear. A lot of ambiguity. Usually, it's like everything was normal. What was successful about it, you asked me? They were funny. They were very tight. Doug was a consummate pro, Doug was much more professional than me. He had training of a musician, he had worked with this clown, or performer, Bill Irwin, and he did music with him. He was a pro. I remember Bill, Bill came to one of our kiddie shows, and it was, I think, kind of humiliating for both of us, because it was like—more for Doug. It was just a rough, rough show. Just little ideas, it wasn't tight. I just thought they were funny, and people found them funny, and they were so silly, but they were also very smart. [00:26:05] I don't know. There's something about them. The chemistry between them—Doug is a very funny man, really smart. Eddie would sort of talk about these obscure readings and stuff that Doug was actually doing. Now he's translating these obscure authors. That's what he does. French writers and stuff. It was just an unlikely pair.

LIZA ZAPOL: Sounds like it was a fun collaboration.

MICHAEL SMITH: We laughed, we laughed a lot.

LIZA ZAPOL: What also happened—or just in looking at the 1990s and the shift in the art world, both in terms of funding—NYSCA funding, Mario Cuomo—

MICHAEL SMITH: NEA.

LIZA ZAPOL: NEA. Well, yeah, NYSCA cut funding in half, or even from 144,000 to 40,000 in the year of 1990—

MICHAEL SMITH: You mean individual funding?

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh, no. This is for Franklin Furnace in particular.

MICHAEL SMITH: Is that post the NEA Five or whatever?

LIZA ZAPOL: That would be post—that was in relationship to the NEA Four.

MICHAEL SMITH: Four. I forgot the figure.

LIZA ZAPOL: But yeah. That space shut down. There might have been some other changes in terms of spaces. I'm curious what you saw happening in the '90s, in terms of—like, funding-wise and audience-wise, in relationship to government support.

MICHAEL SMITH: I didn't know of any. [00:28:00] My sources that I knew of, they seemed to be not there anymore. I also realized I had been doing my work for a number of years, and they like to support newer, younger, fresher ideas. I wasn't dealing with, like, identity politics. Art world does like to stay on point in terms of not fashion, but certain issues and stuff. Thus, there was a certain kind of response with Doug and Mike, to these kind of L7 kind of characters, to the situation.

LIZA ZAPOL: What does L7 mean?

MICHAEL SMITH: Square. I think it's a beat term. I think there was a band called L7, too.

These kind of square dudes, or guys, bachelors, but it's still this ambiguous kind of—and then their relationship to the world, to their friends, their community. They also do things like—we drew from our own experience, like performing in places that weren't literally a toilet, but performing in lots of venues that could be thought of as a toilet. They did a cabaret. One of the women in their acting class is very socially conscious, and one of them is only interested in her hair. She's kind of fatuous, like Doug or whatever. Ambitious, but not that talented. Then Mike, who's kind of hapless. He's wanting to please all the time. Then the nephews. These rampant ids who are running around swearing, who are the kind of outlet for Mike and Doug's repression. [00:30:00] So it's kind of funny.

LIZA ZAPOL: When you talk about them commenting, then, about the identity politics, or somehow in relationship—

MICHAEL SMITH: They weren't commenting. It was just sort of setting up the situation—it was like, here are two straight guys, obviously, or in relationship to the women who are presenting some of the issues, in kind of an absurd fashion. Or the children, who are being very incorrect. It was just a vehicle to maybe express some of those things. Because they're there. You may scold for them, but these things are there, part of the culture. They're part of me, too. We're going through that now, the Me Too thing. What's the balance? I had already dealt with some of that. I had dealt with some of that stuff, my work, because I had done *The Dirty Show*, with a lot of sort of misogynist, scatological tunes. They're done with a certain delivery and abandonment, and a certain kind of naivety and ignorance that people find disarming and very funny. Because my performance, I think I do that—it's like the baby. I know how to deliver them. The outfit I wear is absurd.

LIZA ZAPOL: I don't know *The Dirty Show*. Can you describe it to me some more?

MICHAEL SMITH: It's Mike going to a stag party. So it's him calling in sick for work. He starts with an upset stomach. It's motifs that have been in other shows, like recurring flushing. He doesn't feel well. He calls work, calls in sick. [00:32:00] He's not coming in after they say, "What's the matter?" Saying, "I don't feel well, I don't feel well, I don't feel well." He hangs up and he feels better already, and he's got to get ready for the party. To going out, and he talks about the story about getting the perfect grab-bag gift, where he found a fake dog shit at the store, and he tells the story. Which is a real story I told about picking out the real dog shit. And going to the party, and then he's the leader of the song fest this year, and he puts on his outfit. Then he goes there, and he says hello, and there's a lot of—the atmosphere, the ambience, is kind of fart sounds. I think I took it from a Wildman Steve record, the background. This black, kind of blue comic. Then he sings his songs, and people are really surprised.

LIZA ZAPOL: How does your relationship with Doug then morph into—it looks like you have *Do It*, *Outstanding Young Men of America*, and then *MUSCO*. You kind of return back to Mike. Mike solo. Mike—

MICHAEL SMITH: It's not that I ever left. I was always constantly—the *Do It* actually—I also was making my work. I did a solo project. I was part of a group show, but I did a solo project that was in Holland, at the Kroller-Muller Museum, that—

LIZA ZAPOL: The *Heart of Darkness* show?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was that?

MICHAEL SMITH: It was this kind of international show, and it was based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It was right at the time when a lot of the Chinese artists were getting known. [00:34:00] Huang Yong Ping, and the fellow who does [work] with fireworks. They were all in the show. And Chen Zhen. It was a big group show, impressive. The curator, Marianne Brouwer, did it, who I knew. There was also this French curator—Swiss, French—Corinne Diserens, who was a good friend of mine. She did a video section. Anyways, I was asked to do a piece, and it was in response to this kind of international, inclusive kind of feel. I thought *Heart of Darkness*—one of the densest books I'd ever read in my life, but I read it. I just started thinking—I thought, hmm, colonialism. Mike, the typical American. I'll make him—in trade. I'll make him this kind of offering this opportunity. So ITEA. Also, it was kind of a low point in my life. I was thinking, how do you present opportunity? International Trade Enrichment Association, an organization that sort of provides liaison between corporate

world and artists, providing an opportunity for each. Like prestige of proximity to art, culture, for the corporation, and artists to money. I was very proud of the slogan. Their slogan was "Elevation through association," which is like, we know how things work. It was also like, you're sleeping—whatever. Your connections. Basically, I thought of the piece, and then I sent some of the design to a professional trade show, and they delivered it. Then I designed—I came up with our mission statement, ITEA's mission statement, and it became the brochure for the exhibition, with all the artists. [00:36:09] It was also a mission statement in the piece. There were three brochures. The Kroller-Muller, which is an incredible museum and sculpture park—it was a brochure selling the services of them, touting their—one for ITEA, and one for the exhibition. It was the first thing you'd see when you'd come in the show. Then the *Do It* piece was Hans-Ulrich got wind of me or whatever, and he asked me to do the piece for—he was doing a TV version of the *Do It* project. I think the *Do It* project came out of a chain letter I had got from Cindy Sherman, and I made a piece out of it.

LIZA ZAPOL: I see. So what was the chain letter?

MICHAEL SMITH: A recipe letter. My piece for *Do It* was also kind of response to—in the '90s, now it was the international—it was the focus a little away from the art and more on the curators, like Hans-Ulrich. Although he's a good curator and a smart guy, but the curators became kind of celebrities. It was a little satire on that. I thought it was perfect in this *Do It* book. It's about how to curate your own group exhibition. Now that I'm thinking about it, I think maybe people were thinking about television or video. I don't know, maybe not. I was also invited to do a project at the Palais de Tokyo, and that's when I did the famous quotes. I was thinking maybe—I don't know if that was before or after that—maybe it was after—but I always—they were doing a magazine format show, so I think television, and I thought something short, something that maybe happened—again, I think a magazine. [00:38:10] A magazine hopefully happens more than once. Maybe they'll ask me back again. So I set up something where—famous quotes of art history. That's when I did the reading the Matisse quote in an armchair.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] Right. Which is hilarious.

MICHAEL SMITH: Speaking very poor French.

LIZA ZAPOL: And talking about Matisse's quote about the armchair, right?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Anyways, where—I got distracted.

LIZA ZAPOL: We're leading up to *MUSCO*.

MICHAEL SMITH: *Doug and Mike* was directed by Joshua White. Joshua White was somebody who met me through the talent show. He came up. He introduced himself. Or I had met him once, because he worked with this guy Michael Owen, who helped with SoHo TV, Automation House. He also produced—he was a serious producer, TV producer and video producer, and he produced the "*Mike*" tape for *Saturday Night Live*. He was a pro. He was a friend, too, him and this woman Robin White, who was involved in the—a writer and—yeah, a writer. Organizer. They were married and they worked together. Anyways, I knew both of them. What was I talking about here? I got distracted with Michael, Robin—

LIZA ZAPOL: *MUSCO*.

MICHAEL SMITH: [Correcting the pronunciation] *MUSCO*. *MUSCO.*

LIZA ZAPOL: *MUSCO*.

MICHAEL SMITH: *MUSCO*. It's funny. There was always a confusion about [the pronunciation] "muse-co," "mus-co." Josh. I met Joshua White with the talent show. He said, "Look, if you ever want—if you need some help with something, I'd like to work with you." He volunteered—he was incredibly generous with his time, and he directed the kiddie show. Then after the kiddie show, he directed *Doug and Mike* a little. [00:40:03] Then I had this idea for *MUSCO*. I knew Josh's past. He did the light shows at the—he was a famous light show artist in the '60s at the Fillmore. The Joshua Light Show, which was a famous thing. So I got this idea for *MUSCO*, or, as it's known, *MUSCO*. *MUSCO* is also a very famous lighting company that does major, major shows. Josh said, "Musco is a famous company." I said, "Well, we're MUSCO. What's the difference?" I got MUSCO because it's a story about Mike having his own company, working at his father's company, and then getting this idea for mail-order stuff,

when he met Joshua White of the Joshua Light Show. Expanding on his failed company. The piece was a business in bankruptcy. So we created all their products. We had a catalog, and we had a history. It was convincing. People would come into this installation, and people thought it was an actual business. The ironic thing about it is that Lauren Wittels, who did the show, thought—she announced that she was going to be closing soon after. But we had an incredible response to the show. It was a really good response. Got a lot of press. It sort of snowballed with my collaboration with Josh.

