



Smith's work and its influences, viewing it from a vantage of body politics and/or feminism alone drastically limits the scope of her work, obscuring the nuanced findings that can be realized when viewing such issues and their dynamic intersections within a framework of spiritual inquiry.

Furthermore, this examination of the spiritual significance of Smith's art addresses a significant lacuna in American art scholarship, as scholars recognize the need for further study in the field of the visual culture of American religions. While Smith's work has caught the attention of a wide and far-reaching audience of art critics and scholars, few have thoroughly examined its spiritual dimensions, nor does the literature seriously consider how Smith's work constitutes American religious practice and experience. In articulating the interrelations between a selection of works from Smith's oeuvre and a series of historical and ideological frames, all of which negotiate the recent burgeoning of interest in contemporary art and religion in America and the ensuing debate over art's ownership and public funding, this study develops a fuller, more critical, and more theoretically-driven account of Smith's art production than has previously been assessed.

MAKING GOD: INCARNATION AND SOMATIC PIETY  
IN THE ART OF KIKI SMITH

by

Margaret Randolph Wilkerson

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2006

Advisory Committee:

Professor Emerita Josephine Withers, Chair/Advisor  
Assistant Professor Renée Ater  
Professor Sally M. Promey  
Professor Deborah Rosenfelt  
Assistant Professor Joshua Shannon

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For Ray,  
who introduced me to art history and who has supported and believed in me  
every step of the way.

And for my parents,  
Diane Taylor Wilkerson and the late Earl Randolph Wilkerson, Jr.,  
whose love, guidance, and passion for knowledge I carry with me always.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Department of Art History and Archaeology of the University of Maryland at College Park for the generous support that made this dissertation possible. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to Kiki Smith, whose kind acceptance of my requests for interviews and whose openness and generosity with her time and her insights were invaluable components of this project. I wish to warmly thank my advisor, Josephine Withers, whose professional and moral support throughout my years as a Ph.D. student have encouraged and sustained me and whose model as a scholar and mentor will continue to inspire me throughout my career. I am especially grateful for the fact that Dr. Withers saw me through to the end, even after retiring from the department. Although I am proud to say that I am her last official advisee in the Department of Art History, I am certainly not her last student, as she continues to coach and guide others in her new life with her keen insight and heartening wit. I am also grateful to Sally Promey, whose intellect and scholarship have motivated my development as a scholar in the field of the visual culture of American religions. I owe a great deal of the inspiration for this project to her work, which caught my attention during her panel *Religion and American Art History* at the 2002 College Art Association Annual Conference. I also thank Erika Doss, who, as a speaker on this panel, discussed the importance of Kiki Smith's work in re-thinking religion in twentieth-century American art. I am grateful for Dr. Doss's attention to my project. Her careful reading of chapter one was especially generous, and although she was unable to serve on my committee due to scheduling conflicts, I consider her scholarship and insight integral to my project. Many others

in the field of art and art history have provided me with professional and moral support along the way. I wish to thank Leonard Folgarait, my undergraduate and Master's Thesis advisor at Vanderbilt University, who ignited and nurtured my fascination for art and for learning and my colleagues at Vanderbilt University, the University of Maryland at College Park, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, College Art Association, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all of whom contributed to my development as an art historian and to my perseverance with this project. A special, heartfelt thanks goes to Kim Dennis, my longtime friend and colleague, whose sharp intellect, undying work ethic, "hawkeye" editing skills, and treasured friendship have motivated and sustained me. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my numerous friends without whose encouragement and gentle prodding this project may never have come to fruition, namely Adelaide Palermo, Lisa Mayer, Roshma Azeem, Rebecca Wayland, and Susan Durham. My mom has supported me in this project in every possible way from the very beginning, and I am exceptionally grateful not only for our many hours of enlightening conversation about religion, art history, and feminism but also for her unconditional love and devotion as a friend and mother. I also warmly acknowledge the wholehearted support of my sisters, Beth and Claire and my family-in-law, Loretta, Daddy Ray, Janet, and Jennifer. Finally, for his steadfast encouragement and patience throughout this entire process, I thank my husband Ray. I am eternally grateful to him for his devotion to me and to my finishing my degree. This project was happily interrupted by the birth of our daughter, Lucy Wilkerson Samuels, and it is to her that I last of all bestow my utmost



love and gratitude. I look forward to sharing with her my passion for art and learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

“What we believe fashions us. At the same time, myths, icons are alive because we internalize and remake them. In this sense, we make God.”<sup>1</sup>

Prevailing attitudes in the United States assume that religion and avant-garde art are by definition adversaries, when, in fact, religion has played and continues to play a significant role in the development of contemporary artistic imaginations. While a great deal of contemporary artworks constitute traditional, uncomplicated expressions of religious piety, others, however, in increasing numbers, brazenly challenge the contradictory messages and growing levels of social intolerance widely sanctioned by various religious establishments. It is no surprise that much of this art also processes and reconstitutes the deeply ambivalent and complex attitudes many have toward their religious roots. As such, avant-garde art that rethinks and reshapes religion has not gone without controversy in the United States. This dissertation takes as its point of departure the critical uproar over one particular work of art that embodied, and continues to embody, such ambivalent and unorthodox attitudes toward religion and another artist’s response to it.

Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) (fig. 1.1), exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (1999), was denigrated by scores of Catholic conservatives as “sick,” “blasphemous,” and a disgrace to the Virgin Mary because of its allegedly irreverent use of elephant dung and inclusion of pornographic imagery. Kiki Smith publicly defended the merit of the work, arguing for an acceptance of both its sacred and



profane elements and of its candid interrogation of the highly constructed and speculative nature of representations of holy figures such as the Virgin Mary.

A self-ascribed “idol-worshiper,” Smith claims that all of her work, whether overtly pious or not, is “religious.” A note about word usage: while Smith understands that “religion” is most commonly distinguished from “spirituality” insofar as religion tends to refer to public, institutionalized, and doctrinal creeds of faith while spirituality suggests a more individual, personal, and diffuse belief in the meaning of life, which may or may not ascribe to any particular dogma, she tends to use the terms interchangeably.<sup>2</sup> For the specific purposes of this dissertation, I maintain a distinction between the two terms, using the above framework, which posits spirituality as the broader of the two, encompassing religion as one of its many and varied dimensions. I use “spiritual” not only to refer to a kind of faith which may or may not be “religious” but also to describe that which is, literally, “of the spirit,” immaterial, or incorporeal.

Born and raised a Catholic, but no longer practicing, Smith values the sensual and corporeal imaging of spiritual conditions, and her myriad assessments of the human form affirm her commitment to expressing the sacred world through physical means. She notes, “I was very influenced by the lives of saints when I was a kid—you have a body with attributes and artifacts evoked by a sort of magic. Catholicism has these ideas of the host, of eating the body, drinking the body, ingesting a soul or spirit; and then of the reliquary, like a chop shop of bodies. Catholicism is always involved in physical manifestation of psychical conditions, always taking inanimate objects and attributing meaning to them. In that way it’s compatible with art.”<sup>3</sup>

However, while embracing Catholicism's incarnational imagination, as particularly manifest in medieval art, Smith also disputes the present-day Church's marked opposition to art that mingles the sacred and profane. She finds Catholicism's ultimate resistance to corporeal autonomy and sexual expression, particularly where the Virgin Mary and all women's bodies are concerned, contradictory and hypocritical.<sup>4</sup> Despite its "obsession with all things physical," Smith argues, Catholicism ultimately advocates the separation of sex from the divine, and because of this, she has also pronounced it a "body-hating cult" that "hates things that are physical."<sup>5</sup>

Smith is joined by a number of contemporary artists, including Ofili, who, under the sway of their Catholic upbringing in one way or another, understandably use the image of the body as a metaphor for larger truths and a conduit for spiritual transcendence. They possess what has been called an "incarnational creative consciousness" that operates by thinking through, rather than against, the body.<sup>6</sup>

"Making God" examines the ways in which the art of Kiki Smith implements traditional Catholic material culture and ritual through its propensity, in both subject and materiality, to incarnate spiritual ideas in physical form and encourage somatic responses to it. Drawing on David Morgan's phrase "visual piety," the title of his 1998 book which describes ways in which "religion happens visually" in American culture, I propose the term "somatic piety," asking how religion happens corporeally. In other words, what is the role of the body in the construction of spirituality? My analysis considers Kiki Smith's particular knack for channeling what she encounters in the world, including her thoughts and emotions, through the physical, relying

chiefly on the “things” she creates to corroborate that which would otherwise exist solely in the abstract. For Smith, objects are not merely neutral markers of their creator’s existence and artistic resolve; they are living and breathing bodies that respond to and affect the world around them. As she explains, “When you start making figures, you’re in a sense making effigies or you’re making bodies. You’re making, physically, bodies that spirits enter or occupy, or that have their own souls, presence, and physical space.”<sup>7</sup>

While making “bodies,” and in a sense making “God,” Smith must also constantly interrogate and negotiate the normative narratives that have thus far defined “religion” in terms that confuse and limit our understanding of our bodies, and particularly women’s bodies, as they relate to knowledge, subjectivity, and most important, spirituality. This dissertation, therefore, examines how Smith revels in, rejects, and remakes religion.

The majority of scholarship has examined Smith’s body-based works as emblems of our collective humanity, positioning them within the context of the heightening politicization of the American art scene during the late twentieth-century, when arguments over the body, its representation, and its ideological boundaries considerably dominated political, social, and cultural discourses. While critical to understanding Smith’s work and its influences, viewing it from a vantage of body politics and/or feminism alone drastically limits the scope of her work and obscures the nuanced findings that can be realized when viewing such issues and their dynamic intersections within a framework of spiritual inquiry. Although some critics and scholars have noted the spiritual and/or religious qualities of Smith’s art, some

acknowledging its general penchant for incorporating the spiritual world, others observing more specific references to Christianity and Catholic material culture, no one has explored these elements in depth or in such a way that understands them as part of an intimate alliance with her profound interest in the body.

Furthermore, as scholars recognize the need for further study in the field of the visual culture of American religions, this examination of the religious significance of Kiki Smith's art addresses a significant lacuna in American art scholarship. While Smith's work has caught the attention of a wide and far-reaching audience of art critics and scholars, embraced by feminists and advocates of body art alike, few have thoroughly examined the spiritual dimensions of it, nor has anyone seriously considered how her work constitutes American religious practice and experience. By examining Smith's work within a framework of spiritual inquiry particularly informed by her personal experiences with Catholicism, this study attempts to bring us closer to an understanding of how images and objects "embody, reveal, perform, and negotiate American theological interests," for it is, indeed, no accident that Smith chooses sacred subjects to examine larger issues she believes have been erased from society.<sup>8</sup> While the majority of Smith scholarship focuses on her body-based work exclusively within socio-political frameworks, particularly within contemporary theoretical contexts of feminism and bodily abjection, this study presents a more nuanced approach to Smith's work by placing spirituality at the center of inquiry.

## Chapter Outline

My initial chapter, “Religious Imagery and Ownership in Contemporary American Culture,” provides the cultural and political context within which I will examine Smith’s art and sets up the problem that her work, in part, ultimately challenges: the “iconophobia syndrome,” what many claim is founded on Puritanical aversions to the imaging of sacred subjects in profane contexts. Through an investigation of the firestorm of controversy that resulted from the inclusion of Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* in a 1999 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, an institution that receives city funding, as well an examination of several subsequent incidents of censorship of contemporary religious art in the United States, my analysis attempts to highlight and to question the widespread, culturally-imposed separation of spirituality and corporeality and sacred and profane elements in visual culture. Influenced by the work of art historians David Morgan and Sally Promey, this case study argues that, as evident in their ability to provoke outrage and censorship, “images matter.” They are not merely passive reflectors of history and ideas higher than or prior to their existence, they are active agents that “constitute religion,” arrange, and shape the very social fabrics from which they are made.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter two, “Physiological Fundamentalism: The Knowing Body,” examines Smith’s lifelong fascination with the clinical body and its socio-political implications as a primary means of assessing her motivation for materializing spiritual concepts. While the controversy surrounding The Brooklyn Museum of Art’s *Sensation* can be seen to have been fueled in part by the “iconophobia syndrome,” late twentieth-century America also experienced an onslaught of critical resistance to the body’s

representation in art, which can best be classified as a primary symptom of the “somatophobia syndrome,” the fear of the body and its visual expression as a fundamental form of human knowledge and experience in visual culture. Just as spirituality has been denied its place within the realm of the profane and within modernist and contemporary discourses in visual culture, the body, as Smith argues, has also suffered from unjust categorization as culture’s inferior “other.”

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Smith's work, this chapter also analyzes her strategic use of materials as a means of articulating the physical thrust of her artistic production, an integral component of her work that has not yet been adequately investigated. Together with subject matter, the materials Smith uses are fundamental to forming what she believes to be the tangible and essential foundations of spirituality and daily life, thus affirming corporeal as well as intellectual modes of knowledge and belief. I examine Smith’s characteristic use of craft-based materials, such as tissue paper, lace, papier-mâché, cheesecloth, muslin, gauze, latex, string, felt, wax, glass, and human hair, as a means of consecrating the body and its instrumental role in materializing spiritual concepts and practices. Smith’s works, therefore, not only represent bodies, they literally produce them through their materials.

Chapter three, “The Spirit Incarnate,” investigates the body’s seamless transformation in Smith’s work from raw, base matter into sacred material for spiritual contemplation and piety, arguing that Smith’s work refuses to be just about the body and its clinical reality, its visceral materiality, or even its socio-political significance. For Smith, the body, in all its overt fleshiness, is paradoxically the

primary conduit of the spiritual world. Like her verbal language, her visual grammar slips effortlessly between the material and the immaterial as if they were one and the same and not the mutually exclusive realms they are often perceived to be. Here, I examine Smith's anatomically derived work as it is primarily informed by her Catholic upbringing and her steadfastness in manifesting spirituality through sensual and corporeal expression. I also investigate Smith's overt referencing of Catholic material culture and ritual, which have characteristically understood the body as the primary gateway to spirituality.

This chapter examines the ways in which the physiological fundamentalism of Smith's art, as shaped by its subject matter, materials, process, and its impact on the viewer, ultimately confirms its spiritual potency. It investigates the ways in which Catholicism has seized Smith's artistic imagination and fostered her fascination with the body as the primary conduit of the spiritual world. By examining the predominance of the body in Catholic doctrine and material culture, it will be shown that Catholicism is key to grasping the full impact of Smith's art.

In this chapter, I also maintain that a heightened awareness of the body, as stimulated primarily by the sense of touch, plays a central role in Smith's art, with her materials, particularly those craft-based, taking center stage. My analysis acknowledges that while crafts have long been recognized for their associations with fluidity, tactility, and malleability, only recently has their ability to cultivate the sense of touch and their compulsion to foreground the body as a legitimate site of perception and subjectivity been the source of scholarly inquiry. It is important to

talk about materials, process, and visceral perception in Smith's art because in so doing, the full spiritual impact of her work can be realized.

Finally, in chapter four, "Kiki Smith's 'Volatile Bodies: Feminism in the Flesh,'" I investigate the ways in which Smith's ambivalent attitudes about her religious roots inform her work, as seen primarily in her various incarnations of the Virgin Mary. Acknowledging that she often feels "owned" by Catholicism, and Judaeo-Christianity in general, Smith continually grapples with its complexities, searching not only for alternative means of expressing her religion but for a sign of what form her faith could take. Aware of the conflicting messages the Virgin Mary model conveys about ideals of purity, femininity, submission, compassion, and female strength, Smith recreates the stories and mythologies surrounding her in ways that address not only the constructed persona of the Virgin Mary but also the complexities of the female role in contemporary society. While Smith attests to the incarnate nature of the art-making process, that making art constitutes "making God," much of her strategy can best be described as a rescue and recovery effort in which she continually strives to "re-make God."

In this chapter, I also examine how Smith's desire to re-make God, emphasizing the Virgin Mary's flesh as a source of knowledge, power, and subjectivity, resonates with contemporary feminist theories of the body, particularly those put forth by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz in her 1993 book *Volatile Bodies*. Like Smith, Grosz seeks to sort out the complexities surrounding the feminist "problem of essentialism"—that foregrounding the body in feminist theories of subjectivity necessarily confines women to a pre-given, unchanging, and acultural



“essence.” Grosz maintains that corporeally-centered feminisms can propose the body, or rather bodies, as lived, or “volatile” — bodies that extend the frameworks that attempt to contain them, and bodies that are continually in flux and actively engaged with the production of their own knowledges as well as with those of society. Smiths’ art, I argue, theorizes as such in the three-dimensional, posing various ways to rupture binary oppositions and activate the already powerful connections between the body and mind. I argue that Smith’s “bodies” are “volatile bodies,” bodies that “ooze out all over,” confronting the very source of women’s cultural subjugation, which is one answer to Grosz’s call for a psychological and spiritual corporeality.

Thus, by reclaiming the body of the Virgin Mary through various reinterpretations of her as a corporeal figure of strength, Smith not only arrives at a contemporary understanding of what it means to emphasize the somatic qualities of piety, mending the rift between the sacred and the profane and the human and the divine, she underscores the importance of what it means for all women to think, know, and live through their bodies autonomously.

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<sup>1</sup>Kiki Smith, quoted in Kathy Acker, “The novelist Kathy Acker takes a guided tour of the strange but seductive world of the New York artist Kiki Smith,” *The Independent* (London: February 27, 1995): 20.

<sup>2</sup> When I asked her what she meant when she said that all her work was “religious,” she responded, “I don’t know. I’m just using words. I’m not using it necessarily in any real way. First, I’m using a lot of the forms that I know, from Christianity in particular, but also just forms of worship that I like. It’s a place to play in. I enjoy it. I enjoy manipulating those forms. And as a person I have a vested interest in what’s going on both spiritually and politically and all different ways they intrude and interfere, even save your life sometimes....” Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, quoted in David Frankel, “In Her Own Words: Interview with David Frankel,” in Helaine Posner, *Kiki Smith* (Boston, New York, Toronto, and London: Little Brown and Company/Bullfinch Press, 1998), 38.

<sup>4</sup> As Eleanor Heartney has observed, “In Catholicism, the female body is less a battlefield than a minefield, intimately bound up with doctrinal and political struggles over contraception, abortion, virginity, and the nature and origin of sin.” See Eleanor Heartney, “Thinking through the body:

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women artists and the Catholic imagination,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (Fall-Winter, 2003), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, quoted in Claudia Gould, Linda Shearer, and Marguerite Yourcenar, *Kiki Smith* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art; Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1992), 72.

<sup>6</sup> See Heartney, “Thinking through the body,” p. 3. Heartney also discusses this at greater length in her book *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004). As indicated by Heartney, the notion of a “Catholic imagination” is explored by sociologist Andrew Greeley in his book *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Greeley, himself a Catholic priest, borrows from a book by theologian David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), to maintain the existence of a distinctly Catholic consciousness absorbed in corporeality and sensuality.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, quoted in Gould, p. 67. Also, Michael Kimmelman has noted that to Smith, “art is closely akin to the human body, even art that doesn’t have anything to do with figuration, meaning that to her art is actually a body: it’s alive.” In Michael Kimmelman, “Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies,” *New York Times* (November 15, 1996): C1, 22.

<sup>8</sup> As Erika Doss posed in her paper for the 2002 CAA *Religion and American Art History* panel, “How do images and objects embody, reveal, perform, and negotiate American theological interests?” Erika Doss, “Rethinking Religion in Twentieth-Century American Art,” *Religion and American Art History* (Art Historians of American Art, College Art Association, February 22, 2002, Philadelphia). Panel chaired by Sally M. Promey.

<sup>9</sup> *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. David Morgan & Sally Promey (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001).

## CHAPTER ONE

### Religious Imagery and Ownership in Contemporary American Culture

“To be Catholic is, before all else, to be human.”<sup>10</sup>

On October 8, 1999, the New York City-based evening paper *Newsday* featured an editorial written by Kiki Smith in response to the firestorm of controversy that had recently erupted over the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. Before it even opened to the public on October 2, *Sensation*, which exhibited works from the collection of British contemporary art-tycoon and former advertising executive Charles Saatchi, provoked a windfall of noteworthy debate. At a press conference on September 22, New York’s mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, expressed his disgust over the art featured in the exhibition, targeting a multi-media work by the artist Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996). An eight-foot-high canvas resting on two grapefruit-sized orbs of resin-coated elephant dung, the work is a dizzying array of symbols past and present from sources sacred and profane. Draped in a signature Marian-blue robe, Ofili’s Mary is a stylized Black Madonna as an African Queen who levitates in a dazzling field of Byzantine-gold stippled with mosaic-like patches of glitter. A third ball of the elephant dung-resin mixture, decorated with concentric circles of tiny, pearl-like map pins, forms the bulbous shape of her right breast, offered as a token of divine charity. There is even a possible reference to the playfully eroticized, naked putti often found hovering around the Virgin Mary in traditional canvases. Ofili’s tiny winged cherubs, however, assume the form of butterfly-shaped, female buttocks and genitalia

excerpted from contemporary pornographic magazines. These disembodied fragments punctuate a sexual brazenness relayed in the Virgin's face, conveyed through her penetrating, knowing eyes and her exaggerated, swollen lips, which gently close to form a stylized, pudenda-shaped mouth. These attributes clearly frustrate the viewer's ability to read the image as a straightforward, conventional icon of the Holy Mother of God.

Relying only on a reproduction he saw in the exhibition catalogue and apparently basing his displeasure solely on Ofili's use of the elephant dung, Giuliani swiftly admonished the artist, a self-ascribed "churchgoing Catholic," as "blasphemous," and his work as "sick stuff," a desecration of the Catholic religion which sanctioned a widespread acceptance of "Catholic bashing." He added: "The idea of having so-called works of art in which people are throwing elephant dung at a picture of the Virgin Mary is sick."<sup>11</sup> Giuliani then threatened to withhold the \$7 million of funding the city gives the museum each year, fire the Board of Trustees, and evict the museum from its city-owned premises unless the show was cancelled.<sup>12</sup>

Giuliani's disapproval of both Ofili's painting and the Brooklyn Museum's endorsement of it was shared by a number of religious leaders and their politically conservative constituencies, including the now-deceased Archbishop of New York, John Cardinal O'Connor, the president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, William Donohue, and a seventy-two-year-old devout Catholic and regular protester outside abortion clinics, Dennis Heiner, who boldly countered Ofili's alleged dung-splattering technique with his own brand of iconoclasm: smearing white paint over the face and body of this "blasphemous" portrayal of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>13</sup>

On the other side of the critical debate stood artist Kiki Smith, born and raised, but no longer a practicing Catholic, who observed Giuliani's assaults on Chris Ofili and the Brooklyn Museum as equally "disgusting" and "offensive."<sup>14</sup> She wrote the *Newsday* editorial not only as a retort to Giuliani's reproachful conduct, but as a way to affirm her own reverence for the Virgin Mary as a continuing "presence" in both her work and personal life and to maintain her commitment to "honor[ing]" her in her art as well as in her daily life with prayer.<sup>15</sup> Entitled "When the Spiritual turns Physical," the essay explains that although Christianity is a "ritual-based religion that represents spiritual matters in a physical form," there is nonetheless a strong history of contention surrounding the Christian tenet of fusing "the spiritual and the physical within the same human vessel" and an equally treacherous terrain artists with a Catholic upbringing tread when grappling with the somatic dimensions of piety, especially where sexuality and bodily fluids are concerned.<sup>16</sup>

Smith's initial remarks address the constructed and highly speculative nature of representations of holy figures, particularly that of the Virgin Mary, whom Biblical history has all but obscured, leaving much fleshing out of her physical character and appearance to the public imagination:<sup>17</sup>

....Mayor Giuliani has an image of what the Virgin Mary looks like precisely because of [other] artists' work. The image he is perhaps most accustomed to was developed in late antiquity, through medieval and renaissance art. This image has its origins in earlier sculptural representations of the Egyptian goddess Isis holding her offspring Horus. This is only one of many representations of the Virgin that have emerged during specific historical periods and from different artists' interpretations of Christian beliefs....<sup>18</sup>

Smith includes Ofili's painting in this heterogeneous mix of representations, upholding his "Virgin Mary" as but one of many efforts throughout the history of art to capture her ever-elusive and ever-evolving physiognomy. She sees Ofili's account as an attempt to dispute the culturally-induced separation of those attributes of the Virgin Mary which are considered sacred from those that are deemed profane:

I have seen the 'Sensation' show, and I don't propose to know Ofili's intentions in his Virgin Mary painting. I can imagine that the combination of Mary's image with the dung (a generative material for fuel and fertilization), and the images of behinds (a possible sexual representation), could be seen as the Virgin's mending the traditional separation of her human attributes of sexuality and potential generative power with that which is sacred and divine. Maybe through Chris Ofili, this is her plea to us to honor all that is both sacred and human.<sup>19</sup>

This marriage of the spirit and body, of Mary's sacred *and* profane virtues is, in part, what Smith, too, is most interested in emphasizing in her own art. She contends that history has for too long denied the Virgin Mary, by her very attribution, her sexuality and her humanity, often portraying her as merely a conduit, a chaste vessel for Christ's entry into the earthly realm.<sup>20</sup> This is a central problem Smith investigates in her own work, in which she vehemently gives Mary back her flesh and her sexuality in an attempt to suture the larger ruptures that exist between our bodies and our minds.<sup>21</sup> Her work, as it will be discussed here, underscores the necessity for the physical and spiritual dimensions of our being to complement and engage, not contradict, one another. Her work poses the question: How can freeing the Virgin Mary from centuries of oppression as a woman stripped of her humanity be instrumental in freeing us as humans, who arguably live similarly fractured existences? As she once remarked in reference to this, "Our bodies have been broken

apart bit by bit and need a lot of healing; our whole society is fragmented. . . . Everything is split, and presented as dichotomies— male/female, body/mind— and those splits need mending.”<sup>22</sup> Through her art, Smith consciously seeks to mend those splits.