LIZA ZAPOL: You mentioned also—I think it was when we were talking about your father that you said, as your father's business itself was less successful—

MICHAEL SMITH: Right, it coincided—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, this coincided with—

MICHAEL SMITH: My father was not well later in life. He had Parkinson's. His business had also gone south. [00:42:00] His business was basically a clubhouse. He was sinking a lot of their money into this to keep it going, because he didn't—and I think my mother sort of let it happen. She didn't know, really, what was going on, but she also didn't really want him at home all the time, I don't think. He went out of business, and he had to sell the building, and then he moved home. It was a sad time. It was sort of a defeat. He didn't really look at it like that, or he didn't—he was good about moving on. But his failing business coincided with *MUSCO*, and *MUSCO* was about a failing business, and it was also about coming out of a time when I couldn't get arrested. It was also about my father's business, it was about a time in my career, and it was just about that kind of trajectory and sort of failure, which was also part of the character.

LIZA ZAPOL: When you say you couldn't get arrested—before you said that *Do It*, your idea was also out of this difficult time for you, what do you mean? What was happening?

MICHAEL SMITH: I had these opportunities, but nothing really felt like traction. I felt like I would do these one-off things, and then I couldn't make a—you know. I mean, duh, I realized you don't make a living from this stuff. It was at that point that I—'97 when I started to do—I actually was teaching in California for half the year. I was also in a relationship with the artist Amy Sillman. Amy was very instrumental. We later became married. She was instrumental in really—she was very practical. She said, "You've got to get a job. You're not going to"—and I was in this denial, and I did. She was very helpful. She was good about that. Really knew that, and helped me figure out—get a statement together. [00:44:05] I remember I went out to California, and through my connections and her kind of coaching, I got three positions at three very good schools. I was at UCLA, I was at Art Center, and CalArts, all in one semester. I was working four days a week, not knowing what the hell I was doing, but sort of figuring it out. Then the next year, I taught at the University of Hartford, at the art school—Hartford Art School. I was teaching at Pratt, and I was teaching at SVA for a little while, just piecing it together. I think I taught a little at Yale, and then I got a teaching position, a temporary position, at Austin, a replacement position for a semester. Then I got hired on to teach a class at Yale. I just was piecing it together. Then I got a position at—in '99, they asked me to interview at Texas, and I knew those people, and I said, "I don't want to do it. I don't want to waste your time." I made the final cut, but I said, "I'm not coming to interview, because I'm really not ready." Then they didn't find someone, and then two years later, they did the search another couple times, and then I got the job. I was lucky to get the job. I think there were some other people that fit the demographic better. There were a couple queer women that would have much better fit the time and the need and the space. I don't know what happened. One of them couldn't get insurance for her partner, and then the other one—I don't know what happened. I got the job. [00:46:03] I've been there ever since.

LIZA ZAPOL: That transition to teaching—you mentioned before that you didn't know a lot about performance art until you started teaching. What happened when you started teaching?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, I had to show them something, and so I ended up showing them stuff that I was sort of familiar with. Basically, I started to show them stuff that I grew up on and reacted against, but then I became more interested in it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Like what?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know, just like more endurance work, or—then, of course, I was

showing work that I did like, Acconci or—Marina [Abramović] and Ulay's work I did like. Basically, I'd show stuff that I could get my hands on, because it was a different time 20 years ago than it is now. They didn't have Ubu and they didn't have—they had a library. I just didn't understand about certain issues. I was not up on the history. I had an idea of what was going on, but I didn't keep track.

LIZA ZAPOL: What did you like about teaching, or what were you—

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, I really liked having an income. Maybe that was good. I realized that all the time I was spending doing adjunct work, I had more time. It took me a while. I felt like kind of a jerk. At first, I thought I was being exiled down to Texas, but then I had the wherewithal to know, after a while, when things really got bad in the art world, that I shut up and really appreciate what I got. Because a lot of my friends were struggling. So I knew I was lucky, and happy about that, and just worked it out. It's complicated to live in two places, relationship-wise, everything. I found I had more time, and the school—it's a research I institution, so they supported my work. [00:48:05] They've always been fairly generous with me.

LIZA ZAPOL: We're kind of in '97, but we've also kind of extended to now as we're talking about your teaching. Just to talk a little bit more about teaching, you said you teach performance with some of your students, or you teach—

MICHAEL SMITH: I teach performance art. When people would ask me, I would always shoot back—when they said, "What do you teach?" I'd always say, "Very little." A lot of times, I say I don't really know my approach or do it, but the class seems to be popular, and they seem to like it, and it seems to fit in. So I have a general idea. I don't know if I have a philosophy, but they keep busy.

LIZA ZAPOL: What are some of your favorite assignments?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know my favorites, but some I can just remember, because every year it's always—I seem to lose my syllabi, and I can't seem to find them. I'll say find a Yelp review, and do a performance based on that. I start out very basic, because I'm trying to do everyday activities, and I really don't want to watch bad acting. So I have them try to do an everyday activity from beginning to end, and I always stress beginnings and ends. A lot of my students, they learn that, it's like these meandering, shapeless, formless performances, so they get a sense of beginning and end. Sometimes the advanced classes do bigger projects together. My last class just did a prom. That's the second time. It was a full-blown prom. They did a good job—I wanted to kill them until we got there. What other assignments? [00:50:00] I taught 3D design once, which was one of my favorite classes when I first got there, because they didn't have—maybe one performance class. The assignment—I remember the last one at the end of the semester was—they were doing all these projects throughout the year. Put all your assignments in the middle of the room, and then make a form that contains them, finish the form, close it up, take it away, don't bring it back. [They laugh.] I always liked that one. What other performance—I'm trying to think. There were a bunch. I'd have to review. I'd give them—do a persona. A lot of the assignments, we'd go on field trips to—I'll take them to a thrift store, and they each get $10 limit to spend, and they either can buy stuff as a group or individually, and they make performances out of it. Because I dealt with a lot—and some of them have been great. One year, they—all denim, and that ended up in the final performance, where they had all denim. One year, they bought these Big Gulp cups, Big Gulp glasses or mugs, and they did some dances with them. Very funny what they come up with.

LIZA ZAPOL: I imagine having you as a professor, as a teacher, would give them a sense of being able to—really havethe world open as well.

MICHAEL SMITH: It's license.

LIZA ZAPOL: License, yeah. A sense of license.

MICHAEL SMITH: As I always say to them, "Do what I say, not what I do." Because I'm constantly saying to them, "Where's the joy? Where's the joy?" Oh, I'll have them bring something in, take it apart, and put it—

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MICHAEL SMITH: —back together again. So they can break it. It could also be a figure of speech. It could be language. It could be an object. It could be something. So they could deconstruct something, then put it back together.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean, "Where is the joy?"?

MICHAEL SMITH: I think about it more in terms of my response to art. I sometimes get lost in the process and sometimes don't enjoy it. It's that simple. Habit. You do habit, and you think, what are you doing?

LIZA ZAPOL: What have you learned in your interactions with students? Is there a way that some of that gets fed back into your work or into your own approaches or life?

MICHAEL SMITH: I notice it. I would like to incorporate it more. Maybe be a little more chill, a little less nervous about stuff. Fun, I try to have fun. Some of the things I've learned from them are—I don't know if I've learned from them, but that's influenced me is, unfortunately, pizza. There's a lot of pizza in their lives, and I'm involved with that. I don't know, what else? There's a certain kind of openness and—to some of them. Some of them are shut down and are going through difficult times, but there's some of them—there's a certain kind of ambition and openness and enthusiasm, excitement, that it's kind of nice to see.

LIZA ZAPOL: Recently, you've been taking—was it a class picture, like a Sears class picture —

MICHAEL SMITH: I've been there for almost 20 years.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you describe that?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I think in '99, I did my first class photo, where I took the students to Sears. [00:02:00] It's kind of a great project. They like doing it. It takes a day of class. It takes up a day of class. Then there's this document. It took me a while to figure it out. I remember showing it to one, to somebody, and they liked it. Oh, I made the photo, and then I had wallets made, and I gave them each one. Then it continued. I liked—there was that going to Sears. They kind of liked going to Sears. It reminded them of doing the photos when they were children, so there was this kind of nostalgia for them. Also, they were able to use the props in the place. After a while, I would get my photo for my purposes, and I always wanted a just straight photo, like a Sundays best kind of look. Then I let them play. They like playing with the props and doing the stuff in the plays. Then it's been interesting as it follows how commercial photography is gone, because Sears went out of business, and it was like, wow, what am I going to do? The next thing I know, I was at Picture People, doing theirs. It's also interesting, because they have certain rules, where they'll censor stuff, because kids will do some lewd stuff, and they'll say, "We won't do that."

LIZA ZAPOL: What's Picture People?

MICHAEL SMITH: Picture People is like another Glamour Shots, and they're in the malls. So we went to Picture People. They closed down. Then we ended up at JCPenney. Then we went to different Sears, because—it's also like a field trip. After doing this for many, many years—sometimes I don't do it when I'm on leave, but I did do it a couple schools where I was teaching when I was on leave, like Art Institute of Chicago. [00:04:03] I did a group there. At Yale I did a couple batches, because I taught there a couple different times. For me, I just want my shot, but they enjoy it. They're not cheap. I have to—so now I've got close to 60 of these. Now I can't even get it—JCPenney has a thing where their schedule doesn't line up with mine. They have these stupid rules. So a lot of time, I have to do one of my classes at—I hired one of the students, and then we set it up in the studio at school. There's a curtain there. So there's a bunch of bland-looking ones in front of a curtain. But they have the same look. Usually I let the photographer direct them. Sometimes I'll weigh in when they're just clueless. So they continue.

LIZA ZAPOL: It sounds like—

MICHAEL SMITH: Also, it's sort of a document of me getting older and them staying the same age, which is kind of interesting.

LIZA ZAPOL: Certainly figures into your more recent work. This might be a good moment to talk about—we've talked about William Wegman, or Bill Wegman, Doug Skinner. You're

starting to talk about Joshua White and your collaborations. I'm waiting for the sirens.

[Side conversation] [00:06:01]

LIZA ZAPOL: You've mentioned also, a couple of times, Mike Kelley. If there are some other—and Dan Graham. If there are some other relationships which you'd like to spend some time kind of talking about, what are the major relationships that have affected your work?

MICHAEL SMITH: I did more collaborations with Josh White. I did *MUSCO*, and then I did a series of—we did *QuinQuag*, *Take off your Pants*, *Open House*, and then *Mike's World*. Those were big projects, and they were successful for the most part. Josh and I came to—we had some problems. There were some ego problems. Then, after *Mike's World*, I think I was ready to move on.

LIZA ZAPOL: *Mike's World* itself is a good documentation of that collaboration. I know you were careful to make sure that he got credit as that work at the Blanton was shown. *Open House*, which was a collaborative work, and very expansive—you have *Interstitial*. You have all these other—the installation. But what is happening then in your life that leads to *Open House*? Was that the same time as you were leaving SoHo yourself?