### **The Spirit Incarnate**

The corporeal facet of spirituality, particularly as it relates to the holy figures of the Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, has been addressed by a number of scholars who have examined artists’ references to the mystery of the Incarnation as a means of wresting religion from the domain of the purely transcendental, stressing a continuity between heavenly and earthly realms. For example, in his tour de force, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, art historian Leo Steinberg examines the theological significance of religious paintings that depict nude bodies or body parts. He maintains that late medieval and Renaissance artists repeatedly made Christ’s genitals the focal point of their images, not simply to convey naturalism, but to concede his humanity. Steinberg re-interprets these well-known and cherished artworks by placing them in the context of Renaissance theology and its emphasis on the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>23</sup> Such depictions of Christ, which typically show Mary, John, Anne, and other Saints uncovering, admiring, gesturing to, or even fondling the Christ child’s penis, ensure his fleshly presence on earth as the like-bodied and therefore accessible and imitable ally of all human beings.<sup>24</sup>

Margaret Miles has also observed examples of art that commingle the sacred and the human. In her essay “The Virgin’s One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture,” Miles examines the unique phenomenon in fourteenth-century Tuscan paintings in which the Virgin Mary is repeatedly depicted with one breast exposed, usually nursing or preparing to nurse the infant Christ.<sup>25</sup> Miles explores the cultural context of fourteenth-century Tuscany as a means of understanding possible reasons for the proliferation and widespread acceptance of these kinds of images and argues that the visual emphasis placed on the breast was a primary means of revealing Mary as mother and nurturer of Christ, and by extension, all Christians. She notes that from the third century C.E. on, the Virgin’s theological significance centered on her ability to guarantee Christ’s humanity. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, Mary was named “Theotokos,” God-bearer, in order to officially declare that Christ, born of her flesh, was true man as well as true God.<sup>26</sup> Mary’s role as a simple, accessible, and merciful mother-figure was further strengthened by the fact that these naturalistically portrayed “Madonnas of Humility,” in which a nursing Mary is often shown barefoot and seated on the ground, contrasted so markedly with previous icons of the Virgin as an abstract, enthroned Byzantine empress embellished with lavish robes, opulent jewels, and a company of angels.<sup>27</sup> Using the Incarnation as their theological and methodological foundation, both Steinberg and Miles stress the continuity between the sacred and profane dimensions of both Mary and Christ, and thus challenge the assumption that any person’s holiness, scriptural or otherwise, is contingent upon renouncing all things corporeal.



Linda Nochlin brings the arguments of Steinberg and Miles into late-twentieth-century focus in an editorial she wrote in response to the *Sensation* debacle. Here, Nochlin posits Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* as a kind of sacred cult object that acts as a dynamic medium between earthly and heavenly realms. She reads the collaged genital fragments that hover about Mary as "ex-votos left on Catholic altarpieces by grateful believers since time immemorial."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the affixed body parts resemble Milagro medals that can be found pinned to representations of Saints in thanksgiving or in supplication for the healing of that particular afflicted body part (fig. 1.2).<sup>29</sup> Could Ofili's painting, then, be considered a kind of miraculous and living object that, when activated, allows believers to establish contact with the divine? Certainly, Nochlin's interpretation of the pudenda as ex-votos emphasizes the dynamic and functional qualities of the work of art and the importance of the viewer's interaction with it, a practice of intercessory piety long sustained by the Catholic church.

Furthermore, in light of Smith's critique of the wedge she believes has been systematically driven between our bodies and our spirits with negative implications focused on the body, could Ofili's cut-out female genitalia represent sites of distress that are in need of spiritual healing, of being fused with the soul? Have they been mounted in petition of the Virgin Mary to suture this rift between the human and the divine? Might Ofili be exploring his own relationship to Catholicism and its traditional iconography and practice, drawing on the countless images of lactating Virgins, nude Christ figures, and bleeding Saints, so that he might arrive at a

contemporary understanding of what it means to emphasize the somatic qualities of piety?

### **A “Hip-Hop” Madonna**

While it is possible to read the image as a ritualized site of perpetual interaction and negotiation between a viewer/believer and the Blessed Mother, Ofili’s “Virgin” ultimately beckons us to see it as a whole, finished product. The genital cut-outs certainly emphasize something of Mary herself. While in most areas of the canvas the fragments appear to have been casually pinned or glued on, other areas reveal more thoughtful and nuanced application. For example, portions of the Virgin’s face appear gently “tattooed” with the pudenda shapes, whose deep-brown hues softly blend with her own dark skin tones. Other areas along the borders of her veil and gown also reveal similar points of overlap and integration. And could the faded genital fragment looming atop her head possibly indicate a halo of a more earthly kind?

Ofili has said that he incorporated the pornographic cut-outs to relay his conviction that the Virgin Mary is often portrayed as a “frequently eroticized figure.”<sup>30</sup> He has spoken of the unavoidable sensuality he sees in the countless images that depict, for example, the Madonna suckling the Christ child. “I was going to the National Gallery and looking at Van Eyck’s paintings of mother and child,” he once explained, “[and] I just wanted the image of the breast, really. The exposed breast is hinting at motherhood but those images are very sexually charged.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, critic Lynn Macritchie has suggested that Ofili intentionally portrayed the Virgin

without the Jesus child in order to heighten her sexuality and, thereby, place her on a continuum with humanity, something Ofili maintains is evident throughout the history of religious iconography. His Virgin's pointed stare, enhanced by her arched right-eyebrow, her exaggerated, bulbous nose, her prominent, exposed breast, her generous red lips, swollen and fetishized like their surrounding pornographic counterparts, all suggest, according to Macritchie, a sexuality that dares the viewer to gaze back.<sup>32</sup> She is not the meek, demure Virgin of Renaissance fame. She is an emboldened Madonna, who even in her austere majesty, imparts her human side. An icon of magnanimous proportion, she easily slips back and forth between the realms of the sacred and the profane.

Ofili's approach to materials employs a similar give and take between distinct, often traditionally opposed realms. He has described his style as "coming out of hip hop culture," which is what he sees as "an approach to making things and looking at things with no hierarchy." He explained, "I am trying to bring in...a lot of the stuff that has been left out...the junk of 'the everyday'...like the flies that you find around junk, and all the other stuff that isn't considered high culture."<sup>33</sup> In this light, Ofili's use of elephant dung, his signature "junk" substance, need not necessarily be read as a gesture of irreverence, and certainly not as one that entailed "splattering" or "flinging" excrement at a traditional image of the Virgin Mary, as Giuliani and the general media fashioned it to be.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Ofili has used elephant dung in a number of other works, some of which, including *Spaceshit* (1995), *Popcorn Tits* (1996), *Afrobluff* (1996), and *Afrodizzia* (1996) were exhibited along with *The Holy Virgin Mary in Sensation*. *Afrodizzia*, for example, features a celebratory array of tiny cut-

out photographs of Pan-African heroes such as Nelson Mandela, Little Richard, Dizzy Gillespie, Aretha Franklin, and Michael Jackson along with the names of other notable figures such as Diana Ross, James Brown, Miles Davis and Cassius Clay, spelled out in map pins that have been pressed into clumps of resin-covered elephant dung. Understanding Ofili's use of the elephant dung within this larger, commemorative context, then, problematizes claims of his "Virgin Mary" painting as deliberately sacrilegious and humiliating.

The elephant dung is in fact used for reasons both formal and ideological. According to his biography in the *Sensation* exhibition catalogue, Ofili discovered the possibilities of dung as an artistic material during a 1992 trip to Zimbabwe, where he was "struck by the limits of his paintings" and realized that incorporating the dung would help "ground them physically in a cultural as well as natural landscape."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, according to Ofili, the resin-covered elephant dung "feet" he attaches to the bases of his canvases, including *The Holy Virgin Mary*, serve as a way of "raising the paintings up from the ground and giving them a feeling that they've come from earth rather than simply being hung on a wall."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, as another critic notes, they make a strong "reference to the earth as a source of creativity and growth."<sup>37</sup> Many critics, including Smith and Arnold Lehman, Director of the Brooklyn Museum, have disputed charges of the dung's connotations as crude and irreverent, stressing its status as a sacred symbol of fertility, power, and agricultural resourcefulness in many African cultures as well as a common material used in African art.<sup>38</sup> This, some have argued, was Ofili's way of accentuating the dynamic material relationship between animals and humans and, more generally, as a means of acknowledging his African

roots.<sup>39</sup> And when viewed in the context of countless other traditional images that reveal the Madonna offering her bountiful, bare breast to her son, and by extension, to all faithful viewers, Ofili's Virgin, who likewise exposes her breast of nourishing dung-material, can also be seen as the embodiment of this blessed offering of divine generosity.<sup>40</sup>

Other critics, however, such as Allen Roberts, cultural anthropologist and Director of the African Studies Center at UCLA International Institute, have decried the outpouring of references to "dung veneration" in African culture as an unfounded and "egregious invention of African expression." Voicing his concerns in an internet chat room discussion about Ofili's work, he argued, "Aside from wall-plastering, fuel use, and maybe some clandestine magical practices, I have never heard or read about 'dung veneration,' or even other uses."<sup>41</sup> Olu Oguibe, a prominent scholar in the field of postmodern African aesthetics, also dismissed Ofili's oft-romanticized dung "Eureka" moment in Zimbabwe as "a load of elephant crap." Instead he linked Ofili's fascination with elephant dung to African American artist David Hammons, who in the 1970s exhibited *Elephant Dung Sculptures* in New York as part of his *Dirty Art* series.<sup>42</sup> Shortly after his return from Zimbabwe, Ofili held two ill-received "Shit Sales," during which he attempted to sell balls of elephant dung on the street, followed by an underground advertising campaign which involved placing stickers bearing the words "elephant shit" on London street furniture.<sup>43</sup>

As for Ofili, he mostly kept quiet amidst all the "stink" over *Sensation*, providing only vague explanations for his use of elephant dung. "There's something

incredibly simple but incredibly basic about it,” he once said. “It attracts a multitude of meanings and interpretations.”<sup>44</sup>

This multitude of meanings and interpretations is partly contingent upon the elephant dung’s aesthetic properties. Focusing less on the symbolic or metaphorical uses of the dung, many critics have attributed Ofili’s artistic choices more to formal and conceptual interests: that the dung introduced “an element of funk,” to his paintings,<sup>45</sup> that it was “simply part of the effect”<sup>46</sup> and can even be read as a “metaphor for the whole process of artistic creation. Primal stuff transformed.”<sup>47</sup>

While Ofili has explained that the dizzying array of repetitive dot patterns featured in the majority of his canvases were inspired by ancient cave paintings he saw in Zimbabwe, the combination of the dots with the complex patterning of glitter and technicolor ornament attests to Ofili’s undeniable predilection for formal richness and allure. Of his work, he has said, “I try to make it more and more beautiful, to decorate it and dress it up so that it is so irresistible, you just want to be in front of it.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as Lynn Macritchie notes, “With their decorative surfaces, [Ofili’s] paintings exude an overall elegance and grace that lure the eye even as their content challenges the viewer’s preconceptions.”<sup>49</sup>

Ofili’s flair for ornamentation, collage, and meticulous, labor-intensive hand work, often associated with craft, can also be seen as a transgressive gesture in an art world where abstraction and decoration have not always forged a happy alliance. In his essay for the *Sensation* exhibition catalogue, Martin Maloney praises Ofili’s multi-layered approach as one that has “challenged the rules of good taste by a skillful combination of eclectic elements....Playful in realisation, brash in materials,

[his fusion of jarring elements] have a patched-together, homemade look that allows a gentle romantic spirit to animate the cultural mix of their making.”<sup>50</sup> Ofili has explained his crafty juxtapositions as gestures of liberation from the constraints of traditional art mediums and a statement of his own brand of interdisciplinary “Hip Hop Assemblage,” using hip hop music as an analogue for “playing” out his ideas on canvas: “It has been necessary for me to...really feel that there are no restrictions. Almost like...you can play anything. You can mix it. You can mix rock and roll with Beethoven and not feel as though its was an illegal connection.... Painting...[has] just been kind of blown apart, and it’s wide open for me to bring anything and everything to it....”<sup>51</sup>

Overall, Ofili’s freely eclectic aesthetic choices speak to his urgent desire to embrace contradiction and ambivalence with his work. As he has explained,

In the end, I’m trying to bring something up out of the rubble that’s pleasing to look at. And...it might not necessarily make you think of good things, but at least it stimulates your thought...And in a way, what I’m trying to do is to promote contradiction because that’s the reality of the everyday....[I want my work to be] a magnet for people’s thoughts, ideas, and arguments, and hopefully, it will allow people to feel free to disagree with themselves. Not necessarily with others. But to allow them to think one thing, and then to think another thing completely openly. And freely. And not to be so intent on right and wrong.<sup>52</sup>

And as indicated by Smith in her *Newsday* editorial, the paradoxical components within Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* can also be understood within the context of the complex and contradictory feelings many contemporary artists who were raised Catholic have with Catholicism. In their work, these artists often negotiate a continuum between past and present, using traditional imagery as their point of departure for fleshing out particular problems that often plague contemporary

society.<sup>53</sup> Ofili articulated these feelings with bullet-point precision when describing the multitude of topics his own painting touches upon:

It's about critique. It's about the way the black woman is talked about in hip-hop music. It's about my religious upbringing, and confusion about that situation. The contradiction of a virgin mother. It's about the stereotyping of the black female. It's about trying to make a nineties hip-hop version of the Virgin Mary that would include, therefore, everything that I think she's about. It's about beauty. It's about caricature, And it's about just being confused. But at the same time, it's about not being uncomfortable with that state of mind. And seeing that as a full palate. Rather than just black and white.<sup>54</sup>

### **The “Culture Wars” Continued: A Question of Decency**

It is the very confusion and ambivalence in Ofili's work that skeptics such as Giuliani condemn. Art-related incidents subsequent to the *Sensation* episode confirm a stubborn contingency of individuals who continue to vehemently resist “unsanctioned” contemporary religious imagery. For example, in March 2001, Giuliani renewed his assault on the Brooklyn Museum of Art; this time for its inclusion of a photograph in its “Committed to the Image” exhibition, a major survey of 94 black photographers. The fifteen-foot, five-panel work, *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996) (fig. 1.3) by Renée Cox, features the artist as the Christ figure standing nude among her twelve black male disciples. Launching what has commonly been referred to as “Brooklyn II,” Giuliani attacked the work as “disgusting,” “outrageous,” “anti-Catholic,” and an expression of “prejudice,” “bigotry,” and “hatred,” while William Donohue, although branding the work as a typical example in a recent string of “Catholic bashing” artworks, dismissed it as nothing more than “shock art.”<sup>55</sup> Giuliani's implication was that the Catholic Church “owns” the rights to the representation of Biblical figures and narratives, and thus is justified in strictly



enforcing “correct” standards of their imaging.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the straw that broke the camel’s back in a recent succession of “anti-Catholic” artistic sentiment, Cox’s work provoked Giuliani to call for a “decency commission” staffed with “decent people” to exercise oversight over all artwork shown at city-funded institutions.<sup>57</sup>

A Catholic herself, Cox argued that she made the work in part to critique the Catholic Church “and the role women don’t play in it.” According to her, the photograph, part of her series “Flipping the Script,” is “about...creating my own kind of kingdom, my own universe” and challenging the white-male-dominated iconography that typically defines Christianity and the Catholic Church.<sup>58</sup> The work also represents her interpretation of the Biblical tenet that all of us are made in God’s image, and that “his” image is not the property of any one people, religion or interpretation. She explained:

What I learned from the Bible is that we are all created in the likeness of God. Well, then God resides in all of us, and that means male, female, black, white, red, yellow. I felt I had artistic license to be able to use myself as the central figure of the Last Supper to represent Christ.<sup>59</sup>

Only a few months after “Sensation II,” another religious artwork came under fire in the U.S.: Alma Lopez’s *Our Lady* (2000) (fig. 1.4), a digital photo collage depicting a contemporary version of Our Lady of Guadalupe who, dressed in a bikini made of roses, stares out defiantly with her hands resting firmly on her hips.<sup>60</sup> The crescent on which she traditionally stands is held aloft by a buxom, bare-breasted female angel. Featured in the show *Cyber-Arte: Tradition Meets Technology* which opened in February 2001 at the state-run Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, the work was criticized by scores of outraged Catholics as “repulsive,”

“insulting,” and “sacrilegious,” including the archbishop of Santa Fe, Michael J. Sheehan, who publicly admonished Lopez for turning the Holy Virgin Mary into a “tart” and a “call girl.”<sup>61</sup> Lopez, claiming she meant no disrespect, explained that her intention for making the image was to “find a meaningful connection with La Virgen de Guadalupe,” and she argued that her defiant gaze and strong stance allied her to the women in her life, including her mother, grandmother, and aunt. “They had to be strong to survive, like Christ’s mother,” she resolved.<sup>62</sup> Lopez further defended her work against charges that it be removed from display, declaring:

I feel that if my work is removed it means that I have no right to express myself as an artist and a woman. It means that as Chicanas we can only be sexualized or only be virgins. It means that only men can tell us how to look at the Virgin and relate to her personally.<sup>63</sup>

Although neither incident generated as much media attention as that of *Sensation*,<sup>64</sup> the very resistance to the public display of the Cox and Lopez works points to a current wave of censorship dating back to the “Culture Wars” of the late 1980s and ‘90s, which has yet to subside.<sup>65</sup> Smith has also found herself entangled within the snares of controversy, especially where art and religion are concerned, although she insists that she tries to avoid the kinds of incidents her contemporaries such as Ofili, Cox, and Lopez have encountered.<sup>66</sup> The most recent battle in the “Culture Wars” featured a group exhibition, *A Threshold of the Spirit*, held at New York City’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine in June 2001, in which Smith’s work was shown. Although the exhibition focused on spirituality around the world, the Episcopal cathedral’s director, the Reverend Jay Wegman, took issue with one particular Buddhist-inspired installation, *Crossing Paths*, by Smith’s friend and

colleague Arlene Schechet, ordering that it either be amended or else promptly removed from the cathedral's baptistry. He issued his warning a day before the grandson of Mark S. Sisk, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, was to be baptized there. "The cathedral is not a museum, it is not a gallery, it is a Christian house of worship," Wegman argued. "The baptistry is a place for the primary Christian sacrament, and we need to honor our use of this space."<sup>67</sup> Schechet refused to alter her installation or to remove it herself, and out of support for Schechet, Smith and another exhibiting artist, Leslie Dill, pulled their work from the exhibition. Puzzled by such an act of intolerance by an institution that has long been admired for its open and diverse visual arts program, Smith remarked, "I don't understand it at all. They've got Shinto shrines in there. They've got everybody's everything in that place all the time."<sup>68</sup> Smith's support for Schechet and her work speaks to her own liberal views of what "religion" is and her acceptance of an equally increasing cultural phenomenon historian Diane Winston has identified as "trans-religiosity," a "blending of...beliefs, mythologies, and practices from varying traditions..., without feeling any contradictions."<sup>69</sup>

As will be discussed in the following chapters, Smith's own work exemplifies such a penchant for fusing seemingly disparate histories and beliefs. In keeping with the efforts of her contemporaries who address the oftentimes contradictory elements of spirituality and its representation in visual culture, her work, too, has incited direct threats of censorship, but in her case outside the United States. In July 1999, for example, her pencil drawing of Eve as a naked, young girl with long, unruly hair caught the attention of political moralists in Edinburgh, Scotland. The drawing,

reproduced on post cards and widely distributed as publicity for Smith's upcoming show there at the Fruitmarket Gallery, was derided by Hugh Brown, a spokesman for the Church of Scotland's Board of Social Responsibility, who quipped, "This appears to be nothing to do with art. It looks as though it's simply to drum up some publicity and is nothing short of exploitation."<sup>70</sup> When asked about her reaction to this particular incident, Smith said, "My images weren't controversial in the slightest. What do they think Eve is besides a young girl? What's wrong with that? It's just ridiculous, superficial."<sup>71</sup>

### **Who Owns Visual Culture?**

This surge of controversy and censorship frenzy in Western visual culture since the late twentieth-century ultimately boils down to the question of ownership of images and the degrees to which one can and will modify the officially sanctioned imagery of the Christian canon. As argued in her *Newsday* editorial, Smith believes that, because of the dearth of visual information offered in Biblical and historical literature, any image of a sacred figure is ultimately a mutable construction of sorts and is a projection of the interests of that particular artist in that particular time period. In explaining why she wrote the editorial in defense of Ofili's painting, Smith stated,

It was a way to talk about how these images are, in a certain sense, idolatry, just made up images that are particular to particular histories, and that they're also always changing, constantly mutating to incorporate new information, new possibilities. So [Giuliani's] offense at [Ofili's painting] is in a sense one time period clashing with another, or two different approaches clashing with one another. It's just a fantasy about ownership of images.<sup>72</sup>

Smith has also noted that, ironically, the events surrounding *Sensation* “bring out why things like the Catholic church have been successful, because they’ve been able to include in their iconography many different indigenous iconographies and mix them together....” She criticized Giuliani not only for his ignorance of “the climate of New York and the culture, the second or third largest industry in NY,” but also because he simply does not know his art history and is unaware of the Catholic church’s ultimate openness with respect to the volatility of Christian imagery over the centuries.<sup>73</sup>

Likewise, when Donald Cosentino discusses the diverse range of depictions of religious figures and how Pan-African images such as Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* owe very little to Raphael, he muses “Why should they?”<sup>74</sup> And when Alma Lopez’s rights to wrest a sacred image from the clutches of the Catholic church were challenged, the curator of the exhibition, Tey Marianna Nunn, defended Lopez’s work as but one of many responses to the exhibition’s dictum: “To showcase the manner in which the artists translate and recast their deeply rooted cultural beliefs, images, and history by utilizing computers to create a new type of visual art.”<sup>75</sup>

Erika Doss examines the intricate dynamics of image rights and ownership in a recent article that addresses the controversy provoked by another contemporary artist of Catholic heritage, Robert Gober. The work in question was his 1995-1997 *Untitled* installation piece (fig. 1.5), first exhibited in the Geffen Contemporary, a gallery of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.<sup>76</sup> Gober’s multilayered, theatrical presentation, which features a concrete Madonna figure pierced through the midsection with bronze-cast, standard steel culvert pipe, was denounced as insulting, offensive, and sacrilegious and has continually been referred to, reductively, as “the

Virgin Mary impaled on a pipe.”<sup>77</sup> Yet Doss reviews a full spectrum of public reactions to the installation which reveal that a large number of art audiences also hunger for and embrace contemporary art that engages with spiritual subjects and even challenges traditional tenets of faith. For example, she relays the comments of one particular Catholic viewer, Linda Eckstrom, who, in a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, voiced her misgivings about the Catholic Church and who, “as a woman,” admitted to having felt “disenfranchised” from it. Eckstrom hailed the MOCA installation for its spiritual accessibility, claiming “[it was] one of the most profoundly sacred spaces I have encountered in an art venue.”<sup>78</sup>

In defense of Gober’s work, Eckstrom also wrote an editorial in the *National Catholic Reporter*, expressing her hopes that the controversy surrounding the exhibition would be effective, especially “if it reminds believers that art is most useful to religion when it is free to consider and rethink symbols, rather [than] being condemned for performing its vital service.” Arguing that no church or faith “can claim exclusive ownership of Mary as a symbol,” Eckstrom pronounced, “Where once art imitated theology, it is now quite possible that contemporary art might influence theological notions by challenging the status quo with new forms. The church has always been enriched by the tension that comes with diversity.”<sup>79</sup>

Ofilio voiced a similar argument to the critics of his *The Holy Virgin Mary*, stating, “The church is not made up of one person but a whole congregation, and they should be able to interact with art without being told what to think.... This is all about control,” he added. “We’ve seen it before in history. Sadly, I thought we’d moved on.”<sup>80</sup>

Carol Becker also defends artists' efforts to contest traditional religious imagery as less of a bid to shock their audiences and more of a "need to reflect on and give shape to their interpretation of the world." In her recent article, "The Brooklyn Controversy," she ponders, "If [artists] interpret an iconic image in a radically new way, is this not one function art should serve? If they challenge our assumptions about art, why do we not welcome this challenge and the dialogue that surrounds it?"<sup>81</sup> Becker also chastises the New York art community for its inability to effectively mobilize itself in response to the attacks on art during the *Sensation* scandal. Lamenting the fact that the only argument formally presented was the much-exhausted, First Amendment mantra, Becker stresses the importance of "articulating the right and necessity of a democratic society to support the work of artists whose interpretations of the world allow us to evolve visually and intellectually."<sup>82</sup>

Controversy such as that associated with *Sensation* further accentuates the steadily increasing anxiety-levels in America over the cultural expression of religion since the late twentieth-century; a phenomenon also referred to as the "iconophobia syndrome."<sup>83</sup> Yet it is this very fear of images and their potential to offend and influence, this relatively harmless flare-up of an age-old problem, which affirms their true force. Furthermore, it is in the destruction of these offensive images that we realize their power to influence and provoke.

### **Offending Images**

In the same volume of essay-responses to the Brooklyn Museum controversy in which Carol Becker argues for an art that jolts us out of our spiritual complacency,

W.J.T. Mitchell examines the motivations behind acts of iconoclasm, maintaining that destructive feats such as the kind Dennis Heiner wielded on Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* are nothing less than vengeful attempts to offend in turn the images that have offended them. Indeed, were we to understand Ofili's painting as Giuliani and the popular press pitched it (that Ofili defiled a traditional image of the Virgin Mary by "smearing" it with elephant dung), then Heiner's smearing of white paint on Ofili's "Virgin" can be seen to have been done for the purpose of righting Ofili's wrong with a kind of Biblically-sanctioned "eye for an eye" gesture. It can also be argued that, through his performance, Heiner did in fact restore the Virgin to a kind of desired, iconic status in such a way that, after Heiner was hand-cuffed and hauled off by the police, the damaged painting was immediately granted special status, where, once cleaned and restored by an expert team of conservationists, two security guards were permanently posted on either side of it. An honored recipient of the "royal" treatment, Ofili's "Virgin" was thus transformed into a majestic Queen, flanked by her guardian angels and secured behind a protective shield of Plexiglas. And as a result of the well-publicized controversy, the painting even became a kind of pilgrimage site for an increasingly growing number of faithful, if not just simply curious, viewers throughout the duration of the exhibition.<sup>84</sup>

Mitchell's queries into what it is about images that gives them such remarkable power to offend people ultimately reveal how acts of iconoclasm attest to the oftentimes-perceived magical power of images. He argues that there are major assumptions at play when those who "offend" images believe that their strategy surmounts all others. The first assumption is that there is a direct link between the



image and the thing it represents, between the sign and the referent; that, according to Mitchell, “whatever is done to the image is somehow done to what it stands for.”<sup>85</sup>

The second assumption is that the image is an actual, living, and sentient being that is capable of feeling what is done to it and can, at any time, respond in kind.

Heiner most likely had these assumptions in mind when he approached Ofili’s canvas, and the manner in which he attacked it is also revealing of his intentions. Mitchell points out that Heiner’s choosing to smear water-soluble, white paint over the Virgin’s face and body, instead of, say, violently slashing it with a knife, can be seen more as a protective strategy of “veiling” or “effacement.” In this case, according to Mitchell, Heiner’s vandalism was an act of defense of the sacred image of the Madonna, a means of restoring the painting, and thus her, to a kind of purity, as if she herself, and consequently those who venerate her, were tarnished by Ofili’s depiction of her.<sup>86</sup> Carol Becker suggests another, much-overlooked possible motive for Heiner’s pointed use of white paint, arguing that Heiner, a white male, could have been racially provoked in his attempt to metaphorically, if not literally, disinfect this black, sexualized, “dung-smear” Madonna.<sup>87</sup>

In her *Newsday* editorial, Smith herself attests to the power of images as evident in their ability to provoke outrage and censorship. She maintains, “Christianity and art both share a belief in the power that can be invested in the image and in inanimate objects. It is exactly this belief that led Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to take offense to the Brooklyn exhibition in the first place.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, as David Morgan and Sally Promey argue in their book, *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (2001), “Efforts to destroy images, to protect their honor, or to conquer in

their name presuppose that images matter, that they are invested with meaning, that they exert influence, that their welfare extends some hold over those who would break or revere them.”<sup>89</sup> Their comments further illuminate an understanding of images not as merely passive reflectors of history and ideas higher than or prior to their existence, but as active agents that “constitute religion,” arranging and shaping the very social fabrics from which they are made. Thus, when assessing the consequences material culture has on society, Morgan and Promey insist on asking not what images are, but rather what images *do*. They query, “How does religion happen materially?... How do material objects participate in the practices that make up religious lives? How do such practices rely on material objects?”<sup>90</sup> Most importantly, Morgan and Promey attest to the ways in which acts of iconoclasm, particularly on the part of the artist who challenges or even violates a sacred image, can alter our present mindset and “generate powerful new alternatives, representing new paradigms of thought to replace the old.”<sup>91</sup>

What, then, does Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* do? How does it operate in contemporary American society? How does it affect its viewing public and constitute new modes of religious thought? A true example of iconoclasm, Ofili’s work transgresses centuries of Virgin Mary representations because it ventures to ask questions about the constructed nature of her character and appearance rather than providing definitive answers. Offering a deeply personal attempt at capturing an infinitely slippery and complex “concept” of this figure, the work, as evidenced by Ofili’s comments above, is more about inquiry and confusion than it is about resolution, and, significantly, it is about being comfortable with contradictory views

of sacred figures such as the Virgin Mary. It is perhaps Smith who offers the most direct interpretation when she suggests that Ofili's painting simply acts as a conduit, providing a platform for the Virgin Mary to speak to us and to express what is so often repressed in her conventional representation. Smith ponders, "Maybe through Chris Ofili, this is [the Virgin's] plea to us to honor all that is both sacred and human."<sup>92</sup> Smith's comments again emphasize her hopes of mending the more general, culturally-imposed separation of spirituality and corporeality, as she argues that these realms must no longer exist in opposition, but in mutuality. Furthermore, her comments suggest that it is largely the responsibility of the artist to make this happen.

### **Religion: "Disappeared" from Visual Culture**

The discipline of visual culture studies has also led a contradictory and fractured existence, and scholars in the field have examined the reasons for its perceived incompatibility with religion since the late nineteenth century, attesting to religion's alleged separation and marginalization from modernist aesthetics in particular. In her 2003 article, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," Sally Promey argues that reigning secularization theories of modernity have largely contributed to this myth. Secularization theory, as discussed by Promey and as formulated by sociologists such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Peter Berger, is based on a developmental model of civilization that positions innovation, individualism, and progress as touchstones of modernity. It contends that modernization is unequivocally linked to religion's demise because

religion represents a conservative, sectarian, “pre-modern vestige of superstition,” and an “immature or ‘primitive’ stage in cultural evolution” which “stultifies and inhibits the mature imagination.” Thus, according to this conceptual framework, the very notion of “*modern* religion” is an “oxymoron.”<sup>93</sup> Erika Doss also grapples with what she calls “the modernist binary opposition of art versus religion,” which is racked with assumptions that any spiritually-related American art is based primarily on “difference,” and is therefore ghettoized as an “ethnic, racial, or multicultural phenomenon.”<sup>94</sup> Refuting claims that religion is the “outsider” or “other” to modernism, and that religious inquiry has all but disappeared from avant-garde art made since the twentieth-century, Doss argues for greater public recognition and acceptance of faith-based contemporary art. She includes Smith in a host of critically and commercially successful contemporary artists who can hardly be considered art world “others,” including Robert Gober, Bill Viola, Mike Kelley, Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Joel-Peter Witkin, and David Wojnarowicz, all of whom have explored issues of religion in their art. Yet even critically acclaimed artists such as Smith harbor insecurities about their faith-based works. Smith has admitted that religion “is not a very popular subject matter. It’s not popular for people to think about the psychic or the spiritual life.”<sup>95</sup> She also once revealed her thinking process when planning one of her shows in the early 1990s, explaining that she wanted to include images that “would be useful and positive in daily life.” While initially planning to focus solely on the Virgin Mary, she later decided to mitigate any overt religious overtones by adding other pieces that dealt with more universal and mythological concepts. Superheroine-like goddesses, such as Isis and Nut, along with

metallic sculptures of flowers and stars, then ultimately shared the gallery space with the Virgin Mary. “I thought if you made a Catholic show,” she explained, “it’ll just show you’re crazy.”<sup>96</sup> Elsewhere she has noted her reluctance to disclose the influence of Catholicism on her works for fear that it would be “dismissed by members of the art establishment who equated religion with superstition and political reaction.”<sup>97</sup>

Yet critic Eleanor Heartney, who has devoted a significant amount of research to the particularly Roman Catholic influence on contemporary artistic imaginations, has observed “While it may be unfashionable to admit it, Christianity has had a tremendous influence on contemporary art.”<sup>98</sup> And despite the general discomfort of the art world with religious issues along with decades of scholarly resistance to the study and analysis of sacred art, religion -- as announced by art historian Wanda Corn at the 1999 Stanford University symposium on art of the United States -- “is a hot topic” in American art history.<sup>99</sup> Morgan and Promey also contend that although “most historians of American art continue to assign religion a negligible or inconsequential part in the formulation, production, reception, and theorization of art in the United States..., recent sociological and historical studies suggest that religion flourishes in American culture.”<sup>100</sup> Their confident and groundbreaking program of essays, *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, accomplishes a great deal insofar as it attends to and substantially tackles a significant lacuna in the scholarship of American art. Yet it also recognizes that the visual culture of American religions “represents a field only now coming into view,” and it acknowledges the importance of further study.<sup>101</sup> This examination of the religious significance of the art of Kiki

Smith is one answer to this call. Smith's work has caught the attention of a wide and far-reaching audience of art critics and scholars, embraced by feminists and advocates of body art alike. Yet few have thoroughly examined the spiritual dimensions of it, nor has anyone seriously considered how her work constitutes American religious practice and experience. As Erika Doss posed in her paper for the 2002 CAA "Religion and American Art History" panel, "How do images and objects embody, reveal, perform, and negotiate American theological interests?"<sup>102</sup> By examining Smith's work within a framework of spiritual inquiry particularly informed by her Catholic upbringing, this study attempts to bring us closer to an answer, for it is, indeed, no accident that Smith chooses sacred subjects to examine larger issues she believes have been "disappeared," as she puts it, from society.<sup>103</sup>

### **Spirituality and the Body**

The human body and religion, according to Smith, are both conspicuously absent from society. As evident in her aforementioned commentary on Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Smith champions continuity between the sacred and profane worlds. She is joined by a number of contemporary artists, including Ofili, who connect our common humanity through the body and continually look for ways to manifest divinity through sensual expression. When, in a 1999 essay on the Catholic imagination in contemporary art, Eleanor Heartney professes Catholicism's "tremendous influence" on contemporary art, she further notes that "the recent [late twentieth-century] predilection for body art and sexually transgressive imagery is incomprehensible without it."<sup>104</sup> Elsewhere, Heartney links the *Sensation*

controversy to what she regards as an established pattern of Puritan-based resistance to works of art made by artists with Catholic backgrounds. She notes that these artists, among them Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, Robert Gober, and Chris Ofili, all tend to draw on Catholicism's rich history of imagery and its doctrinal emphasis on physical mortality and suffering as a pathway to salvation. Catholicism's cult of martyrdom, she argues, as well as its major mysteries, such as the Immaculate Conception, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, Transubstantiation of the Host into the body and blood of Christ, and the Assumption of the Virgin, are, after all, grounded in the concept of the human body as a vessel of the divine spirit.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, she reminds us, "The entire drama of Christian history hinges on the moment when 'the Word was made Flesh.'"<sup>106</sup> These artists, then, each under the sway of their Catholic upbringing in one way or another, understandably use the image of the body as a metaphor for larger truths and as a conduit for spiritual transcendence. Heartney reminds us of canonical examples of Catholic art which posit physical desire, pain, and ecstasy as easily recognizable, accessible metaphors for pious expression. Therefore, a work such as Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1645-52), which depicts this holy figure writhing in orgasmic pleasure as the angel prepares to plunge a flaming golden arrow into her heart, is not to be read as a gratuitous display of sensual indulgence, but as shorthand for spiritual surrender and passion. She queries, "Was it disrespectful for Bernini to borrow from common, carnal experience to give physical form to the experience of religious ecstasy? Or was it a sign of his genius, evidence that he realized that the

ineffable can only be effectively expressed in a visual language which draws on familiar and immediately recognizable experiences?”<sup>107</sup>

Heartney further contends that the “Culture Wars” of the late 1980s and 90s, including the more recent controversy surrounding *Sensation*, are, in large part, the result of a Puritanically-based, Protestant backlash against Catholic, body-centered, visual expression. She argues that, unlike Catholics, Protestants tend to privilege the Biblical “Word of God” over images and primarily “view the kingdoms of God and Man as essentially separate.”<sup>108</sup> Their fundamental resistance to the mingling of all things sacred *and* profane and their ever-growing Puritanical tendencies to hastily interpret bodily-oriented religious art as sacrilegious, Heartney maintains, is a serious theological shortcoming and a major impediment to the realization of a diverse American cultural expression.<sup>109</sup> Yet this fault line that she draws between American Protestantism and Catholicism is itself much too solid and resolute. By positioning these faiths in diametrically opposed camps that are in sure and constant battle with one another, Heartney’s argument dangerously precludes the diverse and nuanced ways in which we can understand censorship in American culture. For example, Heartney aptly criticizes *Sensation* detractors such as Rudy Giuliani and William Donohue for resisting the manifold meanings offered by complex works such as Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*, instead choosing to view them as simply “sick,” “offensive,” and “pornographic.” Pat phrases such as “a Madonna splattered with elephant dung” used to describe Ofili’s painting, Heartney argues, unfortunately “trump complex images and nuanced interpretations every time.”<sup>110</sup> Yet Heartney’s charges of an inherently Protestant iconoclasm come perilously close to this reductive



and dualistic rationale. What are we then to make of the iconoclasm of Giuliani and Donohue, both resolute Catholics?<sup>111</sup>

Morgan and Promey address this widespread tendency in the fields of religion and visual culture studies to overlook or even refuse a Protestant practice of visual piety, arguing that such oversights have led (and continue to lead) to larger misconceptions of an inherently “American” iconoclasm. A primary goal of theirs is to invalidate such claims while encouraging future scholarly examinations of the highly diverse, overlapping, and discriminating circumstances that constitute all types of religious practice and inquiry.<sup>112</sup>

Despite its failure to acknowledge these nuanced circumstances, however, Heartney’s scholarship is useful in that it boldly addresses the aforementioned “religion lacuna” in contemporary American visual culture studies, noting that “it is time to move beyond the long standing but erroneous belief that avant gardism is by definition antithetical to religious sensibility.”<sup>113</sup> Her research zealously ponders the countless number of developments in contemporary art that can be illuminated by relating them to a spiritual context, arguing that “the time has come to reinstate religious influences as key factors in the formation of the artistic imagination.”<sup>114</sup>

How, then, does Catholicism inform Kiki Smith’s artistic imagination by way of the body? How does her own work contest binary oppositions of body versus mind and ultimately of contemporary art vs. religion? When Smith explains in her *Newsday* article that Catholicism is a “ritual-based religion that represents spiritual matters in a physical form,” what does she mean by this exactly and how is this made manifest in her own work? Furthermore, how does Smith’s interest in the clinical and

even mundane realities of human corporeal existence communicate a kind of spirituality in itself? The following chapter investigates Smith's lifelong fascination with the clinical body and its socio-political implications as a primary means of understanding her motivation for materializing spiritual concepts. Furthermore, Smith's strategic use of materials to embed meaning within the physical makeup of her work, a facet of her work that has not yet been adequately investigated, is examined as a crucial component to gaining a more comprehensive knowledge of her work. Together with subject matter, the materials she uses are fundamental to forming what she believes to be the tangible and essential foundations of human reality, affirming corporeal as well as intellectual and spiritual modes of knowledge.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard P. McBrien, "Roman Catholicism: E Pluribus Unum," in *Religion and America: Spiritual Life in a Secular Age*, Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 180.

<sup>11</sup> As cited in "Art and Outrage," *Uncensored*, Trio: Pop, culture, TV, Universal Television Networks (June 2002). Hosted by Sandra Bernhard. Critic Elizabeth C. Baker laments the fact that so few critics of the painting actually ever took a close look at Ofili's painting or attempted to understand the multi-layered/complex meanings of the work, let alone see it in person. Her article is only one of few, including Smith's, that provides a substantial formal analysis and interpretation of the work. See "Sacred or Profane?" *Art in America*, v. 87, no. 11 (November, 1999): 39. Also, see n. 23 below for discussion of the various misinterpretations of Ofili's work.

<sup>12</sup> John Cloud, "New York's art attack," *Time* v. 154, no 14 (Oct. 4, 1999): 64. Giuliani's efforts were ultimately squelched when a settlement was reached in federal court which endorsed the museum's rights to free speech, and funding was restored. For more on the legal details of the incident, see, for example, Joell Baxter, "Sensation," *New Art Examiner* (December/January, 1999/2000): 36-37, Dan Barry and Carol Vogel, "Giuliani Vows to Cut Subsidy over 'Sick' Art," *The New York Times* (September 23): A1, B12, and David Barstow, "Giuliani is Told to Restore Brooklyn Museum Funds," *The New York Times* (November 2): A1.

<sup>13</sup> The paint was water-soluble and slow drying. It was immediately removed by conservators, doing no permanent damage, and the composition was put back on display the next day and carefully guarded by security personnel throughout the remainder of the exhibition. See W.J.T Mitchell, "Offending Images," *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy*, ed. Lawrence Rothfield (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 124; Carol Becker, "The Brooklyn Controversy: A View from the Bridge," also in *Unsettling Sensation*, p. 15; and "Vandal attacks Ofili Madonna," *Art in America*, v. 88 no. 2 (February 2000): 31 for details of the incident.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the artist, June 3, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Kiki Smith, "When the Spiritual Turns Physical," *Newsday* (October 8, 1999): A55. Although Smith is not a practicing Catholic, she nonetheless venerates the Virgin Mary, along with other female deities, religious and mythological, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

<sup>16</sup> Idem. Smith mentions Catholic-raised artists Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz as among those recently attacked for their allegedly blasphemous imagery.

<sup>17</sup> The only information given about Mary is contained in the Gospels of the New Testament, and not one account tells us what Mary actually looked like. The earliest known depictions of Jesus and Mary are from 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. See Marie-France Boyer, *The Cult of the Virgin: Offerings, Ornaments and Festivals* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000): 14; and Marina Warner *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976): 3-24 for an in depth discussion of Mary in the Gospels. Warner's book is an incisive examination of how "The Virgin Mary" has shaped and has been shaped by changing social and historical circumstances throughout the centuries. The physical appearance of Jesus has also always been purely speculative. Therefore, Christians have tended to portray Jesus in their own image, according to indigenous artistic styles and traditions. A recent event in popular culture reveals the still highly-problematic nature of manipulating representations of sacred figures. In March 2001, in an attempt to advance a historically accurate representation of Christ, a new, computer-generated image of him was released by the BBC to great controversy. A team of scientists used archaeological evidence, high-tech forensics, and 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Century frescoes from synagogues in Northern Iraq to reconstruct his appearance. This new Jesus has been described as having a "broad, rugged face, olive skin, a generous nose and trimmed, thick black hair and beard," which is "a startling departure from the conventional fair-faced, soft-bearded, long-haired brunette that has dominated religious art since the Renaissance." See Phillip Lee, "The Face of Jesus," *The Ottawa Citizen* (March 27, 2001): A1.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, "When the Spiritual Turns Physical," A55. In another instance, Smith expressed similar concerns, saying: "Consciously you may not even be aware that most of the things you think are historical, that you're just a product of what people were thinking five hundred years ago. In trying to look at the form without any of this moralistic stuff that's dumped on it, hopefully one can get a more

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detached view that's free of all that baggage...." Smith quoted in Carlo McCormick, "Kiki Smith," *Journal of Contemporary Art* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer): 87.

<sup>19</sup> Idem.

<sup>20</sup> The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception- the claim that Mary was born of her mother Anne without the stain of original sin and was therefore the most perfect created being after Jesus Christ- was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854. See Marina Warner's discussion of the Immaculate Conception as a vigorously enforced dogma that, in separating Mary from humanity, has condemned all humans, but particularly women, to "perpetual inferiority.": *Alone of All Her Sex*, pp. 236-254. Warner's work will also be discussed in Chapter Four, in reference to Smith's own imagery of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>21</sup> This will be discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Wells, *Projects 24: Kiki Smith* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983): 10. The book was first published as a special issue of *October* 25 (Summer, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum offers an alternate interpretation of late medieval and Renaissance images of the nude Christ, maintaining that an equally significant number of artworks from this era suggest that Christ's flesh was sometimes seen as female, as lactating and giving birth. See "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992): 79-117.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nudity and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture," *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1986: 193-208.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>27</sup> Idem.

<sup>28</sup> "The gold background is positively Byzantine here," Nochlin writes, "inflected by little backsides and female genitalia which play a role rather like that of the ex-votos left on Catholic altarpieces by grateful believers since time immemorial." Linda Nochlin, "Saluting 'Sensation,'" *Art in America* (December, 1999): 37-39.

<sup>29</sup> The custom flourished in Europe during the Middle Ages, peaking at the end of the Gothic period when the veneration of saints was at its height and subsequently extended to the New World with the Catholic conquistadors, proliferating primarily in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Meaning "miracle," a milagro is sometimes offered to a statue or image of a Saint as a token of gratitude for an act of healing or kindness, as a votive offering or ex-voto would be presented. It is given as a material gift and is often linked to a previous vow or wish made to the Saint by a believer. Another purpose entails offering a medal as a request for something to happen, to trigger some kind of action from the Saint. In either case, the milagros tradition confirms the material efficacy of the ritual objects involved, of both the milagro and the image to which it is affixed. See Martha Egan, *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1991) for an in-depth history and analysis of the Milagros tradition. (Include images of milagros from Oktavec, 136.)

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Baker, "Sacred or Profane?" *Art in America* (November 1999): 39.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn Macritchie, "Ofili's Glittering Icons," *Art in America* (January 2000): 99. Macritchie cites this statement from the catalogue for Ofili's exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Macritchie, 99.

<sup>33</sup> Paul D. Miller, "Deep Shit: An Interview with Chris Ofili," *Parkett* 58, 2000: 164.

<sup>34</sup> Brooklyn Museum Director Arnold Lehman was quick to explain this to the press, as recounted in "Art and Outrage," *Uncensored*, Trio: Pop, culture, TV. Also, critic Andras Szanto recounts the countless descriptive errors incurred by the media in efforts to sensationalize the alleged blasphemy of Ofili's work. For example, the *New York Post*, which ran five different erroneous reports of the work and the method of its creation, including statements such as: "a portrait of the Virgin Mary with elephant dung tossed across the canvas," "the Virgin Mary stained with elephant dung," "the Virgin Mary covered in elephant dung," "smear elephant dung on the Virgin Mary," and "the Virgin Mary splattered with elephant dung." No corrections, according to Szanto, were published. See "Don't Shoot the Messenger: Why the Art World and the Press Don't Get Along," *Unsettling 'Sensation'*, pp. 188-9. Another humorous incident I personally encountered recently attests to the ways in which the media-driven, inflammatory, sound-bite descriptions of Ofili's work can easily pervert and exaggerate

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the truth long after the initial melodramatic buzz has waned. While walking through the entrance to the Brooklyn Museum in the Fall of 2002, I overheard one woman asking another, "Isn't this the museum that showed the work of art where someone peed on the Virgin Mary?" Not only did she relay the work-in-question's often misconstrued method of creation, but she also, of course, confused the excrement of choice, most likely thinking of another work which also bore the brunt of government criticism, Andres Serrano's, "Piss Christ" (1987).

<sup>35</sup> David Barrett, "Artist Biographies: Chris Ofili" in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. London: Thames & Hudson in association with the Royal Academy of Arts. Special ed. for the Brooklyn Museum of Art. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1997, p. 203. Ofili brought his first dung specimen back from his Zimbabwe trip, but he now obtains it from the London Zoo.

<sup>36</sup> Carol Vogel, "Holding Fast to His Inspiration; An Artist Tries to Keep His Cool in the Face of Angry Criticism," *The New York Times* (Sept. 28, 1999): E1, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Baker, 39.

<sup>38</sup> For example, the Brooklyn Museum exhibits a 19<sup>th</sup> century *Boli* figure from Bamana, Mali made of wood, clay, blood, urine, cow dung, and other organic materials at the entrance to its African galleries. As the wall label for the object reads, "In many traditional sub-Saharan societies, bodily fluids and excrement are regarded as extremely potent; because of their inherent powers, these materials may be incorporated into sculptural objects to augment the objects' spiritual powers as well as give them visual impact." See image and further discussion of the work in Donald J. Cosentino, "Hip Hop Assemblage: The Chris Ofili Affair," *African Arts* (Spring, 2000): 40-51.

<sup>39</sup> Although he claims Manchester, England as his home, Ofili was born of Nigerian parents. See, for example, Cosentino, "Hip Hop Assemblage: The Chris Ofili Affair," Baker, "Sacred or Profane?," and Eleanor Heartney, "A Catholic Controversy?" *Art in America* (December, 1999): 41.

<sup>40</sup> In addition to the countless Western interpretations of the Virgin Mary, Cosentino notes the variety of Pan-African ways of imaging the Divine Mother of God, including the Yoruba motif of the Virgin as generous mother or *orisa*, offering her breasts. He also suggests a pantheon of Yoruba female divinities such as Oshun, Yemoja, and Olokun, all of whom have been depicted as boldly displaying their breasts and vaginas. See Cosentino, 51; 44.

<sup>41</sup> As posted on H-AfrArts, the Internet discussion list for art historians and others interested in African art, October 5, 1999, as cited in Cosentino, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Olu Oguibe on H-AfrArts, October 6, 1999, as cited in Cosentino, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Barrett, 203. And according to Oguibe, the "Shit Sales" could also have been inspired by Hammons' "Bliz-aard Ball Sales," in which the artist in 1983 sold snowballs at Cooper Square in New York City.

<sup>44</sup> Vogel, 2.

<sup>45</sup> John Peffer on H-AfrArts, October 8, 1999, as cited in Cosentino, 44.