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. I lost my studio on Spring Street. I moved into Brooklyn. What else? I had steady work now. [00:08:00] I felt like I was back in the—active in that art world. There was interest in the work.

LIZA ZAPOL: Because *Open House* was an installation at the New Museum?

MICHAEL SMITH: New Museum.

LIZA ZAPOL: You took over—

MICHAEL SMITH: —the public gallery downstairs. It was the main space. It was on Broadway. I mean, the basement space near the bookstore. We transformed it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Talk about what, in terms of both neighborhood shift and art world shift, is happening and is reflected on in *Open House*.

MICHAEL SMITH: It talked about gentrification, SoHo. Also, the kind of overlap of the artist community with SoHo. Then I moved to Brooklyn. I mean, I was always in Brooklyn. I had a studio here. I lived here before. I think I moved here in '86, and I was back and forth. I lived out here, and then the gentrification eventually happened in Williamsburg, which was kind of curious. I don't know. Those issues never really stopped me. I tried to adapt to those things.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's interesting, because you're—in this case, it seems like Mike is—he's trying to sell his home, his apartment, at the same time as there's this lament, or nostalgia, for what the neighborhood was.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. His history is kind of tied up with it. It was also kind of a portrait of a certain artist that I was familiar with. The same kind of person that I would think of that was in that Collab group that did the Times Square show. [00:10:05] I idealized it and I made a different kind of figure, but it was somebody who was very kind of caught up in those ideas, and it was very much defining for them as an artist. He had also—you notice people that stop making art. Mike wasn't really making art, and he was in this situation—he was bringing out the old stuff, because it was important to him, but I don't know if anybody was interested in it. They were interested in his real estate, not his art.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right, he's just trying to profit, kind of, off of this shift in a way.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, or maybe it's a real practical move. I don't know about profit. He's reluctant, but it's a time to do this, because he knows that he's trying to—he's got this independent video business, and he's got to survive. I don't know. He's not really making art. Actually, it's an opportunity for him to be successful in terms of selling his place, which is a good move.

LIZA ZAPOL: And *Interstitial*. Was that just created, this cable access show that Mike hosts, with several of your friends who are pretending to be other people? [Laughs.] Was that created just for this?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Josh was a professional director. He had directed *Max Headroom*. He had done some *Seinfeld* episode. He'd done sitcoms, soap opera—he was a professional. He did industrials. So he knew how to shoot this *Interstitial*.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was your favorite of those?

MICHAEL SMITH: I think one of my favorite was me interviewing my friend Andrea Blum, who plays some public art consultant, or public artist. [00:12:07] We're talking about the *Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*. I'm trying to talk about the issues around the arc.

LIZA ZAPOL: The controversy around the removal of *Tilted Arc* down at Foley Square, is that right? Around there?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. She talked about—I said, "It accumulates garbage," and I pull out a Kleenex wad, and I put it down there. The scale is completely off. She just sort of cuts through that. It's just an absurd image. I like that one. She was very good, because she just wouldn't hear it. She stuck to her defense of the *Titled Arc* and public art. I don't know, I like some of the exchange with just various people, and the various artists. There was a good one with Sharon Hayes and Chuck Nanney. They were a duo that had broken up. Sharon plays this one who—he's mourning the loss of the East Village, and she's saying, "I'll work these places. Bigger audiences, more money."

LIZA ZAPOL: The galleries, the East Village galleries?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. She's all for moving forward and advancing her career, and he's back in the old days, this kind of nostalgia. There was lots of different people. A lot of people did really good jobs. Kristin Lucas did a really good job of playing a media person. She got into the artwork. She made a video. It was good.

LIZA ZAPOL: It seemed really playful. You gave people, again, license, like you were talking about with your students.

MICHAEL SMITH: I gave them license, but I gave them outlines.

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh, did you?

MICHAEL SMITH: I did.

LIZA ZAPOL: For characters?

MICHAEL SMITH: I did. I said, "It would be good if you could deal with this." Then some people met and—I think Sharon and Chuck actually came up with their own thing when they were meeting. [00:14:01] But with Kristin, I gave her a guideline. I asked Alix Pearlstein to do that piece, and she came up with her persona. Rochelle Feinstein. I asked her. Then I think Matvey Levenstein, he came up with it. Mark Kostabi, I asked him to be himself. He was totally game and willing. These guys who played the Sohoods. Some of them were ex-students, and one was Guy Smit. Guy was great. People did different things.

LIZA ZAPOL: Let me see. You spoke about *Mike's World* a little bit, this survey, and in terms of your relationship with Joshua White, but what did that mean to you to have to look back at your creations of Mike in that space? What led you to want to have an orientation video? Why the orientation video?

MICHAEL SMITH: When I moved to Texas, I visited the LBJ Memorial Library, and it's like a museum library. I always liked that one. Then when I was offered this position, I think it'd also started to go to other—when I'd drive back to New York—at that time, I would drive back rather than fly all the time—at the summer. I would visit presidential libraries. It became kind of a hobby, or a thing I would do. It was like a checklist. Oh, I've been here, here, here. Then when the opportunity came up to do this survey show around Mike, that the curator Annette Carlozzi suggested—she didn't want to deal with the baby. She just wanted the Mike character. [00:16:00] I started thinking about—I don't know. I thought, hmm. Well, I think I said—I was thinking of the presidential libraries, and I thought, well, the show—there's some similarities between a presidential library and the show. It's around one figure. There's installations, there's timeline, there's paraphernalia, and it's all around the central figure and stuff. I mentioned this to Josh, and he suggested two things: an animatronic figure, which they have at the LBJ Library—and that was a little out of the budget—and an orientation film.

I thought, orientation film? He said, "Yeah." So we hired a writer, a friend of his and someone I knew, who was a pro. Used to work for *Saturday Night Live*. Leslie Fuller. I gave her an outline of what I wanted to hit. Oh, no, actually—it's funny. I did an interview with Josh, and I had already forgotten what actually happened. We hired a professional guy to write an orientation film for the piece. He saw the material and he said, "I don't know how to do this. There's too much here. I don't know, really, how to"—he said, "Let's talk to Leslie," so we talked to Leslie. We both agreed it would not be a good idea for me to write it, because I'm very slow, and she's a—and so I got the outline together. I got a huge amount of clips together. Gave them to her. She knew my work somewhat. She sort of did the script. Then I edited the piece with [the guy I work with, –MS] Bill Haddad in Texas, who's my buddy. [00:18:00] One of the great moments was when—and then we hired this voiceover guy. As Bill said, the voice of God. He had the perfect voice. The music, it was public—I bought that from one of those stock music places. We got to it. It was called "Mike: Fanfare of a Common Man"—"Fanfare for a Common Man." I thought—

LIZA ZAPOL: Perfect. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Thirty bucks. Perfect.

LIZA ZAPOL: Amazing. One of my favorite lines from that is, "Mike, he can shake hands with life in its own terms in 45-second intervals, one day at a time." I mean, just like—

MICHAEL SMITH: It doesn't make any sense, but what he's doing, paired with the imagery—a calendar, I think, and I think maybe he's coming out of the toilet—yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's perfect. It's an interesting—before, you were talking about how there's a sense of mystery that you like. It's interesting to have this as a guide. That's also still sort of baffling at moments as well, but it does help, I think.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. Then there's some moments where I—I think I told her about *Candide*. She throws that in—then I think Josh said, "Maybe throw a quote in from a famous person." So I had those ridiculous Heraclitus quotes.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's the first time, actually, that I'd heard—and I think you also, in other interviews, have talked about Mike being a Candide-type character. I wanted to ask you a little more about what you mean when you say that. A lot of bad things happen to that guy.

MICHAEL SMITH: Candide?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes.

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, that's one thing, that he just goes through life, ups and downs, and he just comes out Candide. He's not a palindrome like Ubu. [00:20:00] My favorite line in there is when he asks to leave Valhalla, and they said, "We don't know. No one's ever asked before." [They laugh.] There was just something about it that was so good. And the relationship with him and—I just like the story. I thought it was very funny, and kind of profound.

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you—and if so, how do you—draw on that as material when you're thinking about Mike or situations for Mike?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't much anymore. Mike has his own world, and now I'm just looking. Maybe it would be helpful if I did, but I don't much go back to that.

LIZA ZAPOL: You know that world, yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Maybe it would be good to re-read it. Maybe I would get something from it. But I don't go back to *Candide*.

LIZA ZAPOL: After *Mike's World* in 2007, what happens next? It seems like you return to Baby Ikki.

MICHAEL SMITH: I did that collaboration with Mike Kelley. Around 19—what was it, 2002?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, *Playground*.

MICHAEL SMITH: *Playground*. I did this project with Seth Price. It was funny. I met—not

funny, but I met Seth when he was working at Electronic Arts Intermix. He edited a piece of mine, and I liked him. I thought, he's a smart guy. I asked him. He was ambitious, very ambitious. I said, "Seth, I have this opportunity." I was friends with Mike, and he was also showing with Emi Fontana, and he was also going out with Emi. [00:22:00] She had a very good gallery in Italy. She also asked me to do a show there, and I was asked to do a show in Switzerland. I didn't know what the fuck to do. I had this idea to do the baby. I thought maybe I should start doing the baby before I can't do it anymore, or maybe it would be interesting to collaborate with somebody on the baby. So I did it with Seth. The piece we did was sort of touching on these infantil—also not coming to terms with, but dealing directly with this kind of idea of infantilism, by modeling the video after a lot of infantilist sites and videos online. Seth and I made this video. He shot some of the video. I shot it with somebody, an assistant. He did editing, and he did some great music. Then we did an installation, used playground equipment. It was at Cannes, and Neuchatel in Switzerland, and at Emi's. Then Mike saw the piece, and Mike liked it. I said, "You want to do one?" because I thought—and he said sure. I had a studio visit with—her name was Regine Basha, who was working at the Sculpture Center. She said, "What are you up to?" I said, "Well, I've been talking to Mike Kelley. We're thinking about doing this project."

Oh, Mike and I met about trying to work on something. We'd meet. It was also a way to—we had always been friends, but I'd go there and hang out with him. It was an excuse to hang out. I'd go to California, and we'd spend a long weekend together looking at baby cartoons. Sweet Pea or whatever. [00:24:00] We'd look at stuff together, or movies, and we'd talk about ideas about what we could do together. Then, I think after one or two summers, Mike came up with this idea of Burning Man. He wanted to do a video, like burners, but do it with actors. He was thinking about collaborating. He knew Ann Magnuson. He wanted to bring her in. I said, "Ann's great, but I'm not a big improviser." The baby I could, but I got frightened by that. Then he said, "Maybe go to Burning Man." So we were thinking, oh, go to Burning Man, do a video. I mentioned in the studio visit to Regine. She was intrigued. She presented it to Mary Ceruti, and I got a call. She said, "We want to produce that." Then they said, "Do it for next year." Then it was another one of those things. I had a plan to go to Burning Man, like, soon, and I found a crew. I found some people who was a burner, who was also the wrangler, and also the DP. Then there was somebody else I knew through Josh. He came along to assist, and maybe take some photos. Then someone drove the van, or the RV.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you have this giant RV that goes out to—[laughs]

MICHAEL SMITH: To Burning Man.