<sup>46</sup> Although Nochlin sees the porn cut-outs as a possible sacred reference to Catholic tradition, she also contends that Ofili equally concentrates on the overall formal thrust of his work. See Nochlin, "Saluting 'Sensation,'" 39.

<sup>47</sup> Cosentino, 48.

<sup>48</sup> As told to Lynn Macritchie in a phone interview, Macritchie, 99.

<sup>49</sup> Macritchie, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Maloney, "Everyone a Winner! Selected British Art from the Saatchi Collection, 1987-97," *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, 169.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, 166.

<sup>53</sup> Smith mentions Catholic-raised artists Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz as examples.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, 169.

<sup>55</sup> See William Donahue, "Brooklyn Museum of Art Offends Again," February 15, 2001: <http://www.catholicleague.org>; Elisabeth Bumiller, "Another Brooklyn Exhibit Draws Fire From Giuliani," *The New York Times* (February 16, 2001): A1, 5; and Douglas Davis, "The Contemporary Art Crisis Redux," *Art in America* (April, 2001): 33. It should be noted that "Yo Mama's Last Supper" was previously exhibited in 1996 at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art and in 1999, during the Venice Biennale, at Oratorio di San Ludovico without any notable objection from either religious

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groups or politicians, or even art critics. See Michael Kimmelman, "Making and Taking Offense, Elevated to Art Form," *The New York Times* (February 16, 2001): B4; 1. It is also dubious that a photograph by British artist Sam Taylor-Wood, entitled "Wrecked" (1996), which features a topless white female as the Christ figure, passed without comment when it was exhibited in *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum. Considering that two of the works most severely attacked featured black women by black artists, one must wonder if, whether consciously or unconsciously, race was a factor in the debate.

<sup>56</sup> Erika Doss, "Rethinking Religion in Twentieth-Century American Art," *Religion and American Art History* (Art Historians of American Art, College Art Association, February 22, 2002, Philadelphia). Panel chaired by Sally M. Promey.

<sup>57</sup> Among the members Giuliani chose for his "Decency Commission" were Leonard Garment, a former member of the Nixon administration, known for his previous censoring of artworks; Peter Max, veteran pop artist; Curtis Sliwa, founder of Guardian Angels, and Raoul Felder, the lawyer representing Giuliani in his divorce from Donna Hanover. The "Decency Commission" was disbanded by Michael R. Bloomberg, when he replaced Giuliani as New York City Mayor in 2002.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Egbert, et al., "Fine Art of Controversy: Brooklyn Museum makes waves again," *Daily News* (New York, February 15, 2001): 5. Cox also launched a scathing indictment of the Catholic Church, claiming that 40% of slave owners were Catholic.

<sup>59</sup> "Art and Outrage," *Uncensored*, Trio: Pop, culture, TV (Universal Television Networks, 2002). Also, in an interview with art critic Eleanor Heartney, Cox explained, "Christ on the crucifix and the Virgin Mary were the first images I saw. But I never found them inclusive of who I was as an African American woman of Jamaican descent. Mary is always about purity and trust, about the powerlessness of women. So I wondered, how do I flip that? How so I inject what I want to say?" Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (Midmarch Arts Press: New York, 2004): 155.

<sup>60</sup> The bikini of roses imagery is an update of the legend in which the Virgin appeared to a poor Indian boy in 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Mexico and caused roses to bloom in the dead of winter as a testament to her visitation. See Sue Taylor, "A New Catholic Iconography? (Book Review)," *Art in America* (February, 2005).

<sup>61</sup> See Sarah S. King, "Santa Fe Madonna Sparks Firestorm," *Art in America* (June, 2001): 23-5.

<sup>62</sup> Hollis Walker, "Depiction of the Virgin of Guadalupe Stirs Objections," *Los Angeles Times* (April 4, 2001): F3.

<sup>63</sup> King, 23.

<sup>64</sup> As earlier noted, Giuliani's "Decency Commission" was disbanded by Michael R. Bloomberg, when he replaced Giuliani as New York City Mayor in 2002. And after much heated debate concerning whether to have Lopez's work removed from the museum, on May 2001, museum officials recommended that "Our Lady" remain on display. As a compromise to community concerns, the museum managers agreed to cut short the exhibition's planned yearlong run, and closed the exhibition in October 2001. See "Bikini-Clad 'Our Lady' Will Remain on Display," *Los Angeles Times* (May 23, 2001): A1, 15.

<sup>65</sup> An extensive examination of the primarily fundamentalist, Christian-driven campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts in the late 1980s and 90s can be found in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, eds. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York University Press: New York, 1999). During this time, publicly-funded artworks by individuals such as Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe were attacked as "pornographic," "obscene," and "blasphemous," and government-supported cultural institutions that exhibited their work were either denied or were threatened to have funding denied by Congressionally-instituted mandates.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, in interview with the author, June 3, 2003.

<sup>67</sup> "Minister Wants Artwork Revised or Removed," *The New York Times* (June 23, 2001): B7.

<sup>68</sup> Idem. Other exhibitors have included the work of artist and designer Donald Moffett, in a 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary gay liberation movement exhibition in 1999 and that of Andres Serrano in 2001.

<sup>69</sup> As quoted in Sally Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* (September, 2003, Vol. 85, Issue 3): 587. See, for example, Diane Winston, "Campuses Are a Bellwether for Society's Religious Revival," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (January 16, 1998): A60.

<sup>70</sup> "Naked girl drawing has church claiming exploitation," *The Herald (Glasgow)* (July 29, 1999): 14.

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<sup>71</sup> Smith, in interview with the author, June 3, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Idem.

<sup>73</sup> Idem. An example of the Catholic Church's openness with regard to art's style and appearance in Catholic worship can be found in *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, a 1978 manuscript written by the Bishops' Committee on Liturgy, which provides "guiding principles" for those involved in preparing liturgical space for worship. The reason the committee offers "principles to guide" rather than "blueprints to follow" rests on the words of the Council fathers, which state clearly in "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy": "The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; it has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of various rites. Thus, in the course of the centuries, she has brought into being a treasury of art which must be carefully preserved. The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due reverence and honor; thereby it is enabled to contribute its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise..." Elsewhere in the manuscript, the Bishops argue for the acceptance of contemporary art in addition to art forms of the past, stating "If liturgy were to incorporate only the acceptable art of the past, conversion, commitment and tradition would have ceased to live... Because [liturgy] is the action of a contemporary assembly, it has to clothe its basically traditional structures with the living flesh and blood of our times and our arts." *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (United States Catholic Conference: Washington, D.C., 1978): 9-10; 21.

<sup>74</sup> Cosentino, 51.

<sup>75</sup> King, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Erika Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation: Issues of Spirituality in Contemporary American Art," *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. David Morgan & Sally Promey (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001): 129-145.

<sup>77</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "A Catholic Controversy?," 41.

<sup>78</sup> Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation," 144.

<sup>79</sup> Linda Ekstrom, "Gober's Mary Fires Debate on Art, Religion," *National Catholic Reporter* (December 15, 1997): 18, as quoted in Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation," 144.

<sup>80</sup> Vogel, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Becker, "The Brooklyn Controversy," 18.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>83</sup> The term is used by Doss in "Rethinking Religion in Twentieth-Century American Art" and by W.J.T. Mitchell, 130.

<sup>84</sup> For a thorough statistical account of audience opinions and demographics for *Sensation*, see David Halle, Elisabeth Tiso, and Gihong Yi, "The Attitude of the Audience for 'Sensation' and of the General Public Toward Controversial Works of Art," *Unsettling Sensation*, 134-152.

<sup>85</sup> Mitchell, 115.

<sup>86</sup> It is puzzling to me, however, that Mitchell refers only to Ofili's use of elephant dung as the alleged offensive gesture towards the Virgin Mary, never mentioning the porn cut-outs as potentially problematic in the eyes of an offended viewer such as Heiner.

<sup>87</sup> Becker, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Kiki Smith, "When the Spiritual Turns Physical," A55.

<sup>89</sup> Morgan & Promey, *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 2. Colleen McDannell also notes how recent controversies over the funding of the National Endowment for the Arts, "accentuate the continuing importance of the material dimension of religion in American culture" in her book *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>90</sup> Morgan & Promey, 16.

<sup>91</sup> Morgan & Promey, 14.

<sup>92</sup> Smith, "When the Spiritual Turns Physical," A55.

<sup>93</sup> Sally Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* (September, 2003, vol. 85, issue 3), 584. Other critics have also examined this assumed rift between a modernist avant-garde and spiritual content. In his catalogue for the 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Donald Kuspit, for example, declares that "the 'spiritual' is a problem concept in contemporary art." A champion of the pure abstraction seen in the earlier

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twentieth-century art of Kandinsky, Kuspit affirms his yearning for an art of spirituality and transcendence, whose very existence he believes has been threatened by late twentieth-century theories of materialism and accusations of art's social insignificance. See Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).

<sup>94</sup> Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation," 143, 134.

<sup>95</sup> As cited by Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation," 143.

<sup>96</sup> Posner, 40.

<sup>97</sup> As explained by Heartney in *Postmodern Heretics*, 168.

<sup>98</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Blood, Sex, and Blasphemy: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art," *New Art Examiner* (March 1999): 35.

<sup>99</sup> As relayed by Sally Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," 582.

<sup>100</sup> Morgan & Promey, xii.

<sup>101</sup> Morgan & Promey, 24. The book's bibliography and the profiles of archives, museums, and collections at the end provide helpful information for further investigation of religion in the visual culture of North America.

<sup>102</sup> Doss, "Rethinking Religion in Twentieth-Century American Art," 5.

<sup>103</sup> A page from one of Smith's notebooks reads: "lots of people are being disappeared/ the body/ Soft tissue covering a boney structure/ the Brain/ Bone covering soft tissue/ what about the body heat, loss, defiance/ frail + mighty." Winters, ICA, 30. This quote will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

<sup>104</sup> Heartney, "Blood, Sex, and Blasphemy," 34.

<sup>105</sup> Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics," *Art in America* (February 1997): 33.

<sup>106</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004): 6. Heartney also relays St. Bernard's standard explanation of the Incarnation: "I think the chief reason why the Invisible God wished to become visible in the flesh... was manifestly this—that he might first win back the affections of fleshly creatures who could not love otherwise than in the flesh."

<sup>107</sup> Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 2. She further states that "Bernini brings out the carnality implicit in the Catholic vision of man's [sic] relationship to God... that, as creatures of flesh and blood, men and women require equally physical signs to approach an understanding of Divinity," p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics," 33.

<sup>109</sup> Heartney quotes theologian John Dillenberger, who described English Protestantism as exhibiting a "considerable distrust of the senses" and which viewed the world as an illegitimate "mode through which God might be perceived or apprehended. The world and all it symbolizes was the fallen matrix from which, through the resources of the mind and spirit, humanity must be delivered," p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> Heartney, "A Catholic Controversy?," 39.

<sup>111</sup> Heartney does, however, acknowledge that a "schism" exists within the American Catholic church particularly where issues of homosexuality, feminism, abortion rights, and contraception, among others, are concerned. She describes the rupture as "a more general stalemate between liberal and conservative manifestations of Christianity in America today." She sees this division as evident within both American Protestantism and American Catholicism and also recognizes that conservative approaches to Catholicism, touted by individuals such as William Donahue, director of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, share some aspects of Protestant fundamentalism, including what she describes as "strongly anti-modernist tendencies which are manifested in a horror of secular culture and a deeply conservative social agenda." Furthermore, it is liberal Catholics such as Smith and Ofili who are most often targets of this kind of "Catholic anti-Catholicism." See Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 15-21.

<sup>112</sup> Morgan & Promey, xii.

<sup>113</sup> Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 23.

<sup>114</sup> Heartney, "Blood, Sex, and Blasphemy," 35.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Physiological Fundamentalism: The Knowing Body

“The voice is no more a part of reality than your skin flaking off.”<sup>115</sup>

*Zweite Wahl (Second Choice)* (1987) (fig. 2.1), a rough-hewn bowl filled with ceramic-cast human organs, is one of the many works Smith has made in homage to the humble truths of our humanity.<sup>116</sup> The featured organs—a liver, spleen, kidney, stomach, heart, lung, among others—rest snugly against one another, worn and weary from what appears to be a lifetime of overuse. The work’s predominately earth-toned palette reiterates the modesty of its subject, while the structural nuances of each organ impart a particular history of use and possible abuse. The liver, for example, bares its eroded, crater-like surface as a brutal reminder of the damage that unfettered hedonism can inflict on the body. Smith’s sensitive handling of its delicate membrane intentionally leaves exposed the cracks, pocks, ridges, and seams inherent in the ceramic-casting process, which reinforces the organ’s own structural imperfections. Other surface flaws are noticeable in an adjacent, mustard-stained stomach, which has been ruthlessly severed from a once-adjoined esophagus and intestine, and in a blackened heart, desiccated and misshapen almost beyond recognition. The bowl itself even bears traces of the artist’s slapdash fingerwork. Its rim is pinched and buckled, its interior surface unevenly blemished, and its exterior patchy, crusty, and lopsided. Yet while the bowl blatantly exposes these pitiful organs to public scrutiny, its soft, irregular contours and womb-like interior offer a

sanctuary in which they are poignantly nestled, and these once-disparate fragments seamlessly congeal into a cohesive unit.<sup>117</sup>

It is indeed atypical to encounter such objects in a customary, domestic serving dish like this, but even if it weren't, these particularly distasteful organs would barely warrant a second glance. Primarily gleaned from the lower regions of the body and associated with digestion and waste elimination, these body parts hold very little cultural panache by conventional standards. The brain, for example, commands much more respect in society as an organ vital to human functioning and advancement. Yet Smith shamelessly displays these plebian body remnants in their ceramic-encrusted humility, consecrating them as if sacred objects deserving of our attention. Although culturally devalued, these organs, according to Smith, are vital to life as an interconnected system of parts, and they are, in the most clinical and elemental sense, the common link to our humanity.

The majority of scholarship on Smith's art thus far has examined body-based works such as *Zweite Wahl (Second Choice)* as emblems of our collective humanity, positioning them within the context of the heightening politicization of the American art scene during the late twentieth-century, when arguments over the body and its ideological boundaries considerably dominated political and social discourse. Powerful and bitter debates at this time over issues including abortion and women's reproductive rights, AIDS, genetic engineering, and minority and gay rights, prompted increased attention to body awareness and a cultural urgency insistent upon re-thinking the representation of the human figure and its intimate anatomy. In 1991, Smith herself remarked, "AIDS has had a lot to do with people's consciousness of the

body as a political and social weapon or landscape,” adding that people have become more aware of their bodies as “more than something they were simply stuck in, freaked out about, or having pleasure with. We’ve become aware of the body as a social organism that is very much manipulated by different venues and different agendas.”<sup>118</sup>

Considered fundamental to helping “reinvigorate the tradition of figural sculpture in the nineties”<sup>119</sup> and credited with making “the human form fresh in contemporary art,”<sup>120</sup> helping turn the “body” into one of the “buzz words of the [late twentieth-century American] art scene,”<sup>121</sup> Smith is regarded as a leading figure in the unleashing of new and alternative means of visualizing the human form. Smith’s art gained notoriety during this time when the human body came to be viewed, according to one critic, as a “political battleground on which the forces of government, religion, and medicine [were] currently waging war.”<sup>122</sup> Her body-based work has been most often analyzed within contemporary theoretical frameworks of feminism and bodily abjection, which locate women’s bodies as particularly vulnerable to political attacks, and it continues to be viewed as a powerful antidote to traditional, patriarchal representations of the female form.<sup>123</sup>

Smith’s inclusion in a host of timely exhibitions and periodicals that tackled the body as politically viable subject matter attests to the manner in which her work was labeled and received at the time.<sup>124</sup> One 1993 exhibition, *Corporal Politics*, which featured Smith’s works alongside those of six contemporaries, aggressively “outed” the body and declared its social significance, which Western visual culture has tried to suppress for centuries.<sup>125</sup> Exhibition works such as Smith’s *Untitled*

*(Sperm)* (1990) (fig. 2.2), comprised of over two-hundred oversized, hand-crafted, lead crystal spermatozoa scattered across the floor, unabashedly laid bare the body as a potent life force while poignantly reminding us of the dangers of fluid transmission in an increasingly cautionary climate of AIDS and abortion. Together with works by Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Annette Messager, Rona Pondick, David Wojnarowicz, Lilla LoCurto and William Outcault, *Untitled (Sperm)* claimed the body as a strategic site for the examination of contemporary society's most pressing issues including homophobia and sexism. By linking the private body to the body politic, Smith and the other artists crafted highly polemical arguments through their use of the fragmented or partial body to expose society's ever-increasing threat to a coherent sense of self.

While hailed by critics such as Helaine Posner for emphasizing at last "the vulnerability of our bodies" through their implication of "physical violence, sexual oppression, and ultimate loss,"<sup>126</sup> such explicit imagery was also condemned for its "pornographic" and "morbid" overtones and its indignant disregard for traditional forms of representation. The strongest expression of public censure was unleashed by the then-acting NEA chair, Anne-Imelda Radice, who vetoed a peer panel- and National Council-approved \$10,000 grant to the exhibition, defending her actions on aesthetic grounds, citing the exhibition contents' lack of artistic excellence and artistic merit," and "long-term artistic significance" as the primary factors in her decision.<sup>127</sup> In his catalogue essay for the *Corporal Politics* exhibition catalogue, "Art and Its Enemies," Donald Hall discusses this controversy surrounding the exhibition, explaining that the more probable cause for Radice's refusal of grant

money was rooted in a congressional pledge she made earlier that year, in which she vowed to deny funds for any art deemed to be “difficult,” “upsetting” or “sexually explicit,” and which did not have the widest audience possible.<sup>128</sup> Smith herself called the decision to revoke funding “ludicrous.” In response to accusations that her *Untitled (Sperm)* was vulgar and morally offensive, she retorted “Our culture has a hard time accepting life the way it’s organized. Without sperm, there is no reproduction. There is nothing implied in my piece that has a sexual connotation.”<sup>129</sup>

While the controversy surrounding The Brooklyn Museum of Art’s *Sensation* can be seen to have been fueled in part by the “iconophobia syndrome,” what many claim can be traced to Puritanical aversions to the imaging of sacred subjects in profane contexts, the critical onslaught against the body’s representation in art, as seen in such cases as the *Corporal Politics* debacle, can best be classified as a primary symptom of “somatophobia syndrome,” the fear of the body and its visual expression as a fundamental form of human knowledge and experience in visual culture. Just as spirituality has been “disappeared” from the realm of the profane and from modernist and contemporary discourses in visual culture, the body, as Smith argues, has also suffered from unjust categorization as culture’s inferior “other.”

It is in Smith’s work that we find a slippery fusion of politics, spirituality, and the flesh, which makes it nearly impossible to discuss one theme without acknowledging its relationship with the others. Smith herself has acknowledged this, saying of her art: “You can talk about it in political terms or from a spiritual perspective; there are just so many implications. It’s like looking at a center to see what’s around, and there’s a lot of stuff around.”<sup>130</sup> Therefore, while critical to

understanding Smith's work and its influences, viewing it from a vantage of body politics and/or feminism alone drastically limits the scope of her work and obscures the nuanced findings that can be realized when viewing such issues and their dynamic intersections within a framework of spiritual inquiry. Although some critics and scholars have noted the spiritual qualities of Smith's art, no one has explored these elements in depth or in such a way that understands them as part of an intimate alliance with her profound interest in the body.

Before examining the dynamic exchange between the spiritual and the corporeal in Smith's work, it is necessary to consider Smith's lifelong fascination with the clinical body and its socio-political implications as a primary means of assessing her motivation for materializing spiritual concepts. Furthermore, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Smith's work, one must examine her strategic use of materials as a means of articulating the physical thrust of her artistic production. Together with subject matter, the materials Smith uses are fundamental to forming what she believes to be the tangible and essential foundations of spirituality and daily life, thus affirming corporeal as well as intellectual modes of knowledge and belief. How then did the body come to be so important to Smith and how does it consistently motivate her artistic imagination?

### **Body Language**

Since 1979, Smith has turned to the physical details of human anatomy as a way of thinking through and actualizing social, political, and spiritual conditions. She views the body and its physical reality as a "universal religion" in itself, a creed

for understanding humanity on a collective level and a trusty compass for navigating the world. As she once explained, “I think I chose the body as a subject, not consciously, but because it is the one form that we all share; it’s something that everybody has their own authentic experience with.”<sup>131</sup> She claims she came into the body as her initial subject by accident when she was making sheets and pillow cases for her home. Painted with diagrammatic images of severed arms, legs, eyes, and mouths, these muslin pieces, including *Untitled* (1981) (fig. 2.3), *Hands and Feet* (1982) (fig. 2.4), and *Untitled (Severed Hands and Legs)* (1982) (fig. 2.5), are based on illustrations she consulted in a copy of *Gray’s Anatomy* she bought in 1979, a resource she often claims as her “Bible” for learning the fundamentals of drawing. The pieces, however, characterized for Smith a reality well beyond their raw, anatomical embellishment. Cut up arms and legs were “how my internal psychic life felt like” at the time, Smith remembers, “not chopped up, but in disarray, fragile.”<sup>132</sup> These anatomically inspired works were the first to resonate with Smith as legitimate pieces of art that she could hang on the wall, and it was in their making that she realized the significance the body held as a central theme for her work as both a subject and a metaphor for nonmaterial states of being: “It seemed to be a form that suited me really well—to talk through the body, about the way we’re here and how we’re living.”<sup>133</sup> Elsewhere she explained that her reason for choosing body-related subjects was simply because it seemed to be the ideal form of communication: “It was a language that I could talk in, that made sense to me.”<sup>134</sup> For Smith, body language was truthful, simple, accessible, and egalitarian. Furthermore, as a subject, the body

offered endless possibilities for dealing with broader, more universal issues, including politics and spirituality.<sup>135</sup>

Smith has also explained a number of times that her often macabre obsession with the body is undoubtedly colored by the large number of illnesses in her family and a general preoccupation with death while she was growing up.<sup>136</sup> She describes her family then as “morbid,...a little bit like ‘The Addams Family.’”<sup>137</sup> Smith and her younger twin sisters grew up in suburban New Jersey with their parents, Tony and Jane Smith, in a large, Victorian house, recognizable by an old, weathered gravestone etched with their family name resting in the front yard. In the hallway entrance, the death mask of Smith’s grandmother loomed large as a constant reminder of her own mortality, while human skeletons owned by her father, then an emerging artist, were often strewn about the home’s common areas to aid in his drawing technique. Additionally, there was an entire section of the house which contained nothing but turn of the century artifacts, such as clothing, books, even dentures, all belonging to her late grandparents, who previously lived there. “It was all death, death everywhere. I liked it a lot,” recalls Smith.<sup>138</sup> Her predilection for wearing eccentric, dark clothing, combined with her long, unwieldy, black hair only furthered the family’s reputation as the neighborhood “weirdos,” often enticing neighbors to taunt the young Smith with accusations that she was a witch.

Equally, if not most important to Smith’s fascination with the body and least discussed in criticism of her work is her Catholic background. Catholics, according to Smith, and particularly Irish Catholics, who claim a significant portion of her family lineage, are “obsessed” with death and the body and with “making things



physical.”<sup>139</sup> “Some people get free [of it],” she once said in reference to what she sees as Catholicism’s commanding influence over its adherents, both practicing and lapsed. “But I’m stuck with it.”<sup>140</sup> As in Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*, the body, in Catholic doctrine, is most commonly viewed as a medium of divine spirit, with its cult of martyrdom and its major mysteries firmly rooted in the body’s sacred status as a pathway to spiritual transcendence. Throughout her life, Catholicism has maintained a grip on Smith’s artistic imagination, informing her fascination with the body as a spiritual vessel and the body’s significance as a fundamental form of knowledge and representation. These interests constitute the spiritual thrust of Smith’s art. Examining her work from this perspective provokes the question of whether the physiological fundamentalism of Smith’s art ultimately signifies a sensibility she designates as Catholic. How does Smith’s recurrent consecration of the body in her work, in both subject, material, and process, speak to her personal experiences with Catholicism? The body is central to Smith’s work, and despite its ubiquity in our daily lives, the body and its representation in visual culture, Smith argues, have all but vanished from modern day consciousness.

### **The Body: “Disappeared” from Society**

Handwritten on a page in one of Smith’s myriad sketchbooks is a poem that illuminates the body-centered motivations for her work (fig. 2.6). Reading more like a choppy, stream-of-conscious journal entry of her most avid convictions, it states: “lots of people are being disappeared/ the body/ Soft tissue covering a boney structure/ the Brain/ Bone covering soft tissue/ what about the body heat, loss,

defiance/ frail + mighty.” This poem illuminates the perspective behind Smith’s self-proclaimed “fight with society,” which concerns “how this culture speaks only in one voice: . . . male, white, power, and money.” She believes that it is important for those who are not of this one voice to be “self-determinant, to talk from your own experience, so that your experience won’t be subjugated, dismissed, and ‘disappeared.’”<sup>147</sup> In her poem, Smith uses as her point of departure these people who are “being disappeared,” who, because of their difference from the “white, male, power, and money” norm, have been ostracized from society. This introductory phrase, “lots of people are Being disappeared,” is then meant to seamlessly meld visually and conceptually with the following words, which describe some of the body’s most basic physical properties: soft tissue, bone, and body heat. “What about the Body Heat,” she wonders. Although heat is easily lost through the body’s countless cavities and pores, it is defiant in its refusal to be contained. And while the body can seem fragile and vulnerable, as evidenced in its soft tissue and permeable skin, it is fortified with a solid skeletal framework. Smith’s words offer an acceptance of the body with all of its frailties and realities, while affirming an undeniable strength in its simple and miraculous physical makeup. The body, according to Smith, is at once frail and mighty. “. . . we are enormously strong and enormously fragile,” she has said. “So, fragility is strength and strength is fragility.”<sup>148</sup>

Furthermore, while the hastily scrawled phrases relay an initial elusiveness and dismissal of rational form and meaning, they ultimately resound with cohesive authority. As with the majority of Smith’s sketchbook entries, this has no formal

punctuation, nor does it adhere to any traditional grammatical sentence structure. In Smith's notebooks, words are often misspelled, sloppily rendered, scratched out or written over, and any accompanying drawings are loosely sketched as if having poured straight from her gut onto the raw paper, with no interfering, editorial brain. Besides serving as cherished reservoirs for her imagination, entries such as this are ultimately embodied forms in themselves, signifying, through ink and paper, the very flesh that generated them. Smith asserts the body's reality here in order to fight its disappearance. Comparing the body to those disappearing "Others," she sees the body as equally at risk of cultural erasure.

While it was normal to talk about the body in her family while growing up, Smith recognizes that, generally speaking, "we're very unphysical in our culture, and it makes lots of problems for us. We are too cerebral. It's not holistic."<sup>149</sup> This can largely be explained by Western reason's centuries-long endorsement of a "mind/body problem," a dualism, based in part on René Descartes' centuries-old formulation of the *res cogitans* (the dynamic, powerful mind and the site of identity) as superior to the *res extensa* (the essential body of raw, unchanging, and uncontrollable matter).<sup>150</sup> For Smith, this "problem" is not just philosophical but resoundingly political:

Our history is a history of body/mind dichotomy, and it really has had enormously devastating ramifications in society, in people's relationship to themselves. I think it is used to justify great quantities of oppression, to justify why it's OK to think that people who are doing manual labor are less important than people who are doing some kind of intellectual thing, because we have this split where we say the intellect is more important than the physical. And we have this hatred of the physical."<sup>151</sup>

Smith's sketchbook entry, "lots of people are Being disappeared," also addresses this body/mind dualism by characterizing the physical makeup of the body, which she relates to "soft tissue covering a boney structure," as the exact opposite of the brain's, "bone covering soft tissue." Yet, in her formulation of the two, does one necessarily dominate the other? Smith seems to have placed body and mind on par with one another, maintaining that both are part of the same meta-system of interconnective bone and soft tissue. The oppositions between body and brain and between what is frail and what is mighty stand as easy contradictions that are inevitable and welcome components of the body's infinite mystery. How, then, does Smith embrace these contradictions in her own work?

**"I pick my nose, therefore I am."**

Smith has often been characterized as an artist who "thinks" and "knows through the body." Her work challenges "knowing" as an action associated solely with the mind. Eleanor Heartney, for one, has noted that "[f]or Smith knowledge is subjective and cannot be separated from the sensate experience of the world."<sup>152</sup> According to Smith, we know as we experience life through our fingers, our ears, our tongue, our nose, our bones, and our digestive system as well as through our eyes and our brain. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl summed it up nicely in a review of one of her shows from the mid-1990s: "'Being' a body, not 'having' one is one of the deep themes of Smith's art. It seems she never heard of a mind/body problem. For her, the mind is a muscle...."<sup>153</sup> And, as Smith theorizes through her work, the muscle is a mind.

Smith's early interests in depicting the human body as a source of knowledge were cemented once she set out to demystify its complex physiology by examining it from a practical and intimate perspective. For three months in 1985, she and her sister Bebe trained to become certified Emergency Medical Technicians at Bedford Stuyvesant Brooklyn Interfaith Hospital. Explaining that she did this merely "out of curiosity" so that she could explore the body's innermost secrets, especially in trauma situations, Smith remarked, "It is physically very beautiful to look at the exposure of [people's] insides and outsides at the same time."<sup>154</sup> One particular incident confirmed her mostly phenomenological and highly idiosyncratic obsession with the body when a patient was rushed into the hospital with a gaping stab wound. Captivated by the way his body looked, so exposed, she recalls, "I wasn't really interested in sewing him up."<sup>155</sup> With her newfound knowledge of the clinical fundamentals of anatomy, Smith produced a series of works in which she turned the body inside out. Among these are *Drawing* (1987) (fig. 2.7), *Glass Stomach* (1985) (fig. 2.8), *Untitled (Meat Head)* (n.d.) (fig. 2.9), *Pelvis* (1987) (fig. 2.10), *Untitled* (1987) (fig. 2.11), and *Ribcage* (1987) (fig. 2.12).

As subjects, these anonymous depictions of body parts and anatomical regions share a common denominator in that they are blind to gender, race, class, sexuality, creed, and political affiliation.<sup>156</sup> They proclaim the democracy of the body as a universal reservoir of humanity. Like *Zweite Wahl (Second Choice)*, also made during this time, the works exude an air of humility in their clinical, deadpan presentation.<sup>157</sup> Smith sees them as collective portraits of the human condition, and for her, learning to understand something as basic and universal as the human body

motivates an acceptance of humanity in more accessible and egalitarian terms. “Most people don’t have a visual relationship with their internal organs,” she has argued, “and this is something I’ve tried to put right.”<sup>158</sup> She has further maintained that her work is “about de-mystification and education—this is what your liver looks like. It’s a first step in self-empowerment and self-determination of what’s going to happen to you. What are the different associations one has to their liver or lungs or different parts of the body? What do they mean in your daily life?”<sup>159</sup> Smith once explained that, as a child, she was often discouraged from asking questions and was thus denied access to a lot of information.<sup>160</sup> Her initial inquiry into the individual systems, fluids, and parts of her own body therefore constitutes an emphatic refusal of ignorance. Elsewhere Smith has said about her early anatomically-based work that “behind [it] was the idea that if you just knew what your digestive system looked like, you could make a way to think about it, to understand what you need to know concerning it. I’m a visual person, so images of the body to me are information—a way of having access.”<sup>161</sup>

*How I Know I’m Here* (1985-2000) (fig. 2.13), begun the same year she trained as an EMT, examines Smith’s own persona through a narrative-like staging of her most basic life experiences. A linoleum block print in four panels, the work features cut-out line drawings of a variety of Smith’s internal organs set within a dense, winding network of cells, nerves, veins, and floating body parts. The panels are exhibited as one, sixteen-foot horizontal frieze on machine-made sheets of Thai Mulberry paper, reading like a frenzied, cinematic sequencing of some of Smith’s most intimate encounters with her own body.<sup>162</sup> Her hands, featured in each panel,

serve as the work's primary narrators, exploring and facilitating various types of sensory experiences, which rhythmically alternate between the inside and outside of Smith's body. For example, the activity in the second panel is set in motion by a recessed line drawing of Smith's right hand, which "walks" along a winding pathway, the fingers serving as legs poised to investigate the lush terrain ahead. Touch, not sight, is the primary means of exploration in this work. Next to the hand floats a white, relief-like drawing of a pancreas, gall bladder, and spleen. The sequence continues with another recessed detail of Smith's hands grasping her right foot and touching it to her face as she tenderly licks her big toe.<sup>163</sup> To its right is another white, relief-like drawing of a female reproductive system accompanied by an incised detail of her mouth wide open with her fingers pinching the tip of her protruding tongue. The other panels similarly move in this rhythmic, back and forth sequencing between the interior and exterior of Smith's body. From a distance, the only images that can be read are the internal organs rendered in white relief, others of which include a liver, heart, stomach, urinary tract, lungs, and brain. Intermingled with these organs are other depictions of Smith engaged in basic bodily activities: combing through her hair with her bare fingers in an attempt to extract nits,<sup>164</sup> cupping her ear with her hand to enhance her sense of hearing, stuffing a pomegranate into her large, open mouth (fig. 2.14), and picking her nose. This is a portrait of Smith's entire self as she experiences the world through her flesh and her organs. Its abrupt flashes of sensory experience punctuate the otherwise chaotic platform of entangled viscera and body parts, which continuously vacillate between clinical pragmatism and

psychedelic whimsy, all the while affirming the body as a potent site of knowledge and experience.

In this regard, the portrait generates its own theory for how Smith navigates her way through the world. Images of a brain and a stomach, which flank a detail of the artist furiously shoving food into her mouth, for example, underscore an imperative to stress the continuity between the cognitive and appetite-driven impulses of the body rather than forging a definitive, hierarchical separation. This conviction radically undermines the Cartesian dictum that privileges the cerebral over the corporeal, declaring instead: “I eat/I taste/I hear/I feel/I pick my nose, therefore I am.” Smith’s body *and* mind substantiate her existence.

In a later, yet thematically related work, *Untitled (Brain with Asshole)* (1994) (fig. 2.15), a collaged lithograph on printed paper, Smith isolates and flouts the key principles of Cartesian philosophy by linking two unlikely constituents. Portraying the chief components of the nervous and digestive systems as a closed, continuous unit, Smith unites both literally, with a series of umbilical-cord-like strings of paper,<sup>165</sup> and metaphorically, the upper, exalted region of the body with its lower and debased half, responsible for eliminating waste. Musing over works such as these while considering society’s partiality to the mind, as it is customarily articulated through the voice, Smith once proclaimed, “the voice is no more a part of reality than your skin flaking off.”<sup>166</sup>

Smith’s work also asserts that bodily fluids provide crucial information about a person. *Kiki Smith 1983* (1983) (fig. 2.16) is arguably Smith’s most clinical and scientific self-portrait. Consisting of a glass microscope slide smeared with her own



blood, the work's patterning recalls the effusive gestures and liberally stained surfaces of abstract painting. Yet Smith's name and the year the specimen was taken, stamped on the slide's right-hand side, dilute any overt signs of universal, painterly expression and, instead, confirm a more specific and quantifiable truth about the artist: her genetic and cellular makeup as it was in 1983. This little smudge of biological data offers a wealth of insight into who Smith was at this time by way of the microscopic particles that were floating through her body. This kind of information, of course, is imperceptible to the naked eye, yet the very idea of a cellular self-portrait challenges traditional expectations of what this timeless genre can encompass by offering a more intimate sampling of the artist's identity.

*Kiki Smith 1993* (1993) (fig. 2.17) reveals another hidden component of Smith's persona. An etching and aquatint on an oversized sheet of handmade Japanese Echizen Kouzo-Kizuki paper, this unlikely self-portrait represents a complete digestive system from mouth to anus. Tiny fan-brush lines together with delicate impressions of Smith's own finger prints flesh out its raggedly rendered coils, giving the form a raw tactility that is more stylized and viscerally expressive than anatomically precise. Additionally, while the feces-colored smudges along the edges of the drawing, together with the animated ripple and splatter patterning in the print's background, emulate the body's inherent volatility and internal fluid makeup, they simultaneously solidify Smith's expressive transference of energy. To breathe further life and dimension into the piece, Smith had its surface spritzed with a pump water sprayer after the printing was complete in order to achieve a kind of "crinkly, folded, distressed look."<sup>167</sup> This deliberate roughing-up of the delicate Japanese

paper gives the work a dynamic, sculptural quality that simulates the very bulk and fleshiness of a digestive system and its hidden contents. Its attention to surface pattern and palpability is emblematic of Smith's uncanny ability to transform a subject associated with bodily waste into a poignant, even elegant reflection on growth and regeneration.<sup>168</sup>

As in *Kiki Smith 1983*, *Kiki Smith 1993* also includes the year it was made, which serves as a subjective marker of Smith's reality at that particular time in her life, ten years after she represented herself as her blood. Smith has often labeled herself an overeater and has struggled with her weight all her life, constantly battling a society that preaches corporeal discipline. In 1993 she was particularly preoccupied with the digestive region of her body and felt that this dissection and uncovering of her hidden self was the most authentic model of expression.<sup>169</sup> By isolating a particular body part, fluid, or region such as the digestive system, Smith is able to ponder its personal and psychological significance in her life. "It seems important to embrace [our physical existence] and look at what these different parts of the body or systems of the body mean," she has said. "If you separate out the digestive system and look at just that system and how much of your life is surrounded by that system, it's just a way of looking at your life."<sup>170</sup> Making works such as *Kiki Smith 1993* also proved to be healing in a ritualistic kind of way through manifesting those parts of her body she saw as "inherently weak."<sup>171</sup> In fact, both the 1983 and 1993 *Kiki Smith* self-portraits relate to earlier drawings and multiples of cigarette packages and pill bottles Smith made to confront what she was doing to her body at a time when she lived on a steady diet of whiskey and cigarettes.<sup>172</sup> Also self-portraits, this series

of works, made over a period of several years in the early 1980s, is a literal transcription of the proverbial expression “you are what you eat.” The works are also products of the “antimedical campaign” Smith was conducting at the time: “I saw medicine as something that tried to own you,” she has said, “that involved you in disempowerment.”<sup>173</sup>

In addition to viewing the drawings as self-portraits, Smith understands them on a more universal level, claiming that they’re also about “people ingesting the world or ingesting these kinds of substances to change their bodies.”<sup>174</sup> Generally her work slips readily between the personal and universal, the private and the public, and, as Smith has commented numerous times, her work is at its best when it allows for interpretations that are unique to each viewer. “It’s not didactic,” she once said of her work. “It’s more like opening a can of worms. All the life that happens between the tongue and the anus. It’s opening up a situation.”<sup>175</sup>

The digestive system, for example, has assumed a variety of forms in Smith’s body of work, from the highly personal in *Kiki Smith 1993* (1993) to the utterly nonspecific in an early screenprint, *Untitled* (1986) (fig. 2.18) and in *Untitled (Intestine)* (n.d.) (fig. 2.19), an anonymous bulge of delicate paper entrails that dangles from the wall. Another version made of ductile-iron, simply entitled *Digestive System* (1988) (fig. 2.20), brings the subject into full, three-dimensional solidity. To Smith, the work initially resembled prison bars and was therefore an appropriate manifestation of herself as a prisoner of her digestive system. After she hung it on the wall, though, it looked more like a rusted, old, beaten-up radiator. As she recalls, “I thought that was the more accurate model, because it’s what your

digestive system does—takes in energy and radiates it out into your system.”<sup>176</sup>

Crudely bolted to the wall, the work stands in stark contrast to its fragile, paper relatives. Yet it similarly speaks of our common humanity at a basic, corporeal level, emphasizing Smith’s mantra that no matter how complex and diverse we may be, it is liberating to seek out a common denominator, easily found in the fundamental reality of our bodies. “Basically we’re just these [systems of] holes going from one end to the other,” she has said of the utilitarian simplicity of our bodies.<sup>177</sup> *Intestine* (1992) (fig. 2.21), rendered in bronze, attests to this, with its unraveled coils stretched into a single, 30-foot trajectory across the wall. A hole at either end, this hose-like structure fleshes out the idea of the body as a generic, simple machine. With such works, Smith grounds identity in our collective physical existence, claiming that we *are* our bodies and our bodies are us: we are more than just “these blobby heads floating through space.”<sup>178</sup>

Yet works such as these function as more than simple commentary on body-based idiosyncrasies or utopian pronouncements of our common humanity. They are also tinged with socio-political issues and can be read, in part, as fierce combatants in the war against what Smith considers to be societal contempt for the physical.<sup>179</sup> The fragmentary nature of Smith’s work in particular has often been read as a potent metaphor for the body’s vulnerability in the face of political oppression, trauma, violence, alienation, loss, and struggle. *The Essential Gesture* (1994), an exhibition that focused on representations of the human figure and its constituent parts, featured works including Smith’s *Untitled (Meat Arms)* (1992) (fig. 2.22) as emblems of what some have identified as a late twentieth-century penchant for the anti-classical:

“incomplete, alternately heroic and frail, ferocious and victimized.”<sup>180</sup> Modeled from raw meat and gruesomely mangled as if ripped from a body, these generic, bronze appendages evoke an acute sense of violence and visceral revulsion reminiscent of war or mass murder, according to the exhibition’s curator, Bruce Guenther.<sup>181</sup>

Smith, too, has explained her inclination for depicting dismembered body parts and systems as part of a phenomenological urge to reclaim the body from the vast array of political agendas that hold sway over it. “Look at the skin’s surface,” she urges:

or the endocrine system, or how much blood there is in the body, and try to see how these things relate in the social or the political, now that all these different factions in society are trying to vie for control of the body, or the ideologies and philosophies of the body. [My work] tries to make people look at and examine those philosophies and ideologies that own you in every aspect of your life—be it religion, government, health, gender definition, or whatever.<sup>182</sup>

Arguably, one of Smith’s most overtly political works is *Womb* (1986) (fig. 2.23), a bronze cast of a uterus swollen to pregnant fullness but left hollow. *Womb* speaks particularly to women’s personal and political struggles in their ongoing battle over body ownership in relation to abortion rights.<sup>183</sup>

Promoting an open and democratic understanding of the body and examining its significance in the personal and socio-political arena, however, does not end with Smith’s subjects alone. Equally important to the artist are her materials, whose physical and metaphorical properties also speak to universal human conditions and whose strongly visceral attributes create meanings both personal and political all their own. This integral component of Smith’s work has been significantly underexamined, and its crucial role in realizing the corporeal and spiritual

motivations behind her artistic practices warrants serious scrutiny. One critic has noted that Smith is considered preeminent among a group of contemporary artists who are “as carefully attuned to how their work says something as to what it has to say.”<sup>184</sup> Yet what does this have to do with her interest in the body as a subject, and how does her attention to the physical “stuff” of art inform the spiritual thrust of her work? First, one must consider Smith’s versatile, egalitarian, and imaginative handling of materials and how her characteristic approach to and use of them affirms corporeal modes of knowledge and inquiry.

### **“Making Things”**

As previously discussed, the humble, hands-on medium of ceramic Smith used to make works such as *Zweite Wahl (Second Choice)* fittingly approximates the fragile and lowly qualities of the organs themselves. An unlikely contender among the ranks of what are commonly considered refined, “high art” objects, *Zweite Wahl (Second Choice)* epitomizes Smith’s inclusive, non-hierarchical approach to her subject, materials, and artistic process. “I do things in this very handmade, old fashioned way,” she has said of her method, “using things that aren’t cared for any longer—out-moded technology, materials that don’t have much significance or power.”<sup>185</sup> In fact, Smith has always categorized herself as a craftsperson, a “thing-maker” rather than a “real” artist.<sup>186</sup> She also makes things she doesn’t necessarily intend to exhibit or to sell as autonomous works of art and relishes in their energy as products of a creative, decorative process. “I didn’t originally intend to be an artist,” she once confessed. “I was much more interested in decorative arts—daily life,

beautiful objects....For a while I wanted to be a potter, and then I wanted to be a fabric designer....I was very craft oriented.”<sup>187</sup> Smith attributes a large portion of her hands-on experience to assisting her father with the preparations for his signature geometric sculptures when she was young. In addition to sitting at the kitchen table for hours after school, cutting out countless cardboard models of cubes, tetrahedrons, octahedrons, and dodecahedrons, Smith and her sisters helped their father gather and divide into various lengths the endless array of twigs and branches he used for his projects. They were also regularly called upon to help move and position his full-scale, monumental sculptures into endlessly varied configurations around the backyard.<sup>188</sup> Although she resented the work at the time, Smith has since gained an appreciation for physical labor as an integral part of the art-making process. Working repetitively with her body, sometimes even mindlessly, she claims, makes her feel “free.”<sup>189</sup>

Years later, beginning in 1976, when she first moved to New York City with little money to spend on her art, Smith drew upon these early experiences by making objects out of readily available or found materials such as sticks, cardboard, paper, and cloth scraps. In addition to being inexpensive, these materials were attractive to Smith because of their independence from traditional Western art materials and production, allowing for a fresher, more personalized approach.<sup>190</sup> Living on the fifth floor of a walk-up apartment building also necessitated that she use materials that could easily be carried up and down the stairs. Smith claims to have never gone to an art supply store during her first five years in New York City, instead she depended solely upon sheer resourcefulness to generate her work. Consequently, she has

described her early artistic process as one of simply “making things,” which could best be understood as a “way to live one’s life rather than a discipline to be studied or a career to be promoted.”<sup>191</sup> This humble, hands-on approach continues to be something of a signature for Smith, even now that she has become a high-profile artist in contemporary visual culture, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.<sup>192</sup>

Smith’s emphasis on unpretentious, utilitarian, and discarded materials and techniques holds a socio-political significance that took root during her formative years as an artist. She is not ashamed that, for example, she was often placed in the lowest-level art classes at her school and often felt “stupid” in comparison to her peers: “It was all working class people, immigrants and black people who were in the classes with me. Which is what has made me want to make my work accessible and informative....The group of artists that I come out of are populist artists. From that feeling of not having access in the society, it seemed important to me to make things accessible and to demystify them.”<sup>193</sup> Smith has also acknowledged the egalitarian, earth-conscious, and collaborative spirit of the “Hippie movement” as well as the political resolve of Frida Kahlo and other artists of the Mexican Revolution who made art for “the people” as among her key inspirations for making populist art.<sup>194</sup> In the early 1970s, these convictions led to Smith’s brief participation in Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theater, a socially-engaged, collaborative organization that attributes much of its performance-based design work to the Pattern and Decoration movement. Today, Smith continues to contribute to the theater and performing arts, making costumes and set designs for plays, including *Eve, As You Like It*, and more recently *La MaMa E.T.C.*



In the late 1970s and 1980s, Smith's involvement with Collaborative Projects, Inc. ("Colab") unequivocally secured her initial status as a crafts-based, politically motivated artist working outside the commercial mainstream. A loosely organized, media-based artists' cooperative, Colab was best known for its exhibitions in alternative spaces around New York City. Among its original members were Charlie Ahearn, Tom Otterness, Jenny Holzer, Cara Perlman, Alan Moore, Robin Winters, Jane Dickson, and Walter Robinson, many of whom had come of age during a decade dominated by formalist theories of art and a discriminating commercial gallery system that favored individual innovation and aesthetic achievement over politically-motivated collaborative production.<sup>195</sup> In addition to their commitment to predominately figurative art forms that articulated political, social, and personal convictions, the artists of Colab characteristically used materials and mediums outside dominant art world discourse—humble, utilitarian, accessible, and unpretentious materials that emphatically contested the institutionalized and highly-guarded separation of high and low art.<sup>196</sup>

Arguably the collective's most well known exhibition, *The Times Square Show* was held in a dilapidated former bus depot and massage parlor on Seventh Avenue and 41<sup>st</sup> Street in Manhattan in 1980. Shamelessly crude, cluttered, and chaotic, this low budget, "funhouse" of an art show, which many saw as an homage to earlier Happenings and Fluxus events, seamlessly merged with the hedonism, garishness, and quirky irreverence of the surrounding neighborhood, then considered to be the "epicenter of the city's viceland."<sup>197</sup> While appealing to its share of art world sophisticates and radical cynics, the show's motley assortment of film and

video, installation, painting, drawing, sculpture, poster art, performance, fashion, music, and exotica also successfully lured unsuspecting locals who happened to stumble upon the show's carnivalesque intrigue, intentionally constructed to subvert and demystify the mainstream gallery-hopping experience.<sup>198</sup> The show's refusal to "officialize" the works with clear spatial demarcations and identification labels only furthered its collaborative and egalitarian spirit, and its accessibility and unabashed display of indigenous kitsch memorabilia and political texts, which might or might not have passed as "art," was considered its strongpoint.

Smith exhibited her first anatomically-based works at *The Times Square Show*, including a banner-sized painting of chopped-up arms and legs, some of which were paired with similar banners representing animal and insect imagery on tie-dyed backgrounds. *Corrosive* (1980) (fig. 2.24), a T-shirt screenprinted with the generic symbol for toxic liquids, was displayed in the exhibition's accompanying souvenir shop, which sold a variety of items at inexpensive prices. Smith also made a series of small, plaster pill bottles, cigarette packs, and fingers, covered with mold spores, along with severed-finger earring multiples and other T-shirts and scarves screenprinted with disease- and death-related texts and imagery, which she sold at the *A. More Store*, another Colab-run retail space established later the same year at 593 Broome Street in Soho.<sup>199</sup> Like the early self-portraits in which Smith represents herself as her blood and her digestive system, these rudimentary renditions of vice objects and body parts manifest the corrosive vessels our bodies become when we ingest poisonous substances.

The universal human self, as experienced through the body, is also examined in other crafts-based works from this period, such as *Nervous Giants* (1980), also exhibited at *The Times Square Show*. (fig. 2.25).<sup>200</sup> Similar to the earlier *Gray's Anatomy*-inspired series of works Smith made initially for her home, the work consists of a large, muslin bed sheet embroidered with an elementary diagram of the human nervous system. Smith once worked as an electrician's assistant and had often thought of the body's nervous system as a kind of electrical system, always "pulsing on and off." The method of stitching—a single thread repeatedly darting in and out of a cloth—also seemed to Smith an appropriate metaphor for the rhythmic electrical currents that freely navigate the nervous system.<sup>201</sup> Stitching also references women's work, and Smith has described the process as a "dissident" female activity. For *Nervous Giants*, she used Betsy Ross as her model—"somebody doing quiet, peaceful, apparently unambitious work [by sewing the American flag], and then a nation comes of it."<sup>202</sup> Smith also stressed the female, communal quality of stitching, as it relates to knitting, sewing, and quilting, when she exhibited subsequent versions of *Nervous Giants* together as a string of banners suspended from wires. In this particular installation, the fragile banners gently rippled and swayed with every puff of air like gossamer-thin bed sheets dangling from a clothesline.<sup>203</sup>

This distinctly humble, practical, and handmade quality of the pieces she made during her Colab years of the early 1980s is what Smith has come to value most in her work: "I was very proud that my art was washable...[and that it] folded small, so there was a modesty—you could keep these pieces in the cupboard, then take them out, like a rug merchant."<sup>204</sup> Furthermore, her approach to the artistic process as one

of simply “making things” applies not only to her resourcefulness in turning cheap or found materials into feasible art forms but to the openness with which she tackles these materials. “I have no preference for any one material,” she admits.<sup>205</sup> “[Y]ou choose materials just the way you’d choose words or...spices to put in your cooking—rather than adhering to one material.”<sup>206</sup> For example, the aforementioned anatomically-based works she made during the mid to late 1980s, such as *Ribcage*, *Untitled (Meat Head)*, and *Glass Stomach*, represent a range of materials, each one chosen for its particular physical, psychological, and metaphorical properties. The untreated terracotta used for *Ribcage*, for example, appropriately replicates the stark fragility of this anatomical structure, and the way in which Smith dangled the individual ribs, held together by a series of frayed threads, from two small nails in the wall, further enhances the work’s delicate and vulnerable quality. Similarly, the red-stained wax used for *Untitled (Meat Head)* fittingly approximates the muscular density and fleshy texture found in anatomy classroom écorché models.