LIZA ZAPOL: To Burning Man.

MICHAEL SMITH: Then we came back, and then Mike's editor—I delivered this stuff to Mike for four months. He didn't look at it, because he was busy. I thought, oh, this is just going to be shit. Then he finally looked and he said, "We got something here." Then he thought of a way to organize, and then he thought about—we had an outline, and I got a lot of material. [00:26:02] It was a lot of work.

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh my God. You were in character for—

MICHAEL SMITH: You saw it?

LIZA ZAPOL: —Yes—an enormous amount of time.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was exhausting. I worked them. We were there five, six days. I was in character five days. As my father would say, I've been there twice. First and last. Did I say that already in this interview?

LIZA ZAPOL: No. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Not my beach. Anyways, fortunately, Mike didn't go, because he was not a good traveler. Then we got it. Then he designed the—I would go out as editor, edit it, and then I'd go out and—I went out a handful of times, and we'd talk about the edit.

LIZA ZAPOL: To Los Angeles?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Then it finished, and then it worked out. He designed what it sat in. I weighed in.

LIZA ZAPOL: The installation around it.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: But he did most of what came after? In terms of the space, rather. But you were also involved in the edit.

MICHAEL SMITH: Edit, and I weighed in. He also had people working for him full-time, so that really helped, because we went way over budget. I mean, way over budget. He got into it. He threw himself into it. Threw his self and money into it. Then it went to like three places. It was popular. He couldn't believe it. He said, "We've gotten more press than I've ever gotten here, on the show here." Anyways, it was good. It was also great—I was really happy that I got to work with him before he died, not that long after. I remember after we finally finished it, it was the day before the opening, and I—[he touches his heart]—get a little touched, when I think about it. [00:28:00] But we were drinking. I was saying, "I think this piece brought us together, closer." He looked at me. He said, "Oh, fuck you. That didn't change it. We've always been close." Very sweet. Yeah. And then—

LIZA ZAPOL: How did you two meet?

MICHAEL SMITH: We met in Michigan, when he was at the University of Michigan. I visited the school, I did a performance there. I was going out with somebody who was in school there, I came and did a performance, and I met Mike. He was living in this place called God's Oasis with Jim Shaw and some other people. Mike lived down—I remember going to that place for the first time. They were playing or something. And just being overwhelmed with the smell of cat pee or whatever. But I went down to Mike's space, and it was very clean. Mike was very tidy, and it was very different from that other zone. They were playing just awful—it was just awful music and stuff up there. But he came through Chicago. He was looking at graduate schools, and he stopped. I said, "You can stay with me." We kind of hit it off. We hit it off, and he stayed with me in Chicago for a few days. He was painting then, he was showing me his portfolio. He did an interview at Art Institute of Chicago, and then he went to LA. Well, he ended up going to CalArts, and then I would visit. He helped line up a gig for me at CalArts, so I did that, I stayed with him. Then we became buddies.

LIZA ZAPOL: That was in the '80s you went out to CalArts, or late '70s even?

MICHAEL SMITH: '70s, late '70s. Like '77, '78, I think. I went out a few times. [00:30:00] Then when he came to New York, he'd stay with us, and he did some performances.

LIZA ZAPOL: If you have any particular stories or anecdotes about those visits, either in LA or New York, with him.

MICHAEL SMITH: I just remember he roomed with Jim Shaw. It was always—I remember seeing Jim for the first time. The first time I saw him, he was dressed up like a pirate, with long hair, and he had buckle shoes. He was so ridiculous-looking. Then Mike was this kind of greasy-haired guy, wiry kind of guy. This real Iggy look, and kind of that Midwestern accent. I was always disarmed by how smart Mike was. But we laughed a lot, we would joke, and we would go to—visiting him out in LA, I think we went to a few piano bars. He was doing that, we'd go to that. We didn't have much—oh, I remember one time, we went to—heard about a party. We were driving around. I think he might have been a little drunk or something, or loud. We went to a party that was in Beverly Hills, or near Beverly Hills, at a kind of fancy-schmancy place, that was given by David Lamelas, this Argentinian conceptualist who was living in LA. There was like, people sitting around this very fancy house, watching—he was showing his movie, and I think Baldessari was there, and a few people. It was kind of some rich people. Mike came in, and I think Mike got a little loud, and we were asked to leave. [00:32:04] I remember that.

Then I remember seeing David. I saw him down in—I think it was in Brazil, Sao Paulo or somewhere. He said, "God, he was acting like such an asshole that day." [Laughs.] It was very funny. Then he told me about the situation, I remember that. My memory is bad, but then Carole Ann reminded me of when Mike once—he was at someplace, and it was involving drinking, and he was on the table, we had margaritas. Next thing you know, he's on the table, he was dancing. They asked us to leave, too. I think it didn't work with the chips and everything. I don't know, we'd go out and dance and drink and have fun. Then, as we got older, we got a little more low-key. [He moves his hands, flatly, parallel to the table.]

LIZA ZAPOL: You're showing me, with your hands, something more even.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Mike was a little agoraphobic. He didn't like to go out. So we would drink at home, didn't go out.

LIZA ZAPOL: Talk about that. You mentioned in the collaboration, there was some laughing involved.

MICHAEL SMITH: We laughed a lot.

LIZA ZAPOL: What were some of the discussions around Baby Ikki, around the edits, if you have any memories around that?

MICHAEL SMITH: Around the edits would be mostly about timing and how it looked and how it felt. Mike would always go to a more avant-garde—or a more extended. He wanted to do—I wasn't even into the idea of making a video of it. He was the one that really pushed that. He wanted to make a film. Then we started making the film. I said, "Mike, it's too long." He pushed to make it a feature, we disagreed about that. [00:34:00] Then I would weigh in about just edits and stuff. He'd listen to me. We had some disagreements about that, but we worked together well. We both respected each other's opinion.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's interesting in that work, because it seems like Ikki is in—there are a couple things that happen in that that we don't see with Ikki in others. You've spoken about there's this infantilist thing, or—I'm not saying it right—but it seems like it comes to the fore a little bit there, like with the women, dancing with the women. On the video, there's a dream of breasts and milk that happened in the [trailer].

MICHAEL SMITH: Mike was big—I was not into that. I thought it was a little obvious. But I thought—but people like it. It's very funny. He was big into that.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean, he was big into that?

MICHAEL SMITH: He was big into that shot, he wanted to put it in there. Not that he was big intro breasts or anything. He thought it was appropriate, that that would put that dream in the baby's head.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm trying to think of the timing of the discussion of the conversation between you two, *Mike Talks to Mike About "Mike*." I think you also talk about Baby Ikki in there, and it seems like he's—

MICHAEL SMITH: I haven't reviewed that in a long time.

LIZA ZAPOL: It seems like he's pushing—that is in the conversation. He's saying, "There's that creepy thing that people see," and you're like, "I don't see that." It seemed like that—

MICHAEL SMITH: I didn't want to see it. Was I that naive?

LIZA ZAPOL: No, no, you said—I think that's right. I think you say, "Okay, maybe I see it, but I don't want to see it."

MICHAEL SMITH: Right.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean when you say that?

MICHAEL SMITH: What do I mean? [00:36:00] I see it, but I didn't want to see it. I meant that. I didn't want to deal with it. I just didn't know how to deal with it. In fact, I think I was interviewed for *BOMB* many—when *BOMB* first came out. I don't think I did a very good interview. This woman, Rosemary Hochschild, she interviewed me about the baby, and I didn't really have it that thought-out or whatever, so I couldn't talk about this kind of symbolic or the psychological implications of it. I wasn't willing to talk about it. I remember in some talk show at that time, someone said—this was a long time ago. Was it Phil Donahue who had that show? He had some infantilists on. That was many years ago, probably 40 years or—so people mentioned that to me, and I said, "I don't want to go there." Seth really pushed me to dealing with it. It also gave us something to format after, so that was fine. It was good.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you see when you look at Ikki now? What are some of the things that

you're thinking about with Ikki now?

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm in public, in a diaper. One thing I think about. Another thing is I do it fairly well. I'm a convincing baby. And I can see where it's many things to various people—many things to many people. [00:38:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: When I saw you and Tim Maul speak at Leslie Tonkonow, someone said, "Are you going to keep doing the baby?" You said, in 2002, you were wondering if you could keep doing it. But it sounds like, now, you're saying, "Yes, I'm going to keep doing it. Baby Ikki stays fixed at 18 months, and I'm aging." That's interesting.

MICHAEL SMITH: I wonder if it will get to that place where I'm infirm, and I become that character. That could be really—maybe I'll be making that—what was that artist's name? Hannah Wilke. She documents her cancer and her death, but it's sort of documenting this kind of decline, which is very powerful. Here's a woman who started out with documenting a certain kind of vanity, all about her and her beauty, and this image of woman. Then just incredibly powerful photos of her having breast cancer and dying. I don't think the baby will be like that, but I think it's the idea of taking it to that place—I don't know what I'll be thinking. I may not want to deal with it, or I may not have the mind to do it. Actually, I'm dealing with this age thing, and I don't want to be trapped in that area the whole time. But since I am using this as a character, it's something that I have to deal with, rather than this kind of—the idea of doing a character and being in denial, or doing this situation where someone older goes back to school, or doing those things where the comedy becomes obvious, I don't know if I want to do that. I don't know. I'm leaving it open now for the baby continue. Maybe, at a certain point, I'll look at it and I'll say, uh, you've got to stop. [00:40:04] I think it's time.

LIZA ZAPOL: When you said someone who's older goes back to school, were you thinking about *Portal Excursion* and the—

MICHAEL SMITH: I wasn't thinking about that. I was thinking more like Rodney Dangerfield, or Melissa McCarthy. Although she's a very funny woman. I saw that this summer. It's one of those summer movies.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes, right.

MICHAEL SMITH: And they do it so much better. I can't do those kind of things.

LIZA ZAPOL: This theme of aging, which you're working on right now—

MICHAEL SMITH: Can't get away from it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Let's talk about T*he Fountain of Youth—Excuse Me!?!...I'm Looking For the* "*Fountain of Youth*", and *Not Quite Under_Ground*, and what's happening. With *Excuse Me!?!...I'm Looking For the* "*Fountain of Youth,*" Mike, this knight—and Baby Ikki sort of appears in that work as well. What led you there?

MICHAEL SMITH: That piece?

LIZA ZAPOL: To that piece, yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: First of all, I liked the title. *Excuse Me!?!...I'm Looking For the* "*Fountain of Youth.*" I thought, I like that title. Then I questioned it, but at first. Then I fell back on it. Then this idea, and the fountain of youth. Then I found myself going to St. Augustine, to a theme park, and doing what seemed to me kind of obvious, going to that source. But getting some photos. Kind of sad, or—an okay series. It just developed. [00:42:00] Then I got this idea of almost like a dance, with the searching. This searching idea, of searching for your glasses, constantly searching. But also someone in the world who's like, everybody's doing that, too. Searching for—whether it's their phone or their stuff. A one-person lost and found, where you're lost and then found, and then lost and then found. It just seemed like a cycle that you are in terms of life or whatever. Then I started building up these ideas. I accumulate and then I put them together. Then it became—and then I started thinking about, I don't know, maybe an opportunity to do some shows.

So I'd do pieces together, and then I'd make a video of the pocket thing. I made a shot one summer when I was at Skowhegan of me with a band. Someone I know did a photo with

himself when he retired. He was always a musician, he was actually, one time, a professional musician. Then he did a concert, he had a party. I can show it to you a little later. It was him, with gray hair, with his buddies. Then I thought, I want to use that photo, that setup. So I did a photo of me with young people. It looked like a roadhouse. I grew out my beard, and it came in gray. So it was me, looking like an elder statesman/musician with the drumsticks, and then some rockers behind me. Because I had my sticks, then somebody asked me to make some drum thing. So it had drum photos. I think maybe we had two of these photos printed, or one—one photo, and then I did it as an installation, just figuring out with me searching through my pockets as a sequence. Then that developed into another piece. [00:44:00] Then, at one point, I wanted to do—and then I came up with a timeline for another piece, and then it fit together. Then I thought, hmm.

I wanted to do St. Augustine that time, sort of medieval—the 1400s or—that's around medieval times, and knights. I thought, I want to do a ballet. I got this idea in my head I wanted to do a ballet. I said, perfect, a story ballet. Put it in that time, with knights. I was watching a lot of *Game of Thrones*, and that came up. So then I made—I talked to someone in Austin, Stephen Mills at Ballet Austin. I said, "Would you like to do that?" So we did that, and then I did the timeline, and then I thought, I need a water cooler, and then the whole story—slowly. I need a synopsis. So then I build, build, build. I talked to Mayo, who had done *Portal Excursion* music. Then he did—so you know. Then I went to KidZania. I read about KidZania, and I thought, oh, I'm putting an adult in a kid's world. What's this like? Also, there's a certain kind of strange something—this kind of mall culture life. I just put it all together, and designed it in such a way that it's kind of walk-through thematic show tangentially, but related to that theme of aging.

LIZA ZAPOL: Which was at Greene Naftali. Then also you had the film that you'd made, that was also then at Tate, at the Tate Modern. Is that right?

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. The Tate asked me to do their project, and I put it off and put it off as long as I could. Their Performance Room, I think it was called. I didn't know what to do. I had a December slot for the—a lot of this stuff—they were also thinking that I would do something television-like. [00:46:05] So they allowed me to use the—I said, "Here's what I'll do. I'll use the ballet, and then we can do some live scenes and cut it in." They seemed okay with it. There's some moments. I'm not sure. I actually haven't looked at it since I did it. But I did it.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's interesting, because you have this installation of an office, and then it cuts to the film that you'd made with the ballet, essentially.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. It cuts back to the office, and then it cuts to a scene in the park with a—I did that idea of—at the time, I was also starting to think about that project for the Tattoo Project. It's a public art project. I thought the most visible, consistent public art that's going on today are people on their cell phones. Parked, stationary, holding that, like George Segal sculptures all over the place. So that was in reference to that. I didn't articulate it, but that's what I thought about that image. I put that image that was from another project into that piece.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then you have your character with the selfie stick, kind of going—

MICHAEL SMITH: —around.

LIZA ZAPOL: —around, in both pieces. Also in *Not Quite Under_Ground*.

MICHAEL SMITH: In *Not Quite Under_Ground*, there's a couple shots with the selfie stick I like quite a bit, when he's in the Nauman shot. That's good. The other one—hmm. It's absurd, but I felt like I just sort of fell back in that. I had to move forward.

LIZA ZAPOL: You were talking to me—I think it was off the record—before about when you were turning 40, and that felt like a turning point for you. [00:48:00] Now you're dealing with aging. It sounds like these milestones carry meaning for you, as they do for all of us. Talk—

MICHAEL SMITH: Always in hindsight. Never when they're approaching.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean? Oh, you mean as you look back now, you can see what was happening?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, or even when they're approaching. I don't really get depressed about age now. You think more about—I think about age now, but now I'm thinking the idea of—I remember when I did *QuinQuag*, it was the idea of what do artists do at a retreat or a retirement place. I just thought, dysfunctional. Those would be dysfunctional. Or I thought of a very depressing place like Westbeth, or someplace where people gather.

LIZA ZAPOL: Westbeth, the artist housing center in the West Village?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I mean, it works, and people do get to live there. I'm not a group guy. The idea of doing that just frightens me. But I understand it idealistically, and I think it's a good—and also—but the retirement thing, it's also—I have a job, and I'm thinking, will I be able to retire at some point? Will I be able to afford to? Then it becomes a theme. Then I somehow come up against some of these timeshares or communities. Then I put my character in that situation.

LIZA ZAPOL: Which is the project that you're working on now?

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: We can talk about it as much as you want to or feel comfortable, since it's something that you're developing right now. Even in *Not Quite Under_Ground*, you collaborate with a tattoo parlor, and you and your friends, and people you've asked, make designs. [00:50:06]

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. Some of them look like tattoos, and some of them are just ridiculous. They just send their paintings. Which are great. I don't—and the tattooists, they said, "We can't do this." I said, "Well, don't."

LIZA ZAPOL: I wondered about that. But which ones were some of the ones that were created quite a bit, or which people did use?

MICHAEL SMITH: Which ones were—

LIZA ZAPOL: Which were the—

MICHAEL SMITH: —popular ones?

LIZA ZAPOL: Which were the popular ones, yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: This artist named Sean Bluechel. He had the duck and martini glasses. He did a lot of those. He did a whole page of them. Who else was popular? Cory Arcangel did one, this kind of geometric thing that was very popular. They did a couple. I was really happy. There was a set of twins, did my little pootie [ph] baby. They each got one on their arm. That was sweet. Just different—those were popular. I was surprised—there was another one. A friend of mine's son, who was like 13, did a few. They were popular. His name was Ace, Ace Wishman. It was cool.

LIZA ZAPOL: Interesting to see what people choose to live with for a while. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Forever.

LIZA ZAPOL: And forever, yeah. Then, for the over 65 crowd, people got 50 percent off, or discounts—

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —for theirs. Talk about that, why you were thinking about this art that people would take with them forever.

MICHAEL SMITH: People always thought about the art, or of that, and they were intrigued that they'd—

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MICHAEL SMITH: —they were going to this festival, and they'd have a piece by an artist.

LIZA ZAPOL: Which was at Sculpture Project in Munster.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Because there were some famous artists there, and I had some famous people design stuff. I was sort of tongue-in-cheek, or looking at the idea of tattoos. I didn't have any. I did get one, finally, at the very end of the thing, after I went back. It was sort of the conceit of the video, I got that. It was mostly because I felt a little pressure. People said, "You've got to get one." I said, "Why? Just because I'm—if you're a bartender, you have to drink?" But then I thought, What the hell? And I got it. I set it up if I wanted—it's a to-do list. Empty to-do list on my ass.

LIZA ZAPOL: Things to do. One, two, three, four.

MICHAEL SMITH: Two, three. Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Is it just three?

MICHAEL SMITH: I think it's three, yeah. But the idea of—my response to the tattoos is—I thought about it just as an idea. Looking for the fountain of youth, I thought, well, young people have a lot of tattoos. I thought, maybe that's one way to—you know. Then I thought, what would it be like to get a tattoo? Then I started thinking about body art, and then I thought about Mike getting a tattoo, and just this social phenomena about how popular it is. I thought how it's changed, the perception of tattoos. At one time, you're a badass, or represented a certain rebel or outsider. Now they're mainstream. They're very bourgeois, middle-class. The title of the piece just reflected that, *Not Quite Under_Ground*. So it's that double entendre of not quite dead, not quite underground. I think older people, maybe they had thought about getting them for all their lives, or they see, and then they get this idea. [00:02:05] So it offered an opportunity for them to do it. It was a little goof about social practice, about bringing the generations together. And it was. They were busy. They were open every day. Only one day did they not open, and they did a lot—they were busy all the time. It was very—they worked their asses off.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's interesting as a goof on social practice, but then it actually becomes the thing it's goofing itself.

MICHAEL SMITH: It was a very successful project. Actually, the museum bought the piece. It was kind of great. I think Mike's piece, Mike Kelley's piece, that mobile home [*Mobile Homestead*], I think that was kind of a goof on social practice, and it's very successful. It's a great piece. It's so good.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, tell me why.

MICHAEL SMITH: Why do I like it?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, why do you like it?

MICHAEL SMITH: I just like the way it's set up, where it goes out in the field, and it spreads its goodwill, and it's well-intentioned program. Then it retreats back home and then allows this underground activity to ferment underneath. It's also a way to sort of give back to a community. He loves Detroit. He was always identifying with Detroit, part of his persona and his bad-boy thing, but then he's like a—it was very mixed. I think he was very interested in these people and all these things, but I think at the same time, he looked askance at some of that work.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right, because this was the home that looked like the home he'd grown up with, right, but also there was a needle exchange program or something like that that happened.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. It was also this white house, this white house going through this black 'hood. Kind of curious. I didn't get to really talk to him about it, but I knew him, and I had a sense of his feelings towards certain things. [00:04:00] So it was a little dig. Anyways, mine wasn't a response to his piece, but I do respond to some of that work. Some of it's good, but some of it—I don't know. I don't respond.

LIZA ZAPOL: If you want to talk about what you're working on now, if that's something that you'd like to talk about in terms of this next project. You talked about having a retirement community or place.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. Let me take a break for one second.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, let's take a break. [Audio break.] So yeah, just to resume recording, we were talking about the project you're working on right now. So if you want to tell me.