Smith’s use of materials, however, is not always predictable, as it often speaks to the contradictory qualities inherent in her subjects as well. With its cold, brittle translucency, *Glass Stomach*, for example, undermines expectations of how this soft, opaque, and pliable organ should be rendered. The impetus for this work came from X-rays she saw of people who compulsively swallow pins and pens, an impulse that struck her as a “superliteral manifestation of consuming the world.”<sup>207</sup> Wanting to make a work of art about this, Smith realized that a stomach made of clear glass would achieve a transparency similar to an X-ray, allowing for a simultaneous interior and exterior view of the organ. Smith originally planned to stuff objects

inside the stomach to further literalize this effect and to enhance the work's functional properties, but she liked it better clear, allowing for broader interpretation.<sup>208</sup> She is drawn to the paradoxical qualities of glass, particularly in how its solid yet fragile, and potentially dangerous properties are yielded from a malleable state of hot liquid, which more aptly approximates the body's sensuous and oftentimes volatile organicism. Details such as this could easily be overlooked, yet Smith's constant probing and dissection of her materials' physical properties and their metaphorical possibilities releases their latent attributes, making visible that which is often invisible.

By rendering the stomach and the greater digestive system in a variety of materials other than glass, from ceramic to paper to ductile iron, Smith has suggested that the organ's physical associations bear no fixed meaning. While she often claims that she simply chooses materials according to what strikes her as particularly "curious" or "amusing,"<sup>209</sup> exploiting the materials' inherent physical properties ("because each material has its own weight or properties, like earth, water, fire, and air"<sup>210</sup>), Smith has also explained her penchant for making different versions of a single subject as a largely intuitive process:

Materials do things to you physically. ... They have this physiological aspect: different materials have psychic and spiritual meaning to them. If you make bodies out of paper, or out of bronze, they have different meanings. So you get to choose which materials are appropriate and contain the meaning you want. Or you can make something in five different materials to have different emotional effects.<sup>211</sup>

Her selection process can also be characterized by its non-hierarchical approach to materials and her desire to have as many different experiences with the materials as

she possibly can: “I’m happy having a larger world than a smaller world,” she has said.<sup>212</sup> This ease and openness also stems in part from her father’s influence on her work and his uninhibited approach to materials, as Smith’s sister Seton, who is also an artist, has explained, “He taught us to consider the qualities of different materials and to look at almost everything as a potential resource.”<sup>213</sup> Smith has even described her relationship with materials as one of improvisation, collaboration, and compliance: “You start making things and then [the materials] start...telling you more and more what it is that you’re doing.”<sup>214</sup>

Whatever the reasons for choosing her materials, be they economic, aesthetic, physiological, psychological, emotional, spiritual, political, social, or purely coincidental, Smith always channels her work through the physical, compounding the materials’ brute properties with their often uncanny ability to render physically what would otherwise exist solely in the abstract. Smith comes to know and understand her subjects only once she materially manifests them. She has even remarked on her “stubborn” tendencies when trying to fully grasp a concept, acknowledging that she must first see and experience something physically in order to believe it. “At least if you know what it looks like,” she claims, “you can begin to think about your relationship with it.”<sup>215</sup> This largely explains her attraction to making multiples, what she refers to as “moving around” within a single subject. “Once you do know about one thing physically,” she explains, “at a certain point it’s easy to translate it then into other mediums and quickly understand it.”<sup>216</sup> For Smith, physical knowledge of any subject greatly depends on the materials used, and it is the materials themselves, combining synergistically with her anatomical subjects, which

most tangibly evoke the human body. While Smith's early involvement with Colab helped cultivate her ability to produce saleable works of art from the most humble and accessible of materials, it is Smith's own fascination with the body and the intimate dialogue she initiates between the body and her materials which generate her works' overall corporeal thrust.

### **Materials and Corporeality**

A page from one of Smith's notebooks reveals the thinking process behind her material choices for a particular work, stressing the symbiotic relationship between her materials and her subject matter (fig. 2.26). Smith wrote: "Possible materials: plaster, cloth, wax, concrete, paper. Bodys: flesh-meat, fat, skin."<sup>217</sup> Here, materials are believed to literally instantiate the flesh.<sup>218</sup> For example, Smith characteristically evokes the permeability, delicacy, and equal durability of skin through the wide-ranging physical properties of paper. *Fountainhead* (1991) (figs. 2.27-2.31), a handmade book of photo-engravings on Abaca paper, unabashedly surveys the body's orifices and their multiple transgressions in a candid account of humanity's most basic realities. Prototypes for body surfaces themselves, the book's translucent, skin-like pages bear intimate impressions of various body parts—an eye, a penis, a breast, an ear, a vagina, a nose—delicately rendered in broken lines of black ink. The dense networks of stipples and scratches that embody these intimate zones brazenly expose unsightly wrinkles, scars, and patches of hair, attesting to Smith's commitment to maintaining corporeal authenticity and candor in her work. Furthermore, the addition of leaking body fluids in colored ink—golden urine spilling out of a penis,

dove-white milk droplets dribbling from a nipple, and scarlet-red blood oozing from a vagina— enhances the work’s matter-of-fact poignancy, which, although bold in its literal forthrightness, adds a surprisingly delicate and decorative touch. At once raw and elegant, *Fountainhead* seamlessly folds its overt disclosure of our most basic physical indiscretions into a tender narrative crafted with private, handmade intimacy.<sup>219</sup>

The physicality of the paper medium only enhances the work’s palpable appeal. Not only do the raw, frayed edges and uneven topography of the book’s pages emulate the irregular surfaces of human skin and activate the sense of touch, but the book format itself requires our direct physical engagement with it. Measuring a substantial 21 x 21 cm, *Fountainhead* can only be experienced in its entirety by turning its pages with the sweeping force of an entire shoulder and arm. Another version of *Fountainhead*, which although measuring in at a more intimate 19.5 x 12.7 cm, features pages that must be unfolded several times in order to view an entire image.<sup>220</sup>

There is thus a sculptural and interactive quality to the works, which, while appearing quite fragile to the eye, are deceptively robust to the touch.<sup>221</sup> This contradiction between resilience and frailty directly implements Smith’s belief that the body is at once strong and delicate. On the one hand, she considers the body a solid, self-sustaining entity, and her work’s durability speaks directly to what she believes to be “the indestructibility of life, where life is this ferocious force that keeps propelling us.”<sup>222</sup> Yet she sees life as equally vulnerable. “You can just pierce it and it dies,” she once said, further noting that it is our bodies that constantly call us into



our own mortality.<sup>223</sup> Smith adds that while orifices facilitate life-giving, pleasurable exchanges and rid our bodies of toxins and waste, they also make us susceptible to invasion from the outside.

These paradoxical qualities are also evident in works that extend the sculptural dynamics of works such as *Fountainhead* into the more literal realm of the three-dimensional body. For Smith, paper is never limited to the flat, neutral repository for illustration it is often perceived to be. In her hands, paper becomes form itself, representing not only flesh but viscera and bodily fluids as well.<sup>224</sup> For example, *Untitled* (1995) (fig. 2.32), a colored pencil drawing of a pair of eyes on adjacent pages of a handmade paper book, resists the medium's standard, two-dimensional, linear narrative format with its tangled profusions of bulbous paper "tears" that conjoin at the book's center crease and dangle well below the pages' lower edges. Similarly, *Untitled* (1997) (fig. 2.33), a pencil drawing of a face on a flat sheet of Gampi paper, expels two paper, balloon-like projections from its nose, which read as renegade mucous secretions. Finally, in works such as *Pee Body*, (1990) (fig. 2.34), a hollow and ragged paper body that leaks copious streams of paper "urine," Smith challenges the conventional limitations of paper as a two-dimensional medium displayed on a wall by sculpting it entirely in the round and suspending it from the ceiling in the middle of a gallery.<sup>225</sup>

While flouting distinctions between the pictorial and the sculptural, these paper works not only evoke the palpability of the very bodies they represent, but they also disprove the common misconception of skin as a definitive borderline between the body's insides and the outside world. Smith has argued that skin is not a dense

casing that protects, conceals, and regulates the body's unruly interior, but rather that "skin is actually this very porous membrane, so on a microscopic level you get into the question of what's inside and what's outside. Things are going through you all the time. You're really very penetrable on the surface, you just have the illusion of a wall between your insides and the outside."<sup>226</sup> Thus, paper becomes, in Smith's hands, the very substance of the body's open and permeable nature.

The body, its skin, and its insides, as fleshed out in these paper works, achieve a great deal more than mere physical affect. Characteristic of Smith's work, they operate on a more universal, socio-political level as well. Smith considers skin an appropriate metaphor for all of the boundaries we claim to have in life, and the fluids that readily transgress these self-imposed obstacles serve as literal extensions of the self-- bridges between the inside and outside, self and other, private and public. While relinquishing control of our boundaries may generate anxiety, Smith contends that embracing the physical self and its multiple indiscretions is the ultimate retribution for society's fierce strongholds on the body:

Most of the functions of the body are hidden or separated from society, like sex or bowel movement... We separate our bodies from our lives. But when people are dying, they are losing control of their bodies. That loss of function can seem humiliating and frightening. But on the other hand, you can look at it as a kind of liberation of the body. It seems like a nice metaphor—a way to think about the social—that people lose control despite the many agendas of different ideologies in society, which are trying to control the body... medicine, religion, law, etc.... Who has control of the body? Does the body have control of itself? Do you?... Does the mind have control of the body? Does the social?<sup>227</sup>

Through her work, Smith ponders the personal and collective struggles the body routinely encounters in society, validating its intimate breaches of propriety as a kind

of liberation for all humanity. Smith's work refuses to just be about the body and its clinical reality, its visceral materiality, or even its socio-political significance. For Smith, the body, in all its overt fleshiness, is paradoxically the very essence of immateriality and the primary conduit of the spiritual world.

### **Body and Spirit**

Several critics have noted contradictory qualities in Smith's work. Nancy Stapen, for one, has remarked that her art has been mistaken as "simply a reflection of the material world," yet it "often appears as a gateway to the metaphysical."<sup>228</sup> Carlo McCormick has also observed that Smith's work is at once "conceptual and literal, formal and idiomatic, scientific and spiritual, political and personal, as well as clinically precise and abstractly metaphorical."<sup>229</sup> In a recent interview with Smith, he commented on the "mystical presence" of her paper body sculptures, such as those discussed above, describing them as "vessels of some metaphysical experience."<sup>230</sup> Smith agreed that while these works, including *Pee Body*, were initially made out of an interest in form and the idea of skin as a perceived envelope or boundary line, they undeniably possess a spiritual, even ghostly quality. "Because they have no weight to them," she also explained, "they're translucent and fragile—they have this quality of transcendence."<sup>231</sup>

Smith has also described her materials as metaphors for psychic energy. Note, for example, how, in a statement already referenced above, she explains the effects of her materials as both physiological and spiritual: "Materials do things to you physically....They have this physiological aspect: different materials have psychic

and spiritual meaning to them.” She uses the words almost interchangeably, as physical properties undeniably carry spiritual resonance for her. Like her verbal language, her visual grammar, as it will be discussed in the following chapter, slips effortlessly between the material and the otherworldly as if they were one and the same and not the mutually exclusive realms they are often perceived to be.

How, then, does Smith’s art mend this rift between the body and the spirit? While her conviction of a carnal-based knowledge largely explains her resistance to the institutional censoring of so much body-based art, such as the NEA’s opposition to the *Corporal Politics* exhibition, Smith’s commitment to the theoretical and artistic integration of the sacred and profane also attests to her ire over the cultural hostility towards artworks such as Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*. And while many have recognized the mystical qualities in Smith’s own corporeally-based works, no one has thoroughly investigated the spiritual significance of her art and its refusal to be “disappeared” from the context of contemporary American visual culture. The following chapter examines Smith’s anatomically derived work as it is primarily informed by her Catholic upbringing and her steadfastness in manifesting spirituality through sensual and corporeal expression. It also investigates Smith’s overt referencing of the history of material Christianity, which has characteristically understood the body as the primary gateway to spirituality.

With this in mind, how do Smith’s anatomically-based works incarnate spiritual ideas and beliefs and in what ways do they explore the sensual aspects of consciousness and faith? How does Smith’s art ultimately require us to consume it with our entire bodies and not with just our eyes, or our intellect, or our emotions?

While this chapter has examined the clinical, socio-political, and material significance of Smith's body-based art, Chapter Three investigates the body's seamless transformation in Smith's work from raw, base matter into sacred material for spiritual contemplation and piety.

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<sup>115</sup>Smith, quoted in Francisco Bonami, "A Diary of Fluids and Fears," *Flash Art* (January/February, 1993), 55.

<sup>116</sup>The German title is most likely due to the fact that Smith had spent several summers in Germany, the country where she was born, prior to making this piece.

<sup>117</sup>Smith has noted that the abdominal cavity, which she saw exposed during a dissection she observed, reminds her of a trough or a self-serving bowl. "A Conversation between Kiki Smith and Lynne Tillman," part of the Public Programs Series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, held in conjunction with the exhibition *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things* (January 28, 2004). This idea is made all the more poignant with the addition, in some versions of the piece, of a tiny ceramic fetus, another unwanted, discarded "body part."

<sup>118</sup>Smith, quoted in Carlo McCormick, "Kiki Smith," *Journal of Contemporary Art* (Summer, 1991), 89. Smith herself more aware as AIDS hit close to home: Her sister, Bebe died of it in 1988 and her friend, artist David Wojnarowicz in 1992.

<sup>119</sup>Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 481. The popular survey text features Smith's work in its final section, "New Tendencies of the Nineties," within the rubric "Return to the Body." Work by contemporary artists Sue Williams, Ann Hamilton, David Wojnarowicz, Robert Gober, Karen Finley, Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Rona Pondick is also discussed. "Untitled" (1990) marks the entrance to the "Body Art" room in Whitney's permanent collection.

<sup>120</sup>Robert L. Pincus, "First in its class; With big plan on campus, Stuart Collection rewrites rules of sculpture," *The San Diego Union Tribune* (October 18, 1998): E-1.

<sup>121</sup>Deborah Solomon, "Is the Met Phobic About Contemporary Art?" *The New York Times* (January 9, 2000): 47.

<sup>122</sup>Helaine Posner, "Separation Anxiety," in *Corporal Politics*, texts by Donald Hall, Thomas Laqueur, and Helaine Posner (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center; Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 27. The battle continues today. See also Michael Kimmelman, "Kiki Smith: The Body as Political Battleground," *New York Times* (August 16, 1992): 23, for a concise outline of body politics in art during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>123</sup>See texts Jessica Bradley, *Kiki Smith*, exh. cat. (Toronto: Power Plant—Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre, 1995); *Kiki Smith*, texts by Christine Ross and Mayo Graham (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1996); Essays by Jack Ben-Levi et al., Ward; Mary Jo Agerstoun, "Kiki Smith" *Terra Firma*, The Art Gallery, University of Maryland at College Park, 1997; Althea Greenan, "Moths, Bodies & Disorder," *Women's Art Magazine* 63 (March/April, 1995), 22-23, among others; session panels at the conferences of the College Art Association, such as: *Carnal Knowing: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Representing Women's Bodies*, 1992; *Negotiating Stereotypes: Representing the Body*, 1994; *Body Politics: Performativity and Postmodernism*, 1997; *Breasts in Visual Culture*, 2001, and 'Ecriture Feminine' 20 Years Later: *Hélène Cixous and Contemporary Feminist Art*, among others. *Abjection: Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art, Selections from the Permanent Collection* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), Joanna Isaak, "Working in the Rag-and-Bone-Shop of the Heart," *Otherworlds: The Art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith*, exh. cat., ed. John Bird (London: Baltic and Reaktion Books, 2003).

<sup>124</sup>Among these exhibitions were *The Essential Gesture*, Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1994; *The Body*, The Renaissance Society, 1991; *The Human Factor: Figurative Sculpture Reconsidered*, The Albuquerque Museum, 1993; *Corporal Politics*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1993; *Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic*, Portland Art Museum, 1992; *This is My Body, This is My Blood* (Amherst, Mass.: Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1992) texts by Susan Jahoda, May Stevens, and Elizabeth Hynes; *Body, Mind, and Spirit*, Chandler Williamson Gallery, 1995, among others; and periodicals, such as: Jeff Rian, "What's All This Body Art?," *Flash Art* 168 (January/February, 1993): 50-53; Roberta Smith, "Body, Body Everywhere, Whole and Fragmented," *The New York Times* (September 8, 1992): C24; Eric Gibson, "The Figure Reconsidered," *Sculpture* 13 (May/June 1994): 10; Donald Kuspit, "The Decline, Fall, and Magical Resurrection of the Body," *Sculpture* 13 (May/June 1994): 20-23; Mario Cutajar, "Reclaiming the Body," *Artweek* 22 (August 29, 1991): 12-13. Furthermore, among Smith's solo exhibitions that categorized her work as "body art"

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are: *Kiki Smith: Unfolding the Body: An Exhibition of the Work on Paper* (Waltham, Mass.: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1992), text by Susan Stoops; *The Body Electric: Zizi Raymond and Kiki Smith* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1992), text by Terrie Sultan, and periodicals: Michael Kimmelman, "Kiki Smith: The Body as Political Battleground" and Susan Tallman, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons," *Art in America* 80 (April 1992): 146-53, 175. Scholarly work also reveals the predominance of investigating the political implications of her work. See for example, Yana Balson, *Catholicism and the Flesh: An Examination of the Female Body in the work of Kiki Smith*, Master's thesis, Temple University, January 1999. Balson discusses the ways in which Smith puts great emphasis on formal qualities, on the form of something in order to better understand the body's personal and social implications- but not the spiritual implications, p. 8.

<sup>125</sup> See Thomas Laqueur, "Clio Looks at Corporal Politics," *Corporal Politics*, 14-21.

<sup>126</sup> Helaine Posner, "Separation Anxiety," *Corporal Politics*, 22.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Donald Hall, "Art and its Enemies," *Corporal Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1992), 12. At the same time, Radice denied a \$10,000 grant to the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University for a similar exhibition called "Anonymity and Identity," which also included images of sexual organs. This controversy sparked symbolic protest throughout the arts community. For instance, a few days after Radice vetoed the grant to the List Center, a Boston-based publisher, Beacon Press, withdrew its application for a for a \$39,000 grant from the NEA. See Patti Hartigan, "Beacon Press Thumbs its nose at NEA," *The Boston Globe* (May 14, 1992), 83. The private donors who ultimately rescued *Corporal Politics*, with a \$10,000 gift, were the members of the rock band Aerosmith, as reported by Christine Temin, "Controversy Abounds," *The Boston Globe* (September 13, 1992), 87.

<sup>128</sup> Hall, 12.

<sup>129</sup> Hartigan, 83.

<sup>130</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 93.

<sup>131</sup> Smith, quoted in Robin Winters, "An Interview with Kiki Smith," in *Kiki Smith* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art; The Hague: Sdu Publishers, 1990), 132.

<sup>132</sup> Smith, quoted in Helaine Posner, *Kiki Smith* (New York, Bullfinch Press, 1998), 31. Smith has also confessed, "I have an obsession with cutting things off, making them ineffectual, and I indulge my gory streak occasionally...." See Michael Kimmelman, "Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies," *The New York Times* (November 15, 1996), C1.

<sup>133</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 130.

<sup>134</sup> Smith, quoted in Kristen Brooke Schleifer, "Inside & Out: An Interview with Kiki Smith," *Print Collector's Newsletter* (July/August, 1991), 86.

<sup>135</sup> Smith has said "I've mostly made pieces that talk to the body, but people can fill them with their own content." Quoted in Schleifer, 87.

<sup>136</sup> Both her father and her sister have died. Her mother recently died as well, Summer 2005. As Smith explained in an interview, "I always think that somebody's going to get murdered or something like that when the phone rings. I used to be...afraid to come home because I thought somebody would have died...I expected death all the time, any second. Everything was going to die and disappear all the time...Now half my family is dead, so I'm getting used to it....You know it's perfectly okay, people dying. It's the most normal thing in the world." Quoted at

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/smith/index.html>, hereafter referred to as PBS Interview.

<sup>137</sup> Idem.

<sup>138</sup> Idem. She also described her home experience as one of living with "the dead things in the dead parts of the house." See Helaine Posner, *Kiki Smith*, p. 11.

<sup>139</sup> Smith, quoted in PBS Interview and Winters, 130.

<sup>140</sup> Smith, quoted in Chuck Close, interview with Kiki Smith, *Bomb* (Fall 1994), 38.

<sup>141</sup> Francisco Bonami, "A Diary of Fluids and Fears," *Flash Art* 1993, 55.

<sup>142</sup> Note, for example, Smith's inclusion in the host of "body art" exhibitions that have been mounted since the mid-1990s, including *The Essential Gesture*, Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1994; *Body, Mind, and Spirit*, Chandler Williamson Gallery, 1995; *The Body*, The Renaissance Society, 1991; *The Human Factor: Figurative Sculpture Reconsidered*, The Albuquerque Museum, 1993; *Terra Firma*, The Art Gallery, University of Maryland at College Park, 1997; *Corporal Politics*, MIT List Visual

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Arts Center, 1993; *Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic*, Portland Art Museum, 1992;, among others; periodicals, such as: Michael Kimmelman, "Kiki Smith: The Body as Political Battleground," *New York Times* (August 16, 1992): 23, Jeff Rian, "What's All This Body Art?," *Flash Art* 168 (January/February, 1993): 50-53 and Roberta Smith, "Body, Body Everywhere, Whole and Fragmented," *The New York Times* (September 8, 1992): C24, among others; and session panels at the conferences of the College Art Association, such as: *Carnal Knowing: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Representing Women's Bodies*, 1992; *Negotiating Stereotypes: Representing the Body*, 1994; and *Body Politics: Performativity and Postmodernism*, 1997, among others.

<sup>143</sup> Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 481. The popular survey text features Smith's work in its final section, "New Tendencies of the Nineties," within the rubric "Return to the Body." "Untitled" (1990) "greet"/marks the entrance to the "Body Art" room in Whitney's permanent collection.

<sup>144</sup> Deborah Solomon, "Is the Met Phobic About Contemporary Art?" *The New York Times* (January 9, 2000): 47.

<sup>145</sup> Schleifer, 86.

<sup>146</sup> Schleifer, 86-87.

<sup>147</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 129-30.

<sup>148</sup> Smith, quoted in Amei Wallach, "The Way of All Flesh," *Newsday* (December 16, 1990), 19.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 128.

<sup>150</sup> See René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols. Translated by E.S. Haldane and G.T.R. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931-34).

<sup>151</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 86.

<sup>152</sup> Eleanor Heartney's most recent essay on Smith's work is entitled, "Knowing through the Body: The Art of Kiki Smith," *The Smiths* exh. cat. Essays by Adrian Dannatt, et. al. (Lake Worth, FL: The Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 2002), 76

<sup>153</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Incorrigible," *The Village Voice* (Oct. 10, 1995), 8.

<sup>154</sup> Smith, quoted in Francisco Bonami, "A Diary of Fluids and Fears," 54. About her reasons for taking the training course, Smith has also explained: "I was already doing work about the body and wanted to have information from another point of view about it. I did the EMT for the same reason I take an exercise class...I try to get information about the body from different disciplines." Quoted in Lawrence Rinder, *Matrix 142: Kiki Smith*, exhibition brochure (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, 1991): n.p. She also made photographs using CAT scan and X-Ray technology.

<sup>155</sup> Smith, quoted in Leah Ollman, "She Stands Expectation on its Head," *Los Angeles Times* (November 1, 1998), 65.

<sup>156</sup> Smith once noted that "not everything is gender-specific" and that gender, along with race, class, and sexuality are only "a small percentage of who you are....Universality is most important to me." "Artists and Youths, a Dialogue with Kiki Smith," *Youth2Youth Programs* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, November 30, 2001). As objects, these works also bear significant meaning in terms of the materials used to make them, to be discussed in the following section.

<sup>157</sup> They resemble Renaissance/16<sup>th</sup>- century anatomical textbook illustrations, yet without a great deal of scientific foundation. Smith's are more expressive, poetic, and poignant.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, quoted in Martin Gayford, "The Arts," *The Daily Telegraph* (March 8, 1995), 14.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, quoted in, John Dorsey, "KS discusses the body of art," *The Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 1996, 5E.