MICHAEL SMITH: Which is kind of a timeshare. I'm turning the space—I'm doing a project in Mexico City, at Jumex, the museum there, Jumex Museum. It's this space, kind of a glass space, kind of a difficult space to show in, because there's, I think, three walls of glass. It's at this second level of the museum, and it looks over on a square. I just had this idea to turn this space into a timeshare. I was thinking about timeshares for Mike, in terms of a point in his life—I guess it's another phase of retirement, where you actually start thinking about what are you going to do. You're retired, and now you've got some extra time. Let's have a little fun leisure activity, maybe it could be organized, or maybe there's some sort of structure in it that guarantees you to have some of that fun or enjoyment. The timeshare idea came up when I was—I'm doing a show in Boca Raton, which is perfect. They wanted to maybe see if they could get funding for me to do a project down there, so I came up with this timeshare idea. [00:06:05] We didn't get the money, but I started to get the idea. One thing—it's interesting. Before, when I was younger and I'd make proposals, I would get upset. I'd make a proposal and I didn't get funding, it would sort of hold me up. Now, after years of doing this for a while, I realize I could take those ideas and use them again, and develop them, whether if I'm applying for a sabbatical, or applying for a project, or maybe I could do it some other place, or a change. So in one way, I was saying, I hope that I can adapt more. I'm adaptable in certain ways, and my work changes. It does kind of open up. With the timeshare, I'm giving Mike a timeshare, and I'm turning this space into the idea of it becoming a timeshare. At the same time that I'm turning the timeshare, I'm also trying to deal with the idea of the absurdity of the space, this big, open space, and having the idea of a kind of fancy lifestyle in this space. So the absurdity of a lone bedroom set in this vast space. And also putting it in an area that's being—it's going through major gentrification and development. It's also during a time when US-Mexican relations are kind of at a strange place. At a strange place because of—I don't know if it's because of our president, but he does add to a certain tension in the air. When I was thinking about timeshare and retirement, I got to thinking about this older project I did—I think maybe I mentioned earlier—ITEA, International Trade Enrichment Association, which I thought it seemed like something to throw into the mix with the timeshare, the idea of trade, and this naive approach to trade, with the timeshare. [00:08:01] So right now, with the timeshare, I'm dealing with some formal issues. I'm going to have the trade show booth that I had redesigned in the '90s, and then two other pieces. So I don't know if they're going to resemble a trade show and look collapsable and temporary, like this is something they set up as an office. Or is it going to look like they're going to be three-dimensional kind of—like one of the museum, and one of another timeshare in San Miguel de Allende? I've got a lot of information. I just don't know how to present it, in which order. I'm going to do a brochure. A lot of the languages would be there. I'm just dealing with that. I flood pretty easily, so organizing this information kind of makes me nuts. So I'll feel much better when I get that fitted together. It's a lot better than what it was, I feel, but I just want to get it concise.

LIZA ZAPOL: Just talking to you as you are in the process of putting the pieces together, it sounds like a lot of it is collaborative. Finding the person who's going to design the brochure, or working with the person who's going to be composing the sound for the film—

MICHAEL SMITH: Right, or doing the video.

LIZA ZAPOL: Or doing the video.

MICHAEL SMITH: Right. So at the same time I'm trying to figure out the ideas, I've been working with Jill Pangallo, an artist here in New York, an artist/performer in New York, who helped me design the updated ITEA brochure. I'm talking to Kevin Bewersdorf, who did the music for the tattoo piece. And I'm talking to a production company in Mexico City that I haven't worked with, but we've already had a meeting. Trying to get a sense of what I want, because I don't always know, and they're trying to get a sense of that, too. Plus, working with a budget, and working with—then I'm also going to be talking to a woman who's worked in development and real estate and art, and she's going to help me figure out—in fact, that reminds me, I've got to call her. [00:10:09] I think she's doing a Ph.D. also in that. She's going to help me with pie charts. So they'll look very official. I'm organizing a steak dinner, which is another thing around trade. I thought, okay, Trump, a steak dinner. I think that makes sense. So these kind of markers that hopefully fit together.

LIZA ZAPOL: When I visited your studio earlier this summer, you were sketching. You were

drawing.

MICHAEL SMITH: Coloring.

LIZA ZAPOL: Coloring. Was that around this work, or was it parallel, something else?

MICHAEL SMITH: Both. Mostly the coloring was over older work. I'd be coloring ideas that I put down, or sketches, and I was coloring them in. I think I may have mentioned to you then that that's probably my happiest moment in the process.

LIZA ZAPOL: Is—

MICHAEL SMITH: Doing those drawings. It's free associating. Then there's a certain kind of—it's like when I would do a line, "I will not talk in class," over and over again. There was a certain kind of comfort in that. It's like filling in a circle with color.

LIZA ZAPOL: Allows your brain to—

MICHAEL SMITH: Just—who knows. Go into the zone. Empty zone. I look out the window a lot. It's like lolling in bed, looking out the window, looking at the ceiling.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's interesting. We were talking before that you are not sure about, in your own life, what happens in the future, in terms of retirement or whatever, but you're giving Mike a retirement space.

MICHAEL SMITH: Huh. Thank you for putting in that way. [00:12:00] Am I being generous by giving him that?

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] Yeah, right.

MICHAEL SMITH: Thank you. I didn't know if I was being—I'd like to think about it that way. Thank you.

LIZA ZAPOL: You're treating him well, but you're not sure what you either want or have for yourself.

MICHAEL SMITH: Good point.

LIZA ZAPOL: I think this question—you mentioned off the record dealing with Mike and aging. There's some tension there as well, as this is parallel in your own life. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MICHAEL SMITH: Tension? I don't know if it—

LIZA ZAPOL: You said frightening.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah, okay. I want to bring it down, tone it down, lower the volume on that. Frightening only because it's more or less avoidance, like thinking about it. So maybe frightening is people—why is it frightening? Maybe I'll have to talk about that. Frightening. Yeah, it's something I'm surprised I haven't thought about, in a way. I have. I mean, your job is leading towards a certain thing, or even they've thought about it, and they give you a retirement plan. I don't know if I can afford to retire on it, but they think about those things, and people think about those things, and all the time—I didn't have a full-time job until I was 50. That was my first full-time. I guess I'm a little naive, or just unwilling to accept certain things—I don't know, whatever.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you've created this space where, in parallel, you're exploring those ideas for your character.

MICHAEL SMITH: I have. So it is kind of parallel, yeah. I don't know how much—I like to think that those are not—this is not the same space that I occupy, but that's the scary part, because some of them, I think, are the same space, which I refuse to acknowledge. [00:14:06] So yes, it is frightening. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: In what ways, then, might Mike be you?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, with the theme of aging that I'm in, he's very much me. In terms of

his outlook, he's probably a little more—maybe doesn't appear that way, but I like to think of him as more optimistic. Although I have to admit, looking at some of my expressions, doesn't seem like he is. It seems a little more depressive. I think he seems more game than me. Seems more open for experience than I am. Although I try to be open. I guess I don't think of him as very crafty. I think of myself a little shrewder, maybe, having more of a take. Also, a remove from stuff. I don't think I'm as naive as him. I'm a little more skeptical than him. That's what it is. I'm a fairly skeptical person. I said judgy, but I'm skeptical. It takes me a while to buy into stuff. Then, sometimes, I'm like a sheep. There's a certain kind of play there.

LIZA ZAPOL: You talked about whether you're judge. [00:16:05] That was off the record. Where you might position yourself outside. That's in relationship to what you were just saying, your skepticism. Seeing yourself as an outsider.

I had this question about whether you associate yourself with a particular movement or style? How you might describe yourself as an artist.

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't think of myself within a particular style, but people have other ideas, and I seem to fit into certain group shows. Every so often, there will be a humor resurgence or interest, and I'll often be in those humor shows. Or when it has to do with media or television, I get, sometimes, thrown in there. What was the question again?

LIZA ZAPOL: In terms of groups, whether you associate yourself with a particular movement or style? I'm thinking also, I had mentioned a couple of artists before we spoke, and you said, "Oh, the Pictures Generation artists," including yourself, I think, in that.

MICHAEL SMITH: Again, I was sort of ignorant about—but I shared certain strategies and certain interests, and socially I was aligned with them at certain times. Yeah, that would be one. There was a certain kind of—I guess you could look at me as part of a certain performance community. [00:18:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: You mentioned Roselee Goldberg describing performance art. Can you—yeah.

MICHAEL SMITH: I think in her book, she talks about performance art as being kind of reactive. And I am—that sort of describes me, as a person and as an artist. I react to situations, and my work comes out of response to things, whether it's something going on in the world or a piece of junk I find on the street. There's a reaction to that, and it's manifest in various ways, whether it's manifest in just a notation, or maybe a movement, or a theme, or an idea for a generated show. I have a funny—not funny, but there's a blend, or a combination, of my work is very visual, but it's also—I deal with many things. Movement, visual, certain tone or inflection. I don't know, narrative. I deal with narrative, there are certain things that come with that.

LIZA ZAPOL: You talked about being sort of in and out in the art world. What do you mean when you say that?

MICHAEL SMITH: I'm not always within one style. You said who do I align myself—I've done many different things, and I have also floated between many communities, whether the video community and the performance community. Now they think of these artists that do all different things, but at various times in my career, I've been in these communities, or stepped in and stepped out, depending on what the opportunity, or who I'm dating, or who I know, I'm friendly with, or who I'm hanging around, or what I'm looking at. [00:20:01] So I've been in various communities. I forgot the question again.

LIZA ZAPOL: Being sort of in and out of—

MICHAEL SMITH: In and out, I am in and out. I'm also in and out of how to—sometimes when I'm too in it, I get a little worried about that. I want to step out. I don't know. Being in it—if you can ride a wave, it's fun, or if you can feel part of a community, that's great. It's nice. Maybe I want too much. I'm not sure. You put yourself out when you feel like it's not responding to you or whatever. That's where that—you mentioned the word "judgy." Maybe I go out of it when I—I put myself out of it when I really want to be in, and so I became a little judgmental of what's going on or something.

LIZA ZAPOL: You talked about how video artists in particular have been shown or exhibited over time. That was off the record, so I wondered if you could say that again, and kind of—

MICHAEL SMITH: I was mentioning I was in a show recently at the Hirshhorn called *Brand New*, I think. It was kind of great, because they showed all the video artists on separate monitors. So everybody was given a space in the museum. Probably an equal space in the catalog, a page in the catalog, a space in the museum. Whereas before, like in the '80s, early '80s, at least when I was showing video, they'd have video festivals. [00:22:00] Then, it was—video festivals have their own kind of—they didn't have a hierarchy, because it was about video. But a lot of museum shows, video would be displayed in the catalog like it was displayed in the museum, in reels of various works. A lot of times, during the Biennial, they show video artists, they want to include it. They have it—like I mentioned, it's like public access—at various times during the day when you can't see it, but your name is in the program and you're in the biennial. It was kind of being relegated to a second-class status and stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: Similarly, it's—

MICHAEL SMITH: They're changing it now. It's changed. It's gotten better. But they still don't know how to deal with all that content.

LIZA ZAPOL: What's your feeling about the positionality of performance art as well, in and out of gallery and museum spaces? It seems like it's come back again. Would you—

MICHAEL SMITH: It's very popular. I think it also creates a certain kind of activity, or it makes it look like there's activity and interest. I think it's in because it brings bodies in, and interest, like press and education programs, and there's money for it. I think it's great. It creates a more social, public space for that. There's something to see other than what's there. A lot of times, that leads into other work, whether it's maybe the context of a gallery. Maybe the artists develop certain 2D works, or sculptural work, into performance. They feed off of one another. Because a lot of the education isn't like that. It sort of promotes that. So people can actually sort of show what they're thinking about, or their process. [00:24:00] I worry sometimes, just judging for myself, and I think about it with my students, what do you do with this performance stuff? After a certain point, what do you do with this performance stuff? Sometimes I like to see tangible results, or—not tangible, but where do you—some people have more idealistic about—oh, they just want it to be about the live experience. They don't want it to be tape. But what do you do when you do the live experience and it's 10 years later? Do you just do it by oral—by photograph and have it, or do you do it by word of mouth and think that that's going to—I mean, I don't know. Sometimes I'm—how do I—sometimes I wonder, have I stopped performing because I don't know what I get back from it? Or am I going to get something back, or is there something I'm going to get to do to generate more work and ideas?

LIZA ZAPOL: In terms of documentation or a product?

MICHAEL SMITH: A product, or something to show, or even a direct—now I'm thinking—I don't even know if I care, but I think—because performance is how I generated my work, and it's generated other stuff. I thought, maybe this is a way to generate some new things, is just go back to my old process, perform, do something that I sometimes don't like doing, that creates real headaches and fatigue, and challenges my ability to be disciplined, and go in front of an audience. But maybe it will be a good thing to push it in a new place or a different place, or just push it forward.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's interesting. It sounds like an answer in and of itself.

MICHAEL SMITH: I pose that to myself. [00:26:00] I talked to Tim Griffin about doing a show at The Kitchen, and I thought, do I really need this? I had some ideas. I thought, no, it could be a good idea. It could be fun. I think I mentioned to you about going to Holland to take that class.

LIZA ZAPOL: I don't remember.

MICHAEL SMITH: Oh, a friend of mine sent it to me, or I saw it in the *Times*, about a class for older people to learn how to fall. I wanted to do a choreographed piece with learning how to fall, with work again with older people. But have it—so do some sort of—maybe like a dance piece, performance piece. So I would like to combine that with some sort of projection and timeline, somehow. Maybe the baby will enter that. I don't know. It seems like the baby should be in that. But I'm not sure. So I have an idea, a rough, rough idea, where to start, and where would it go.

LIZA ZAPOL: It sounds like there's room for play in there.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. I hope so. Play, yeah. Or leeway.

LIZA ZAPOL: We haven't talked too much about any significant relationships with dealers or curators. They've come in a little bit in here. If there's any—

MICHAEL SMITH: Dealers—I've gone in and out of some relationships with dealers. I worked with Castelli. When I was at Castelli, I worked a lot with—I think Toiny Castelli took a liking to me. I was brought to Castelli first by Marvin Heiferman, who ran the photography uptown at the Castelli Graphics. Then Toiny, Leo's wife, took a shining—she liked me. I performed there, and I think she liked the performance up there. She was talking about "très drôle" or something. She really found it funny. [00:27:59] Then they offered me—I did some photos, and then I did that installation up there, and then I also got—I became friendly and also worked with their tapes and films, with Patty Brundrage, and she was great. I'm still friendly with Patty. Toiny is no longer alive. But with Patty and—so they handled my tapes and films, and then they stopped doing that. But she was very supportive. Then, after Castelli, I think I didn't really show in galleries much for a while after that. Then, I think the next thing I did with galleries, I think, was Lauren Wittels, who'd had her gallery, and she presented *MUSCO*, which was a real boost at that time. I mean, I showed at—I would be in a group show here and there, but I didn't have a relationship, and really couldn't establish a relationship with Lauren, because she closed not too long after that. But she did invest in that piece, or present the piece, and that was a real boost for me then. Then I started working with Christine Burgin, and Christine was fantastic. I love Christine. She's Bill's wife. She sort of manages Bill's career, but she also had a really interesting gallery for a number of years in the '80s and the '90s, and had a really interesting group of artists she worked with. Very smart, very funny, and totally—she's not cut out to being a dealer. I don't know how great of a dealer she was. Now she's in publishing. I did about three shows with her. She also has some of the best drawings I've done. Then, after that, I worked with Emi Fontana. I did a couple shows with Emi in Europe. Then I have a dealer in—I work with this guy who I've worked with for 20 years or so in London, Paul Hedge. Paul is a sweetheart, and I trust him implicit—very sweet. [00:30:01] He's doing quite well now and we're starting to pick up discussion again. I've been showing with him, but I think he's more focused on his artists now. He's got some directors working. He's doing quite well. I still work with him, and then I have a Dutch dealer, Ellen de Bruijne. I've worked with her for—I really like her. I don't know how she is for business. You know, how she is with business. But she's—I like her, and she's got a—it's an interesting gallery. I don't think it's easy to have a gallery in Amsterdam. Most of the people that are interested in the art, it's hard for them to—there's always something. I don't think anybody's perfect in a gallery. We still work with each other. We're still—in terms of like—I'm not a big seller. The fact that these people are showing me and dealing with me, it says I should be flattered and very happy. But you may want—I am, and I'm very happy, but sometimes you do, and then you want to be paid or whatever. And I work with Carol, Greene Naftali, and it's a very good gallery, and I think it brings a lot—I think it's added credibility to me. I think some people, a lot of people, in Europe look and they say, oh, that's—I think it ups my—like when I was showing with Castelli. I did that one large show. I'm going to do another show soon. I don't know, maybe a year or two. And curators. I've had various curators over the years. Some of the curators I was working with have since retired, or done other things, or some of them passed away.

LIZA ZAPOL: But really, just if there are any curators who you think helped you to shape or give ideas to your work, or maybe shifted your work in any way. [00:32:01]

MICHAEL SMITH: In that they've offered me opportunities?

LIZA ZAPOL: In opportunities, or even—yeah, or ideas, you know.

MICHAEL SMITH: In hindsight, there was one curator that made me crazy, but I really like him. I'd known him for years, and then we—he makes me nuts. He was doing theater direction. He was at the Tate. Chris Dercon. He was at the Tate. He wasn't a direct—was he a director? He had a high position. Then he went to a big theater, recently, in Berlin, and he was let go there. But he did a drawing show of mine. He was the first person to put a drawing show together of mine, in Belgium, like in '86, and it was really interesting. He did an interview with me, I know, around that time, and I wish I could redo it, because he asked me a bunch of questions that now I know the answer to. Like, in terms of how I think of parody or satire, and I just didn't quite understand it then. But over the years, I've tried to make

myself think more and I could answer it. I'd be curious to answer, because I don't think I answered them adequately.

LIZA ZAPOL: What question would you like to re-answer?

MICHAEL SMITH: All those things I deal with. I didn't want to think about satire, but I deal with a little satire, I deal with a little parody, I deal with appropriation. All these things. But I don't—and there's a balance to them. I also try to deal with a certain kind of, for lack of a better word, maybe compassion for something, sympathetic. A sympathetic quality in some of the work, or maybe an empathy about it. [00:34:02] I don't know if I brought that up or whatever. Then Jay Sanders. We're buddies. He's offered me opportunity. Even people I—now if I forget some—I hope I don't offend—you know. Yeah. It will come to me.

LIZA ZAPOL: I think we've talked about this a little bit, but how you define success.

MICHAEL SMITH: I think accomplishing something that you've set out to do, and maybe other people acknowledging that. And also acknowledging it yourself. I think success is having a certain kind of satisfaction or happiness from it. It has to do with life, too. But that becomes—that's a big one. As I mentioned earlier, I invoke that, "Where's the joy?" I want to put those together.

LIZA ZAPOL: One second while I think about how we follow up with that question. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't want to put a stop around anything. [00:36:05] Get too heavy. Yeah, what makes one happy? Get something back from the work. If you're giving it to other people, why don't you get something back, too?

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you take creative breaks? You talked about, when you're in a moment of creation, kind of looking out the window, getting ideas, but are there moments where you—how do you recharge?

MICHAEL SMITH: I don't know, call a friend. Maybe I'll go to a movie. I don't know. I need to ask myself that more.

LIZA ZAPOL: You were saying before it's a lot about the work.

MICHAEL SMITH: A lot about the work. Fortunately, with my work, sometimes recharging is—my work presents opportunities, travel. I get to see some different places. I'd like to maybe go to some places now, not necessarily around work.

LIZA ZAPOL: In terms of travel?

MICHAEL SMITH: Maybe, yeah. Maybe it would be good to fantasize more about what that could be. Sometimes I have ideas for things, and I've been putting them in the back burner maybe, and sometimes I—trying to get to them eventually. That will maybe recharge. Then usually something comes up. I get distracted, I get distracted easily. [00:38:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: What's something that's out there that you're working towards?

MICHAEL SMITH: I would like to—in terms of a project, not in terms of my life goals—but in a project, I would, at some point, try to do something with this idea of—take the timeshare into a real estate mode, and deal with that kind of—I'd like to situate into Chicago, where I grew up, where my father was in real estate, and situate it in terms of—not knowing how to deal with it, but—situating it in terms of race relations, and also ethics, and also just survival. Three of those things. And also in terms of a personal history and trying to understand that.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, that's interesting in terms of coming [full] circle with this interview as well. We began with talking about your dad and the neighborhood that you grew up in, the changing neighborhood, and his business as well.

MICHAEL SMITH: Funnily enough, with my father, I always thought of him as kind of a maniac. Or maybe I even mentioned it before, but he was very much in his work, like an artist. Although he had a home life and a family and a committed relationship with my mother, but he was off in that place where you couldn't break it. But he also—he allowed joy in his life in certain ways. He had a real sense of life. They had a good life, and they really enjoyed life, which is great.

LIZA ZAPOL: You mentioned that in terms of their relationship.

MICHAEL SMITH: That's nice. It was a good model. I learned later that that's—maybe I should think more about that model. [00:40:03]

LIZA ZAPOL: This is an interesting question. We're talking a little bit about how do you recharge, and things that you would like to do that aren't necessarily about work, but also, what do you dream about? What are some of the dreams that you are having right now?

MICHAEL SMITH: Actual dreams?

LIZA ZAPOL: Actual dreams. If you remember them.

MICHAEL SMITH: I remember one, but I don't know if I want to go into it.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] Okay, okay.

MICHAEL SMITH: I mean, it wasn't explicit or anything, but it was just very—I say I'm not going into it, and I'm starting to talk—it just had to do with an ex. Happening to notice, huh, they're on the same airplane. [Laughs.] But I don't dream a lot at all. Very infrequently. Or at least I don't remember the dreams, let's say.