<sup>160</sup> Smith, quoted in, Winters, 133.

<sup>161</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, "In Her Own Words," 34.

<sup>162</sup> The work's horizontal foldout format was inspired by medieval and Renaissance prints of pageants and royal parades, Wendy Weitman, "Experiences with Printmaking: Kiki Smith Expands the Tradition," *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 17.

<sup>163</sup> The images of Smith, in which her face is identifiable were based on photographs of her taken by David Wojnarowicz, Weitman, 16.

<sup>164</sup> This detail was apparently inspired by a time when Smith had to do this for her niece.



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- <sup>165</sup> The strings were inspired by handmade paper cording used in Japanese bookbinding. See Olivia LaHs-Gonzalez, *My Nature: Works with Paper by Kiki Smith*, exh. cat. (Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 1999), p. 14.
- <sup>166</sup> Smith, quoted in Francisco Bonami, "A Diary of Fluids and Fears," 55.
- <sup>167</sup> Craig Zammiello, master printer at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) in West Islip, New York, where Smith has produced a significant number of prints, explains the process to Wendy Weitman, in Weitman, 19.
- <sup>168</sup> The characterization of the work as a system of growth and regeneration is Weitman's, Weitman, 19.
- <sup>169</sup> Smith in audio recorded speech, *Kiki Smith*. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, Visiting Artists Program, January 30, 1991). Hereafter cited as SAIC lecture.
- <sup>170</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 86-87.
- <sup>171</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 87.
- <sup>172</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 31.
- <sup>173</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 34.
- <sup>174</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 86.
- <sup>175</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 132.
- <sup>176</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 34.
- <sup>177</sup> SAIC lecture.
- <sup>178</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 86.
- <sup>179</sup> For example, "In [Smith's] art the body is more than a basic unit of matter that conforms to the laws of science. She gives the body a dimension that is political and social." Gilbert Brownstone, "There Was a Family Named Smith," *The Smiths*, exh. cat., 48.
- <sup>180</sup> Bruce Guenther, "The Essential Gesture," *The Essential Gesture* (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1994), 10.
- <sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>182</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 87. Smith also discusses these issues in a video-recorded program *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994). Or as maintained by art critic Susan Tallman in her article, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons," Smith's particular attention to body parts and corporeal functions culminates in one central question: "Who controls our bodies?" See Susan Tallman, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons," *Art in America* 80 (April 1992): 146. Christopher Lyon sees her work as an examination of the body as a means of diagnosing psychological and social ills: "Smith's aim is to release the body, or better, to spring it from the prisons of religion, medicine, and government, and from art and language as well.... Her works can seem like convicts suddenly freed....", Lyon, pp. 102; 106.
- <sup>183</sup> See, for example, Helaine Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 14.
- <sup>184</sup> See John S. Weber, "Introduction: After the Personal Became Political," *Dissent, Difference and the Body Politic* (Oregon: Portland Art Museum, 1992): 8.
- <sup>185</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 137.
- <sup>186</sup> "I've always made things. A great deal of my attraction is for hand-made, daily-life objects." See Winters, 134. Also, "I'm a thing-maker. I make *things*. I wouldn't even say which piece is an individual work." See Munro, 489.
- <sup>187</sup> Smith, quoted in Helaine Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 11, 31. Smith has also mentioned that when she was young she sewed patchwork and appliqué quilts and sewed her own clothes—"these hippie things." Smith, quoted in Frankel, 33. Also, in an interview she gave at the Whitney Museum, Smith labeled her father Tony and her sister Seton the "real" artists, stating that she would have happily done crafts all her life. "Artists and Youth: A Dialogue with Kiki Smith," *Youth 2 Youth Programs*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, November 30, 2001).
- <sup>188</sup> "We were like 'Egyptians,' they way we worked for him," Smith recalls. Quoted in Brownstone, "There was a family named Smith," 40, 48.
- <sup>189</sup> "Working, and the things that I hated most as a child, are what I appreciate the most as an adult now. I see that really formed my personality. It's funny." PBS interview.
- <sup>190</sup> "Paper doesn't have as developed a history of use for sculpture in Europe as in Asia, so it isn't 'used up' as a material." Smith, quoted in Frankel, 37.

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<sup>191</sup> Smith, quoted in Susan Tallman, 151. Also see Jennifer Wells, “The Body as a Democracy,” *MoMA Members Quarterly* (Fall 1990), 18-19.

<sup>192</sup> Smith’s inauguration into the blue-chip art gallery PaceWildenstein in 1994, as only the fourth woman among a roster of 31 artists and artist’s estates, is among the many achievements that have secured her acceptance into the mainstream art world. The other three women represented by PaceWildenstein are Agnes Martin, Coosje van Bruggen, Elizabeth Murray, and the estate of Louise Nevelson. See Carol Vogel, “Downtown Artist Goes Uptown, but Not Her Art,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 9, 1994: C11). As will be discussed in Chapter Four, Smith continues to embrace a hands-on, “feminine” craft-oriented approach to art making. For example, for her inaugural show at PaceWildenstein in 1994, she introduced some of her most overtly feminine work, made from decorative doilies-- works she herself calls “super girlie” and “annoyingly fem.”

<sup>193</sup> Smith, quoted in Close, 42. Smith has also discussed her propensity to make “accessible” and “easy” art at an “elementary school level” as a political gesture of resistance against the powers that be, “Artists and Youth: A Dialogue with Kiki Smith,” *Youth 2 Youth Programs*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, November 30, 2001).

<sup>194</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 31.

<sup>195</sup> For more information on Colab, see Barry Blinderman *Signs of Life: Rebecca Howland, Cara Perlman, Christy Rupp, and Kiki Smith*, exh. cat. (Normal, IL: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 1993).

<sup>196</sup> See Kimmelman, “The Body as a Political Battleground,” and *Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic*, exh. cat. Smith describes this formative period of her career as her “college years.”

<sup>197</sup> See Jeffrey Deitch, “Report from Times Square,” *Art in America* (September 1980), 59-63 and Anne Ominous, “Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of the ‘Times Square Show’ *Artforum* (October, 1980) and reprinted in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, Lucy Lippard, ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 183-191 for detailed analyses of the exhibition and its contents.

<sup>198</sup> “We’re interested in taking up situations that activate people outside the art world,” explained one of the organizers of *The Times Square Show*, in Ominous, p. 188.

<sup>199</sup> Smith also sold similar scarves and trinkets at Tin Pan Alley, a bar in Times Square where she worked as a cook.

<sup>200</sup> The title comes from childhood experiences Smith had whenever she encountered grown ups. At first she was intimidated by their overbearing presence but then realized that they’re “actually ordinary fragile and nervous people,” just like herself. See Frankel, “In Her Own Words,” 33. She also described this experience in one of her notebooks: “There was a girl that grew up in a house of nervous giants and monsters and she became a monster and a monster maker living in a chop shop of body parts, sewing, mending and regenerating dreams of Banshee Warriors.” In Paolo Columbo, et. al., *Kiki Smith*, exh. cat. (The Hague: ICA/Amsterdam, Sdu Publishers, 1990): 98.

<sup>201</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 33 and SAIC lecture.

<sup>202</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 33. Smith also sees stitching as metaphor for healing, a way of mending that which is flayed. See Winters, p. 128.

<sup>203</sup> From *Kiki Smith*, Ezra and Cecile Zikha Gallery, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 1989. Smith’s interest in stitching, embroidery, and other craft-oriented activities commonly associated with women’s work will be explored in detail in Chapter Four, as it relates to her female subjects.

<sup>204</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 31. Modest in concept and alluring in its simplicity, much of Smith’s largest work can be shipped folded inside a small cardboard box and installed with pushpins, as stated in Blinderman, *Signs of Life*, 7.

<sup>205</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 37.

<sup>206</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 86; SAIC lecture.

<sup>207</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 37.

<sup>208</sup> Idem. Smith was also commissioned to make a glass stomach for a Pepto Bismol advertisement. See Christine Temin, “Controversy Abounds,” p. 87.

<sup>209</sup> Smith, as quoted in Frankel, 37.

<sup>210</sup> Smith, as quoted Winters, 39.

<sup>211</sup> Smith, as quoted Close, 38.

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- <sup>212</sup> Smith, as quoted Schleifer, 85.
- <sup>213</sup> Seton Smith, as quoted in Brownstone, "There was a family named Smith," 50.
- <sup>214</sup> Smith, as quoted in Althea Greenan, "Moths, Bodies & Disorder," *Women's Art Magazine* (March/April, 1995): 23.
- <sup>215</sup> Smith, quoted in Leah Ollman, "She Stands Expectation on its Head," *Los Angeles Times* (November 1, 1998): 65. Also see PBS Interview.
- <sup>216</sup> Smith, quoted in Ollman, 65. Another recent event at which Smith publicly spoke validated these convictions. As part of a series of public programs in conjunction with the exhibition "Elie Nadelman: Sculptor of Modern Life" at the Whitney Museum of American Art (April 3 – July 20, 2003), Smith, along with artist Arlene Shechet, addressed the importance of Nadelman's work on their own. Nadelman (1882-1946) is known for his extensive collection of multiples. Smith expressed her admiration for his facility with formal experimentation, for his ability to play materials off one another, and for his fearless passion for synthesizing seemingly disparate materials, especially in his "taboo" juxtapositions of "high" and "low" art materials. As stated in "Kiki Smith and Arlene Shechet Discuss the Work of Elie Nadelman," (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, May 22, 2003). Smith also noted, in an earlier published conversation with Shechet, that, when seen together, Nadelman's works resemble a "strange gathering or a multitude of creatures." See "Arlene Shechet and Kiki Smith in Conversation," *Elie Nadelman: The Late Work* (New York: Sander-O'Reilly Galleries, 1999), 15.
- <sup>217</sup> Printed in Peter Noever, et. al., *Kiki Smith: Silent Work*, exh. cat. (Vienna: MAK, 1992): 35.
- <sup>218</sup> According to Smith, it is the physicality of the materials that is most important and it is the materials themselves that serve as vehicles for creating meaning. As explained in "Artists and Youths, a Dialogue with Kiki Smith," *Youth2Youth Programs* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, November 30, 2001).
- <sup>219</sup> Critic Nancy Stapen has written of her work, "Smith's images simultaneously seduce with their beauty and startle with their visceral nature." See Nancy Stapen, *Kiki Smith: Prints and Multiples 1985-1993* (Boston: Barbara Krakow Gallery, 1994). Also, Michael Kimmelman writes "Smith possesses a feeling about the body as something tender, vulnerable, something to be revered, and she is trying to convey both its raw physicality and its poetry, to be a realist and an expressionist at the same time. She seems determined to prove that the two are not irreconcilable." See Kimmelman, "The Body as a Political Battleground," p. 28.
- <sup>220</sup> The fold-out format is common in medieval books, which have inspired Smith's work. See Weitman, p. 21. Individual pages from "Fountainhead" have been exhibited as prints hanging on the wall as well.
- <sup>221</sup> Smith often makes her books from paper used for archival purposes.
- <sup>222</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 83.
- <sup>223</sup> Idem. Elsewhere, Smith has noted that while her works may appear to express the body as vulnerable, they also underscore the "ferocious strength of life.... There's an enormous fierceness that wants to live. So we are enormously strong and enormously fragile. So, fragility is strength and strength is fragility." See Amei Wallach, "The Way of All Flesh," *Newsday* (December 16, 1990): 19.
- <sup>224</sup> Smith has said, "I [use] paper as a sculptural material rather than as a flat material. But it changes; it just tells me what to do." See Schleifer, p. 86 and SAIC lecture. She uses paper to "challenge the material's limitations." See Olivia Lahs-Gonzalez, *My Nature: Works with Paper by Kiki Smith*, exh. cat. (Saint Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 1999), 9. Smith was also influenced by helping father in such a "hands-on" way, making paper geometric models for his work as well as using paper as a sculptural medium. See Brownstone, "There was a family named Smith," p. 48 and Weitman). Also, see Susan Stoops, *Kiki Smith: Unfolding the Body: An Exhibition of the Work on Paper*, exh. cat. (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1992). The exhibition highlights Smith's unorthodox approach to this medium.
- <sup>225</sup> A full analysis of these characteristically female bodies which emit an unruly melange of bodily fluids will follow in Chapter Four.
- <sup>226</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 83.
- <sup>227</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 127.
- <sup>228</sup> See Stapen, p. 5.
- <sup>229</sup> See McCormick, p. 81.
- <sup>230</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

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<sup>231</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 85. Smith has also explained how this association came to her accidentally: “I hung one of them up in the corner of my studio, just to get it out of the way, but it was shortly after my sister Bebe died, when I saw it suspended there and thought that it is like a spirit. With all these people we know dying of AIDS, you have this hovering of people’s presence who you don’t have physical access to anymore but are quite vital to your life. Having this body hanging in the corner reminded me of that....” Quoted in McCormick, 84.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Spirit Incarnate

“Spirituality is nothing if it’s abstract.”<sup>232</sup>

*Untitled* (1990) (fig. 3.1), a two-panel wall piece first exhibited in the *Projects Room* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1990, consists of thousands of beeswax cubes assembled over several, thin layers of shredded gauze. The cubes, chopped from a single wax-casting of one man’s entire skin surface, were randomly jumbled then re-arranged to fit within a pair of rectangular frameworks. At first glance, these mosaic-like structures of misaligned flesh fragments appear abstract, and the work’s generic title only neutralizes the impact of any definitive subject. Upon close scrutiny, however, details of this man’s anatomy, piece by piece, slip into focus: the slightly tanned, fleshy bulge of his earlobe, a cluster of creases from the palm of his hand, and the wrinkly depression of his navel, for example. In the bottom right section of the right-hand panel, where the anatomical details from four cubes are accurately aligned, the impression of the top of the model’s foot can be made out, complete with its bulging tendons, hairy instep, and warped, encrusted toenails (fig. 3.2). It is only upon recognizing details such as these that the less discernible chunks also emerge as actual fragments of cast flesh: a concave piece from what may be the nape of his neck, for example, a slightly bumpy section from his right buttock, perhaps, and a portion of what is most likely the smooth underside of his forearm. It is the blood-red wax, oozing between each juncture, however, which ultimately confirms the work’s

realism and brings it into graphic focus. Together with the ragged clusters of gauze that sop up this “blood” around the panels’ perimeters and catch stray droplets from below, these explicit details relay the wounded condition of these freshly sutured grids of flesh, evoking a palpable sense of pain and vulnerability.

Like other works made during this time, including *Hands and Feet* (1982) (fig. 2.4) and *Drawing* (1987) (fig. 2.7), *Untitled* fulfills Smith’s desire to obtain a greater knowledge of the body through dissection, separation, and renewal. “I always wanted to know what the body would look like unfolded,” Smith explained in reference to this piece.<sup>233</sup> She once read in a medical manual that the average adult body is covered with 3,000 square inches of skin, a figure she used as a guideline for determining the total surface area between the two panels. While anatomical details specific to this model are evident throughout the work, Smith’s ultimate goal for it was to deliver a schematic for the universal human form, one that speaks to the collective human experience.<sup>234</sup> As she said in one interview, “I want to make things that don’t exclude and sometimes are informative—like how much skin surface there is or how much blood there is in the body—[to] show it to people, make it physical, then they can think about what it means in their lives.”<sup>235</sup> Any number of factors come to mind when considering the significance of skin in everyday life, including those concerning race, age, gender, weight, and beauty, and Smith’s gruesome portrayal of this skin as not only unfolded, but as flayed, chopped up, bloody, and sutured relays its vulnerability in the face of so much ideological discord in contemporary society. Its patched-up, reconstructed condition is also the result of what Smith once explained as her attempt at “piecing things together that have been

broken apart.”<sup>236</sup> She often refers to “the evils of European hierarchical dualism” as key culprits in the chopped-up and wounded state of our world, and she uses what she refers to as “the Frankenstein model” to meld disparate fragments into a unified whole, leaving the schisms and sutures visible. As Smith has explained, “[With this work] I’m trying for a containment, but one that can’t hide the rupture.”<sup>237</sup> The fissures stand as visceral reminders of this skin’s delicate and wounded state and of Smith’s attempts to resurrect a body, piece by piece.

An insistence on the flesh as an integral component of human nature is also central to the meaning of the piece. On several occasions, Smith has acknowledged the influence of the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) on her work in general and on this particular work. A medieval monk, theologian, and philosopher, Aquinas maintained that human nature consists of both flesh and spirit, and that without both, a person is incomplete. His words are transcribed in one of Smith’s notebooks:

Nothing is corrupted except by its form being separated from matter. A subject composed of matter and form ceases to be actual when the form is separated from the matter. But if the form subsists in its own being it cannot lose its being.<sup>238</sup>

Following Aquinas, Smith rejects the kind of dualistic thinking that posits the soul, or “form,” as independent from and superior to the body, claiming that a person *is* his or her body and not just a soul inhabiting a neutral shell. She also follows the medieval notion of union of body and soul. As explained by medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum, “The idea of person, bequeathed by the Middle Ages to the modern world, was not a concept of soul escaping body or soul using body; it was a concept

of self in which physicality was integrally bound to sensation, emotion, reasoning, identity—and therefore finally to whatever one means by salvation.”<sup>239</sup>

Thus, by removing the flesh in *Untitled* from its original context-- its essential form, or spirit -- Smith articulates the corrupt and wounded condition of a body that has been ripped away from its very essence. “A lot of my work is about separating form from matter and kind of seeing what you’ve got,” Smith once explained.<sup>240</sup> While its shoddy patchwork bares its current state of disarray, this body, with all its sutures and seams, also appears to exist for the very possibility of becoming whole again.

Perhaps it is in this abstract and ruptured condition that this body is most tangibly realized. Systematized into a more or less uniform pair of grids, this body’s new form recalls the serial, symmetrical ordering and tapered geometries of Minimalist sculpture. Its fleshy physicality in the purely abstract sense also draws on Minimalism’s allegiance to “objecthood” and presence.<sup>241</sup> Smith’s intimate knowledge of this style from years of helping her father negotiate and assemble his spare, modular, and geometric constructions most certainly shaped the thinking behind her work’s physical impact as well as its design and construction. A 1992 aluminum casting of *Untitled*, stripped of the blood and gauze and realism of wax, draws even more closely on Minimalism’s austere, sterile, and machine-wrought attributes (*Untitled (Skins)*, 1992, fig. 3.3). However, even the aluminum version imparts an organicism, most evident in the unique patterning of each cube, whose countless surface undulations, varying from gentle, rounded swells to sharply



puckered dips and ridges, suggest the distinctive folds and sensuous contours of a human body.

It is these formal idiosyncrasies that place both works more appropriately in the lineage of Postminimalism or “process art.” Borrowing from Minimalism’s commitment to material objectivity and presence as well as to regulated systems of geometric abstraction and structural repetition, Postminimalism is distinguished in part by its displacement of the former’s hard and aloof aesthetic in favor of softer, more sensuous forms and materials, which readily disclose the nuanced conditions of their making.<sup>242</sup>

Smith’s work has been compared to that of Eva Hesse (1936-1970), often labeled a Postminimalist artist, and whose work is best known for its initial consideration of these very conditions.<sup>243</sup> Hesse’s work is important to Smith’s because of its myriad references to the body. Certainly Hesse’s sensuous, organic forms call to mind the body’s physical structure, but it is also in Hesse’s artistic process and in the materials she uses that touch and corporeality are unequivocally present. A 1994 exhibition at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, entitled *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse*, included several of Smith’s works alongside those of seven other contemporary artists, all of whose work was characterized by the exhibition’s curators as, in some form, “indebted to [Hesse’s] creative efforts,” including Hesse’s direct, labor-intensive manipulation of unconventional, tactile materials, such as latex, fiberglass, rope, and papier-mâché.<sup>244</sup> In an essay for the exhibition’s catalogue, artist Mel Bochner describes his former colleague and friend as someone who “always kept a very physical, hands-on relationship with her work.”<sup>245</sup> Indeed,

Hesse's penchant for the handmade, as exemplified by her attention to process through repetitive acts such as knotting, binding, wrapping, threading, folding, stacking, and layering, is arguably her signature. Hesse herself even described on several occasions the repetitive nature of her hands-on working method as "compulsive," "obsessive," and even "absurd."<sup>246</sup> In various assessments of her work, critics have concurred, using these very adjectives to describe the nature of her process.<sup>247</sup>

Hesse's labor-intensive, time-consuming gestures are apparent in works such as *Sans III* (1969) (fig. 3.4), a sculpture composed of forty-nine, contiguous latex boxes. In a roundtable discussion held in conjunction with the 2002 Eva Hesse retrospective, conservator Martin Langer described how the work was made, noting that each box was built up with as many as ten to twenty layers of latex. At one point in the discussion, Langer facetiously used the word "forever" to describe the amount of time it must have taken Hesse to complete the piece. Langer, in fact, remade the piece himself to get an idea of the time and labor commitment, and as he recalled, while doing this, "days passed by, and weeks passed by. Knowing this," Langer observed, "suggests that the process of making *Sans III* may have been more important to the artist than the aesthetic of the resulting work."<sup>248</sup>

A self-ascribed admirer of Hesse's work, Smith, too, regards the process of creating a work of art as constitutive to its overall meaning. In a recent discussion at a public venue held in conjunction with her 2004 MoMA exhibition, *Prints, Books & Things*, Smith declared, "It's in the making where art resides, not in the thing."<sup>249</sup> The making of *Untitled* was most certainly a lengthy and laborious process,

beginning with the initial casting of the model's entire body surface, a markedly hands-on experience in itself. Subsequent steps included the removal, flattening, and dicing of the cast, and the methodical rearrangement of the 1,235 resulting cubes, one by one. Smith's meticulous fingerwork is also apparent in the layers of gauze that have been shredded, pinched, crumpled, and smoothed into place. Even the work's imperfections and irregularities, as seen, for example, in the uneven edges of the cubes and the globs of wax that seep up through the fissures, preventing a tight connection, stand as the result of a lengthy and methodical mark-making process. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Smith relishes in such tedious and painstaking labor, arguing that with each step, the work becomes more complex, indeed, more layered, and that, as an accumulation of many stages, the end product should reveal the conditions of its making.<sup>250</sup>

Equally important to the process of creating a work, for Smith, are the materials used to create it. This interest in materials was developed in part through her involvement with Colab, and by her interest in Postminimalist art, namely Hesse's, which typically incorporated the use of unorthodox, highly tactile, and often volatile materials. Another unifying factor among the artists featured in *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse* was their ability, like Hesse, to manifest in their work "a material sensibility," achieved by choosing materials whose physical properties bore the traces of their own hands.<sup>251</sup> A detail of Hesse's *Sans III* (fig. 3.4) for example, reveals the artist's direct manipulation of the latex, specifically in the way the sides of each box have been folded, stretched, pinched, and melded together in snake-like succession. Similarly, in *Constant* (1967) (figs. 3.5, 3.6), Hesse's fingerwork is

embedded within the surface of a unique mixture of acrylic paint with papier-mâché and other “unidentified” materials. Further hand manipulation is evident in the dozens of pliable rubber tubes incorporated into the surface, each tied with a single knot at either end.

Similarly, Smith’s handling of the individual cubes in *Untitled* was facilitated by the malleability of the medium she used. A volatile substance with a low melting point, wax is best known for its highly accurate surface memory. For this reason, it has been used for centuries in the production of a vast assortment of objects ranging from music records and artificial fruit to anatomical models and funerary effigies. Additionally, wax has been used to create those uncannily lifelike replicas of historical figures, pop cultural icons, and creatures of horror, known as waxworks and displayed in such venues as *Madame Tussaud’s Museum of Wax*. Smith’s use of wax sculpture derives from the ancient tradition of lost-wax casting, yet, in the case of *Untitled*, the wax is never “lost” or discarded; it is the primary medium. Smith employs it primarily for its plasticity, its impressionability, and its capability of verisimilitude. She also relishes in wax’s ability to impart a richness and tactility that beg to be grappled with in the true, physical sense.<sup>252</sup>

Thus, the human body, as manifest in the work’s subject, materials, process, and form, is the foundation of works such as *Untitled*. The work’s capacity to activate the bodily, or haptic, realm of sensation, as well as the visual, results from its multiple references to touch. Despite its generic title, *Untitled*, on the most literal level, represents skin, the primary “organ” of touch. Its show of flesh, blood, and bandaging, and its display of anatomical fragments bring the work into a realm ripe

with physicality. Decidedly different from the delicate skin of Smith's hollow and diaphanous paper works such as *Pee Body* (1990) (fig. 2.34), this skin is thick, substantial, fleshy, and more true to how one would imagine real skin to look, feel, and even smell. It is emphatically here for our visceral engagement; it is real enough to be sensed without ever touching it. This sensation of touch is also triggered by non-representational forces in the work. The palpability of the wax and the expressive, hand-wrought surfaces are able to communicate a corporeal sensuality without ever having to literally picture a body.<sup>253</sup>

Ultimately, *Untitled* hovers somewhere between figuration and abstraction with its dizzying array of textures, tones, materials, and formal details that constantly slip in and out of recognition. Punctuated by alternating dips and peaks, repeatedly offset by smooth plateaus, the irregular, hand-worked topographies of this panel-pair transform the work into a dynamic relief-map that is as readily felt as it is seen.