LIZA ZAPOL: How would you describe yourself now? How would you describe yourself in terms of how you—your appearance, and the way you move through the world?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, I'm not sure. Maybe my perception of myself in relationship to how others perceive me. I was talking about myself as a garden gnome the other day. So my perception may not be that great. [Laughs.] [00:42:02] But garden gnomes have some color, and they reflect light. Sometimes they hold a globe. So I've always had a strange sense of myself. I see my friends and they say, "You're looking good. You're looking fit." And I'd say, "Not really." But they say that. Physically, I'm aware of changes, very much so. More so recently is that I am aware of a certain kind of place in terms of my teaching. At a certain place within the faculty and students. There was a nickname they gave me, is Uncle Grandpa. I don't think of myself—you think of yourself as fairly spry. But when they were looking at me trying to get—look at my phone—sometimes they'll just push me away from the computer and grab the phone out of my hand, and just do it because they don't want to watch me sometimes navig—or just focus on that. I find that very funny.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you mean, they don't want to watch you doing that?

MICHAEL SMITH: Whether or not—I don't have my glasses on, or the telescoping, or they don't want to—because I'm trying to find a site on the internet, and they'll go, "Touch up there. Go backwards. Touch that key." And then all of a sudden, next thing I know, someone's pushing me away and they just take over. And that's all I want to begin with. Or I'll just say, "Could you"—and they say, "Yeah." [They laugh.] "Juan, could you"—"Yeah. Yeah, all right."[00:43:49] So I'm aware of a certain—I don't try to fake it anymore there. I find it more difficult to hide. I like to hide at work. I find it more difficult. Maybe I can—which implies I try to make my—you know. I don't shirk responsibility, but I try to hide sometimes. How did I get there?

LIZA ZAPOL: How do you see yourself? What is your—

MICHAEL SMITH: Sometimes I'm surprised at—there was a certain point. Oftentimes, I'm given a certain kind of respect for what I do, and I'm surprised by that. And I'm surprised that some people know my work. I am surprised. And other times—I've also accepted when I'm meeting—you meet artists, young artists, and they have no clue who you are. I thought, I don't care. Okay. I'll listen to them, and I'll try to be polite and listen. Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you have a sense of an audience now when you make your work?

MICHAEL SMITH: Not really. I have some friends of mine telling me, and then they'll—a lot of times, I feel they're blowing smoke up my ass. They'll say, "So-and-so loved it." I say, "Oh, really? Great." [Laughs.] Or, "Oh, yeah, blah, blah." But then, occasionally, you get a fan. Someone will say, "I like the work," and I'm thinking, what do they see in it? What do they know? Then I realize, maybe I shouldn't question it. I just say thank you.

LIZA ZAPOL: What kind of feedback is helpful to you?

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, probably the feedback that's really helpful for me, I have to sit down and take it in slowly, and measured. [00:46:17] Probably feedback that's most helpful for me is when I'm ready to take it, when I'm at that stage. I think I tend to be kind of annoying to my friends sometimes. I ask a lot of questions or interrupt. I think I'm trying to listen more. I'm not a really good listener, so I'm trying to do that and take that in, and figure out—instead of getting—I'm trying to be less defensive about that. So I'm trying to get the feedback. Also, I'm realizing, I, with this project, now I have a better sense of what it is. A lot of times, it will get—people will say—or, "I'm doing this," and they'll say, "That sounds great." I say, "Well," and they say, "What's the matter?" I say, "I'm not totally in it." A lot of time, I really need to be in something or know what I'm doing. Like I said, I flood very quickly, or get overwhelmed. I wish I could experience that less.

LIZA ZAPOL: It sounds like you respond mostly to your own sense of what needs to come next than anything else.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Then I would actually really like—I like it when someone tells me. That would be good next, so I could either say, "Good idea" or "I don't"—I mean, I don't really say, "I don't like that idea." I'll just go, "Oh, okay." And ignore it or whatever. Or, "Fuck you." [They laugh.] I don't know. I'm not quite clear.

LIZA ZAPOL: I think we're coming towards the end of this interview. [00:48:00] Here I am. We're sitting in front of lots of—

MICHAEL SMITH: —boxes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —boxes of your work that's really well-labeled, from this journey that actually you've narrated through as well. There's a box here that says "Talent Show." There's—what else?—"Doug and Mike," and so on. It sounds like you've been going through—it looks like you've been going through, or maybe have consistently gone through, your work, your archive. I'm curious about what a document is from your work, and how you use these, and what you would like to use them for.

MICHAEL SMITH: What I would like to use them for? I don't know. At a certain point, I'd like to have them go away. I'd like to—less stuff in my life. I'm not an acquisitive guy, but I have been very good about saving a lot of this stuff. The order of this, I have to admit—not have to admit. I want to credit Kate, who used to work for me, Kate Scherer, who's now at MoMA doing project managing. She was a little OCD with this stuff. It made me a little crazy, but I'm happy it's done. What's great about these is that I can kind of—after a little bit of going through, if I'm thinking about something or trying to get—I mentioned I worked on the box set. Certain details are going back, trying to recollect certain things that happened. [00:50:00] I can go back to a datebook or something and maybe think about some sort of order or trajectory that I was going through. A lot of time—I mentioned something—I didn't look, but I mentioned something about looking for drawings or misspellings. A lot of times, I'll come across correspondence or something from places that I've kept that are kind of great. Rejection letters, and letters from certain people. I have a couple letters from Brian O'Doherty when he was at the NEA. It was very cool, I mentioned that when you visited the first time. Just letters from my friends or my brother. They're kind of interesting. It allows me, when I go through and I get distracted, I can go down memory lane. Maybe it doesn't—and then I found that, through accumulation, as I get them together and they—there's a certain satisfaction. It makes sense as I save them, in whole, because I've gotten a picture of myself, and I've done a fairly consistent job of it. I can hand it over to someone, or someone could take it and do something. Maybe the work will live on, or something of it will live on. Which I didn't even think about. I guess this is the first time I've ever voiced that. I guess some of that, I want that to continue. I don't want it to be that nightmare of seeing it out on the sidewalk. So I figured, okay, maybe there's a few people that would be interested, so preserve that. I don't know. Some of it's kind of interesting.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, and in terms of thinking about preserving—

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LIZA ZAPOL: —or your archive, I'm curious how you would like your art to be viewed in the future. That's complicated. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. Well, it depends on what it is. I would like it that maybe some of those installations are recreated. I mean, it's funny about—people do performance, and they

do these recreations of performance, but I've documented them. I've never had that opportunity, and I don't know how I feel about it. I really like the way Joan Jonas has done those, and they're very fresh, and it's also sort of acknowledging where she is, but also bringing this idea of youth and a fresh outlook and energy to it. Whereas there's other performers that do them and it seems just like vanity to me. I don't need to name any names. But reenacting certain performances. They should just stay where they are, I think. There's a certain kind of—they always talk about being in the moment, or being at a certain place. I think maybe they should stay where they are. Because they lose, for lack of a better word, charm, or just punch or something. So I don't know how—I actually thought about that, Would I want to do those kind of performances? But I think a lot of it can be tied up to me physically, the timing and everything. I don't even know if I want to witness—or if I want to—maybe I wouldn't have to. I don't really work with—I had scripts. I don't know. So how would I like it to be displayed? They're videos. Maybe they'll just live on the internet. Maybe it would be nice, maybe, if they generated a little money. I don't know. It will be interesting after this box set happens. That's a certain box of them, and I'll get a sense. You've looked at them. There's a couple DVDs in there, I wonder if I should have let go or something. [00:02:01] I'm sort of happy with five of the eight. But in terms of my whole—it's so odd. The work I've done, it's sort of interesting. Some of my fav—I really like some of—like the rec room piece, to see how it's evolved, and you can see how I'm thinking. It's kind of painful at times, but then there's some good things about that. So maybe for some sort of academic or something, or maybe even for some artists. Then there's the treat of the puppet shows. There's a variety—it's funny. I always think of myself not having a range, but there's a strange breadth of work there. Odd—I mean, it's—I don't know how people do it, because there's a lot of various things that I do. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, and I think we've covered a lot of that in these conversations, from the early sketches, and your working with comedy and these collages, to finding your characters, and then various iterations of Mike, both polished and commercial, and less so, but always reactive, as you've talked about. And then Ikki as well. It's really been a pleasure to go through that journey with you—

MICHAEL SMITH: Well, thank you.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and to really learn about your work. So thank you.

MICHAEL SMITH: Thank you.

LIZA ZAPOL: And is there anything that I haven't asked you about today, and two days ago, that you wanted to talk about, or would like to talk about?

MICHAEL SMITH: Not that I can think of offhand. May I get back to you if I do?

LIZA ZAPOL: Sure.

MICHAEL SMITH: Or if you think of something, you can—and I can even write it to you or something. [00:04:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: Sure.

MICHAEL SMITH: No, not that I can think of. In a way, it's kind of exhausting to go through that. Your stamina is very good. It's—yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: I think we've really time-traveled.

MICHAEL SMITH: It's kind of funny and interesting to do it here, too, within this context, because a lot of it's here. Bits of it. Just the tip of the—certain things.

LIZA ZAPOL: In your studio, yeah, where there's a wall full of your documentation in these plastic boxes, and—

MICHAEL SMITH: Drawings.

LIZA ZAPOL: —actually, it goes all the way around. And drawings, and your working space. So yeah, it's sort of coexisting in this space, I guess. One question that sometimes we ask at the beginning of interviews, but maybe this is something to end with, is who's in the room with us? Sometimes there are ghosts who are kind of in the—who are witnesses to some of

the stories. I wonder if there are any people, both living or not, who might be in the room with us as we've been talking together.

MICHAEL SMITH: Um. Probably the people I talked about. I wish I was clearer about some of the—like the people I've worked with professionally and talked to, about that. I don't know if—there was John—I didn't mention John Hanhardt. [00:06:00] I mentioned him briefly. Other people. Just people who I've mentioned, like friends. They're important. They've been very—people I mentioned. They're the people here. It's funny, the people I've shown the work to and stuff—because sometimes I go around with my dog and pony show, or I do a lecture, so it's kind of a block of people, just like some of the students. Although some of the students I've become friends with, so they become part of this. But it's—I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: You're saying that sometimes your audience becomes a block of people, but—

MICHAEL SMITH: It's sort of like I—

LIZA ZAPOL: —indistinguishable in a sense. But then sometimes there are specific people who come forward.

MICHAEL SMITH: Yeah. No, it's like—no, it's people I mentioned. Family and stuff. Family, friends. A couple—I didn't really talk about my teachers or that, but—yeah. We covered it, I think.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay. Thank you.

MICHAEL SMITH: You're welcome. Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]