Yet what does the visceral corporeality of Smith's art signify and why is it so important to her work? While a work such as *Untitled* (1990) clearly draws on the formal achievements of Hesse and Postminimalism as well as the ideological complexities concerning identity and body politics, it is also fundamentally shaped by Smith's Catholic upbringing, which cultivated in her a healthy obsession with all things physical. As she has explained, "In working with the body, I feel like I'm actually making physical manifestations of psychic and spiritual dilemmas. Spiritual dilemmas are being played out physically. That puts me in a Catholic tradition..."<sup>254</sup>

This chapter examines the ways in which the physiological fundamentalism of Smith's art, as shaped by its subject matter, materials, process, and its impact on the

viewer, ultimately confirms its spiritual potency. It investigates the ways in which Catholicism has seized Smith's artistic imagination and fostered her fascination with the body as the primary conduit of the spiritual world. By examining the predominance of the body in Catholic doctrine and material culture, it will be shown that Catholicism is key to grasping the full impact of Smith's art.

### **Cultivating the Senses: Catholicism, Incarnation, and Material Culture**

Thomas Aquinas's belief in the indivisible union of body and soul was firmly rooted in the Christian Doctrine of the Incarnation, the central dogma of the Church which affirms that God was incarnated in human flesh through the historical person Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The Doctrine of the Incarnation is based on the fundamental paradox that because God took human form in the body of Christ, Christ was simultaneously both fully divine and fully human.<sup>255</sup> Because of the Incarnation, the sacred and the profane worlds are seen in Catholic doctrine as inseparable, and the divine is believed to continually reveal itself through the objects, events, and people of ordinary existence. Following the notion that the divine became mortal in the person of Christ, Catholicism regards the human body as the primary vessel of the divine spirit, the one medium through which humanity's deliverance from sin is realized. Catholicism's cult of martyrdom, as well as its major mysteries, including the Immaculate Conception, the Resurrection, the Transubstantiation of the Host into the body and blood of Christ, and the Assumption of the Virgin, are firmly rooted in the body's sacred status as a pathway to spiritual transcendence and redemption. Smith primarily understands Catholicism as a religion that employs a particularly

carnal approach to piety and salvation, stating on several occasions that Catholics are, for instance, “obsessed with the body,”<sup>256</sup> that Catholicism is “a religion that’s about making things physical, about taking very un-physical things-- emotional and spiritual ideas-- and making them physical,”<sup>257</sup> and that Catholicism “uses a body model or image to address the spiritual condition.”<sup>258</sup> Most notably, in her 1999 *Newsday* editorial on the *Sensation* controversy, Smith observed more broadly of Christianity that it is “a ritual-based religion that represents spiritual matters in physical form,” and because of its emphasis on physicality, “the Christian world is one pregnant with symbolism and meaning.”<sup>259</sup>

Indeed, symbols are historically vital to the Catholic Church’s mission to help its members understand, communicate, and celebrate the divine nature of God, with the body as its most potent symbol. In the book *Symbols of Catholicism*, an introduction to the fundamental rituals and sacraments of the Catholic religion, symbols are explained as “a constant requirement of human nature, which is made up of both a soul and a body. They allow us to pass from the one to the other by means of an image or of a text....They act as linchpins or hinges and are essential to us... [because they] refer to a reality which transcends them.”<sup>260</sup> Furthermore, as the book’s author, Dom Robert Le Gall concedes, it is because of the mystery of the Incarnation, the spirit made flesh, that Catholics “justify” making images of God.<sup>261</sup>

Art historian Colleen McDannell also attests to the power of symbols as incarnations of the spiritual world in her book *Material Christianity*. She explains, “Through contemplating the signs of God, the mind and spirit of the believer ascend from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the referent. Devotional pictures

and sculptures bridge the gap between the human and the divine....” McDannell also maintains that “It is through the visible world that the invisible world becomes known and felt.... People need objects to help establish and maintain relationships with the supernatural [world].”<sup>262</sup> Smith, too, has noted Catholicism’s particular use of symbolism as a means of enfleshing the spiritual world along with its propensity to find sacred significance in everyday things: “Catholicism is always involved in the physical manifestation of psychical conditions, always taking inanimate objects and attributing meaning to them. In that way it’s compatible with art.”<sup>263</sup> Elsewhere, Smith stated, “It’s one of my loose theories that Catholicism and art have gone well together because both believe in the physical manifestation of the spiritual world, that it’s through the physical world that you have spiritual life, that you have to be here physically in a body. You have all this interaction with objects, with rosaries and medals. [Catholicism] believes in the physical world. It’s a ‘thing’ culture.”<sup>264</sup>

Moreover, as tangible evidence of sacred conditions, Catholicism employs symbols that appeal to more than just the sense of sight. As epitomized by the holy sacraments through the liturgical rites of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Penance, and Extreme Unction, Catholics rely on symbols to cultivate all of the senses in spaces of worship. While appealing to our sense of vision through imagery and gesture, Catholic liturgy also requires aural participation, listening to the Word of God, both spoken and sung, and to music, chimes, and bells, as well as using one’s own voice in worship. Liturgical participation also entails the smelling of incense and the tasting and consumption of the Eucharistic bread and wine. Furthermore, the sense of touch is activated through the anointment of water in



the Holy Baptism, for example, and through the laying-on of hands and the use of unction. An example of the urgency with which Catholic liturgy seeks to encourage such kinds of somatic piety can be seen found in a manuscript composed by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, entitled *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*. After convening with the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1978, the Bishops' Committee prepared a document that mandated implementation of a particular set of symbolic criteria by all those involved in preparing liturgical spaces for worship. In one section, "The Experience of Mystery," which outlines particular requirements for worship, it states that, in order to achieve a successfully "contemplative" atmosphere in which a sense of the holy can be fully realized, all five senses must be called upon. "One should be able to sense something special in everything that is seen and heard, touched and smelled, and tasted in liturgy," it reads.<sup>265</sup>

Furthermore, in noting the Catholic church's extensive history of using symbols to encourage communication between its members and Christ and the saints, Colleen McDannell has observed the particularly somatic nature of Catholic piety, in which "images are handled, cherished, prayed to, and even eaten in order to arouse affection and evoke tears." She notes, for example, one nineteenth-century German lithograph of the crucified Christ, which was printed on numerous sheets of paper that were meant to be swallowed in order to prevent or cure an illness.<sup>266</sup>

Symbols are, therefore, by their very nature, corporeal. They embody, they incorporate, they incarnate the abstract world, and in so doing, they initiate full sensory responses to them. Smith's art explores this Catholic-inspired reverence for

symbols—their capacity to manifest spiritual conditions and for their imperative to communicate on a corporeal level. In works such as *Untitled* (1990), the body is not only the subject of the piece; it is also the object. The work’s visceral impact is not only the result of its corporeal subject matter, the fact that it represents human flesh and blood, its physical force can also be attributed to the overtly physical conditions of its making and the tactile materials of which it is composed. Together, these factors, according to Smith, produce a certain kind of power that culminates in the work’s objecthood.

### **Making Bodies: Idol Worship and the Power of Things**

“I’m an idol worshiper,” Smith once declared. “I believe objects hold power, that they retain the energy you put into making them. That’s why I’m an artist.”<sup>267</sup> A self-proclaimed “thing maker,” Smith channels what she encounters in the world, including her thoughts and emotions, through the physical, relying chiefly on the “things” she creates to corroborate that which would otherwise exist solely in the abstract. Smith largely attributes this practice to her Catholic upbringing. She concurs with what some have already pointed out about many Catholics, both practicing and lapsed, that she possesses, or rather is “possessed by” a so-called “enchanted imagination” which sees “the Holy lurking in creation,” and that it is through the physical, created world that we gain our brightest glimpses of holiness.<sup>268</sup> In fact, Smith claims that what she values most in people is not who they are or her relationships with them but rather “what they have made.” Furthermore, whenever she encounters “really great forms,” in a museum, on the street, or in someone’s

home, she instinctively considers them to be “holy in a way, like they have this really incredible power about them.”<sup>269</sup> She has also described any work of art she admires as having a “clear” and “active” presence wherever it sits, that it is “a kind of voodoo embodiment” of its creator, and that it “stands in like a god, . . . tak[ing] up psychic space the same way people take up psychic space.”<sup>270</sup> Elsewhere she discussed her attraction to Catholicism’s view of the world as “animistic,” stating “It’s about a kind of worship. . . of the spirit in the physical plane. The power of the physical plane. That objects contain the residue of intent. I think art is like that, too.”<sup>271</sup>

Thus, for Smith, objects are not merely neutral markers of their creator’s existence and artistic resolve; they are living and breathing bodies that respond to and affect the world around them.<sup>272</sup> As she explains, “When you start making figures, you’re in a sense making effigies or you’re making bodies. You’re making, physically, bodies that spirits enter or occupy, or that have their own souls, presence, and physical space.”<sup>273</sup>

Effigies, as venerated in the Catholic tradition, are representations of holy people, such as Christ and Mary or of a living person, such as the Pope. Taking the form of a drawing or sculptural object, for example, the effigy not only memorializes or idolizes that person, it is believed to literally embody his or her spirit, and it often possesses miraculous healing powers. Therefore, to burn someone in effigy, a secularized, widespread practice that concurs with Catholicism’s belief in the power of the image yet targets a reviled individual, such as a political figure, is to eliminate that person’s spirit or element from the world by setting fire to his or her likeness.

The power that can be attributed to images is also evident through acts of iconoclasm, such as Dennis Heiner's infamous smearing of Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* with white paint in hopes of banishing all profanity from the Holy Mother herself and restoring her to her original purity. According to Smith, it is acts such as Heiner's, along with defensive responses such as Mayor Giuliani's, which ultimately attest to "the power that can be invested in the image and in inanimate objects."<sup>274</sup> This power is the key to understanding the spiritual component of Smith's art, as it is her belief that the "things" she creates do in fact retain the energy she puts into making them, taking on a life of their own. The ability to literally create bodies, to make visible that which is invisible, is the reason she is an artist, and it is this practice of making bodies that is fundamentally bound up with Smith's experience of Catholic ritual.

### **Hocus Pocus: Catholic Ritual and The Cult of Relics**

The quintessential symbol of Catholicism is the crucifix, a representation of Christ's body nailed to the cross, which exposes the central truth of Christianity, that Jesus was crucified and died for the salvation of humanity. Traditionally portraying the physical torment Christ underwent on the cross, with its realistic depiction of Christ's wounds, along with a visible, distended ribcage, rigid abdominal muscles, contorted, dangling limbs, and bowed head, the crucifix functions not only as a reminder of the means through which Christians believe human sin is absolved, but also as a symbol of Christ's compassion for human suffering. An early fourteenth century wooden crucifix from Cologne is one such example of this graphic display of

corporeal anguish of Christ's Passion (fig. 3.7). Smith has acknowledged on a number of occasions her attraction to this kind of gruesome expressionism prominent in medieval and northern European artworks such as this.<sup>275</sup> Therefore it is only fitting that she made one of her own in 1992 for Saint Peter's Church in New York City (fig. 3.8). Crafted entirely out of aluminum, this processional crucifix portrays a similarly anguished Christ with a pronounced ribcage, well-defined abdominal wall, ruffled skin, flaccid limbs, and a solemn, downward gaze. Instead of hanging, nailed to the front the cross, though, as he is in most arrangements, Smith's Christ is suspended or "floated," as Smith describes it, within the hollowed-out framework of the cross.<sup>276</sup> Thus, Christ's body is integrated within the body of the cross to the extent that his body not just simply mimics its cruciform shape on a separate superimposed plane. Rather, it is fully encased within the cross and, thus, is one with it. Smith's crucifix, then, is a literal manifestation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. It formally incorporates the Catholic idea that sacred objects are "bodies" filled with the Holy Spirit.<sup>277</sup> Smith also used traditional iconography of Christ's Passion in a 1997 letter press composite image entitled *Jesus*, in which Jesus is similarly portrayed in various stages of expressionistic anguish (fig. 3.9).

There is no question of Smith's indebtedness to the rituals of the Catholic Church in her art. Named for Saint Chiara, who cut off her hair as a vow of humility and poverty, Smith maintains certain elements of Catholic tradition in her life including her love of its material culture.<sup>278</sup> Her great grandfather was an altar-carver, who brought the trade to her family from his native Ireland, and Smith's intimate knowledge of the sculptural and decorative components of sacred spaces is

firmly rooted in her personal history. Having said that she is interested in Catholicism primarily because “it’s a ritual-based religion,” Smith also admits to having an affinity for its mystical traits and customs. “I like all the hocus-pocus aspects of Catholicism,” she once declared.<sup>279</sup> Among them is the practice of wearing charms or amulets such as a Rosary bracelet, which, when worn, is believed to carry spiritual and talismanic powers (fig. 3.10). Smith’s *Bird Chain* (1993) (fig. 3.11), an oversized bracelet made of intricately crafted bronze pieces, bears a striking resemblance to such popular pieces of jewelry. A highly decorative work, *Bird Chain* is embellished with tiny, red roses, which accentuate the delicacy of the work’s focal point, a bronze dove with clear, glass wings. Instead of being worn as a charm to wards off evil spirits, though, *Bird Chain* is intended to adorn and consecrate entire spaces. In one 1993 exhibition at Fawbush Gallery in New York City, *Bird Chain* was suspended from the ceiling, with the dove hovering above a sculpture of the Virgin Mary (fig. 3.12).<sup>280</sup> In this context, the conventional notion of the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit was all the more apparent, with the gallery’s prosaic, “white box” space transformed into a kind of blessed sanctuary. Smith has explained that all art one way or another shields its creator from evil. “I think art is like...making things to protect yourself. I always say my art’s like my army in the world. That’s how you make a lot of it. You store it up and hoard it and get it like your army—strong—to protect you.”<sup>281</sup>

Other works created with talismanic attributes in mind include her *Rosary* (1994) (fig. 3.13) and *Veins and Arteries (Rose Chain)* (1995) (fig. 3.14), both of which are based on the traditional Catholic rosary beads, used to count the prayers of

the rosary, one bead fingered for every prayer. For many, saying the rosary is not only a process of reciting Hail Marys and meditating on the sacred mysteries of Christ's life, it serves as a blessing of peace, a weapon against evil, and a means of obtaining "indulgences" from God and the church. For instance, there are reportedly fifteen promises the Virgin Mary is believed to keep to those who recite the rosary, including special protection from sin and evil and God's eternal mercy. Drawing on the rosary's popular appeal and mystical aura, Smith's rosaries maintain a kind of supernatural allure with their own ethereal and decorative qualities. Instead of using the traditional counting beads, typically accompanied by a sacred medal and crucifix as prayer guides, Smith's "beads" form various body parts, including an ear, tongue, stomach, heart, veins, and arteries, which serve as points of meditation, one body part for every prayer. In this regard, Smith's chains incorporate references to "chachals," traditional Guatemalan necklaces which are roughly based on the rosary beads yet customarily incorporate charms or "dijes" in their design as symbols of grace and devotion. This contemporary copy of a chachal necklace, made of silver beads, a cross, and bone dijés, is an example of such a work that is believed to carry talismanic powers, presumably for someone fraught with bone ailments (fig. 3.15).<sup>282</sup>

Another cherished Catholic ritual that informs Smith's work is the practice of presenting milagros and ex votos to statues or images of Saints. The custom flourished in Europe during the Middle Ages, peaking at the end of the Gothic period when the veneration of saints was at its height and was subsequently brought to the New World by the Catholic conquistadors, proliferating primarily in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico.<sup>283</sup> Spanish for "miracle," a milagro is a small

devotional charm or medal composed of a wide variety of materials, including wax, wood, glass, pottery, plaster, silk, bread dough, and metal and cast in the form of an animal, plant, person, material good or body part (fig. 3.16). Traditionally, milagros are pinned or tied to representations of Saints as tokens of gratitude for a miracle, such as an act of healing, in the same way a votive offering or ex-voto would be presented.<sup>284</sup> They are given as material gifts and are often linked to previous vows or wishes made to the Saint by a believer. Milagros are also offered in supplication, to trigger some kind of miraculous action from the Saint, as in the healing of a leg, heart, or eye.<sup>285</sup>

Smith's body part works, such as *Pelvis* (1987) (fig. 2.10), *Ribcage* (1987) (fig. 2.12), and *Digestive System* (1988) (fig. 2.20), can be understood within the context of this tradition. While Smith has described such works as testaments to corporeal knowledge and understanding, they clearly have spiritual significance as well. Drawing on the Milagros tradition, Smith offers up such body parts as sites in need of special attention and healing, as in the digestive system, a region of her body that, as previously discussed, once required extreme consideration and care. One of Smith's notebook entries, which lists pairs of over thirty body parts in Spanish and was most likely written during one of her many trips to Mexico, further attests to Smith's interest in Milagros. Smith's interpretation of the vaginal cut-outs glued to Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* as a evidence of Ofili's appeal to mend the traditional separation of Mary's human and divine attributes also draws on the Milagros tradition, and as discussed in Chapter One, Linda Nochlin's reading of the pudenda as ex-votos confirms Smith's own analysis.



Perhaps most evident in Smith's body part works is the reference to the cult of relics, the practice of venerating the body parts, fluids, or material possessions of holy people, which flourished in medieval Western Europe. Caroline Walker Bynum has noted that relics, which emphasized the body as the "locus of the sacred," were held in popular medieval belief as "far more than mere aids to pious memory; they were the saints themselves, living already with God in the incorrupt and glorified bodies more ordinary mortals would attain only at the end of time."<sup>286</sup> Revered as "little pieces of heaven," relics were believed to perform miracles, and the reliquaries that enshrined them became frequent pilgrimage sites. This conviction follows Aquinas' teachings on the inseparability of form and matter and the incorruptibility of the body through fragmentation. As flesh and spirit are always one, according to Aquinas, any portion of the body must contain the spiritual essence of the whole. The body organs of Smith's *Zweite Zahl (Second Choice)* (fig. 2.1) certainly recall holy relics, but their modest presentation so starkly contrasts the elaborate reliquaries that typically house such sacred objects. The worn and battered bowl that holds these somewhat pitiful remains indicates Smith's desire to impart a sense of humility and universality so aptly found in the human body. They are the organs of everyone, yet because they are the very sites of our collective experience as humans, they must be viewed as sacred. According to Smith, "it's a Catholic thing" to believe that, in their simplicity and carnality, these lowly body remnants reveal the immanence of God and the essence of grace.<sup>287</sup>

Smith's work also draws on the Catholic practice of preserving bodily fluids as holy relics. Her *Untitled (Jars)* (1987-90) (fig. 3.17), a work that shared the same

space as *Untitled* (1990) (fig. 3.1) in her 1990 *Projects Room* at the Museum of Modern Art, is a meditation on the preservation, revelation, and contemplation of bodily fluids.<sup>288</sup> Consisting of twelve silvered glass water bottles arranged side by side on a platform, each bottle is inscribed, in Gothic typeface, with a word referring to a particular body fluid: Blood, Tears, Pus, Urine, Semen, Diarrhea, Mucus, Saliva, Oil, Vomit, Milk, Sweat.<sup>289</sup> The tops of the bottles are open, yet there are no odors emanating from them, and their mirrored surfaces prevent us from seeing what is inside.<sup>290</sup> What we are confronted with instead is our own reflection, a visceral reminder of our own comfort level with such rudimentary substances, especially in public spaces.<sup>291</sup> As with her other fluid-based works, such as *Fountainhead* (1991) (fig. 2.27 – 2.31), *Untitled (Jars)* candidly imparts the fundamental, often embarrassing realities of the body Smith finds profoundly authentic and liberating.

The work can also be viewed within a political context, as many critics have noted the grave implications of such potentially fatal, disease-transmitting fluids as semen, blood, saliva, and breast milk along with the societal stigmatization and regulation of those infected. Art critic Michael Kimmelman, for example, has described the Gothic lettering on the jars as “theatrical” in the way it “underscores the alarming connotations of the fluids, especially in this era of AIDS,” while Susan Tallman has observed the aura of the work as “Frankensteinian.”<sup>292</sup> In addition to acknowledging on more than one occasion similar social and political connotations of these fluids, Smith has also mentioned that diarrhea is one of the largest killers of children in the Third World.<sup>293</sup>

As with the majority of her works, *Untitled (Jars)* additionally holds spiritual significance, for just as politics can be understood through the body in Smith's work, so can spirituality. The vessel-like structure of the jars recalls the medieval reliquaries that held the sacred body fluids of Saints,<sup>294</sup> but like the lowly, deteriorating bowl of organs in *Zweite Zahl (Second Choice)*, these anonymous jars suggest fluids that belong to all of humanity and are, in their very nature, miraculous. As Susan Tallman has observed, "[the Jars] are like the relics of some pantheistic religion in which everyone is divine."<sup>295</sup> Smith made *Untitled (Jars)* with reference to the medieval prayer book, or book of hours, which offers a prayer for special hours of the day. She has expressed her interest in this type of ritualistic format, saying "I used to love medieval books of hours, the idea that every hour you had some kind of meditation, something to think about or believe in."<sup>296</sup> With the body as her primary belief system, Smith first used the prayer book as a model for her own *Untitled (Book of Hours)*, (1986), a 365-page book of handmade Twinrocker paper which substitutes a body fluid for a prayer for every day of the year (fig. 3.18). Later, with *Untitled (Jars)*, Smith condensed the ritual to one that featured a fluid for every month of the year. Like body parts, Smith suggests, body fluids carry significant information about ourselves and the world around us and serve as intimate guides for organizing and thinking through our daily lives.<sup>297</sup> Thus, the fact that the fluids are not actually present in the jars reveals Smith's desire to make the work useful to all who encounter it, urging us to fill the jars with our own associations with each fluid.<sup>298</sup> The fluid is simply a point of departure for further meditation or, as Smith described it, a mandala or "center point from which life radiates."<sup>299</sup>

Because of its formal simplicity and its physical omission of the messy indelicacies that normally accompany the body, *Untitled (Jars)* operates on a level that is far more clinical and abstract than the majority of her other body works.<sup>300</sup> Made a year before she began the “Jars” series, *Game Time (There are approx. 12 pints of blood in the human body)* (1986) (fig. 3.19), for example, offers an entirely different approach to the body. The work consists of twelve Mason jars filled with pig’s blood she acquired from her local butcher.<sup>301</sup> She originally assembled the work for an exhibition about torture and war, using the blood as a literal marker of human life and a symbol of violence. She arranged the jars to look like bowling pins as scathing commentary on the disturbing insouciance of those who spill other people’s blood as if it were all a game.<sup>302</sup> The blood also bears strong connotations to Catholicism, particularly as a primary symbol of Christ’s Passion, martyrdom, and the Eucharist, with the Mason jars further likening the objects to drinking vessels. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, medieval and Renaissance theological texts concentrate primarily on Christ’s blood as the ultimate mark of his humanity, particularly as a sign of suffering. Bynum has explained that “blood is redemptive because Christ’s pain gives salvific significance to what we all share with him..., the fact that we can be hurt. We suffer.”<sup>303</sup> “I love blood!,” Smith once declared.<sup>304</sup> She is certainly intrigued by blood’s humanistic and spiritual properties, and she has used blood as the subject of numerous other works that fetishize it through a variety of materials. *Shed* (1996) (fig. 3.20), for example, a copious spill of blood-red glass “drops” scattered across the floor, takes the subject of blood out of a conceptual or literal realm into the metaphorical. While the title suggests violence, the jumbo size

of the drops, their shiny red surface and sheer abundance, according to Smith, were inspired by the hyper-real depiction of “the million drops of blood coming out of Christ’s pores” in Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, one of her favorite works of art.<sup>305</sup> With references to power and fantasy, Smith’s drops of blood are “uber” constructions of a basic human fluid in the most material sense.

Similarly fantastical and grandiose, *Bloodline*, (1994) (fig. 3.21) and *Red Spill* (1996) (fig. 3.22), further dramatize the symbolic properties of blood through platelet-shaped glass forms. *Red Spill*, like *Shed*, is a floor scattering or “spill” of blood, here in the form of amorphous, red globules, and *Bloodline*, a collection of similarly shaped globules arranged in a straight line, cheekily puns on the linear properties of genetic history. In the case of all three works, blood is not portrayed as the clinical, genetic matter that it actually is. It is not the raw material depicted in *Kiki Smith, 1983* (1983) (fig. 2.16), the previously discussed glass microscope slide stained with the artist’s own blood. Nor is it the organic fluid that had to be preserved in the freezer, as was the case with *Game Time*, or a figment of the imagination, as in *Untitled (Jars)*. Instead, in these works, blood assumes a kind of supernatural quality, turning base matter into decorative and pristine beauty. In other works such as *Nose Bleed* and *Untitled (Train)* (1993) (fig. 3.23), Smith similarly eschews the grotesque, even taboo qualities of blood by transforming it into elegant strands of red beads, while *Peabody* (1996) renders blood as delicate sheets of Nepal paper.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Smith chooses her materials according to their unique physical, psychological, and spiritual properties, not according to societal standards of what counts as art. “I don’t want to be owned by traditions which dictate

that, hierarchically, certain subjects or ideas or techniques or materials are innately high art while others aren't," she has said. "As an artist, you want to expand possibilities."<sup>306</sup> Her energy goes not only into selecting just the right subject for a work but also into choosing the appropriate "body" for it, which often involves the use of "low art" or craft materials. Drawing on the material richness and diversity of traditions such as Milagros, for example, in which anything from glass to wax to tin to bread dough is used according to its unique physical and spiritual properties, Smith's works emphasize material sensibility and physical form as key conduits of spirituality. It is this commitment to material composition and to formal structure which affirms the corporeal thrust of her work, thus securing it within the realm of the spiritual.

### **"Tactile Values": Spirituality and the Body**

After her sister Bebe died, Smith made a death mask of her, as part of a family ritual.<sup>307</sup> Smith has commented on her experience of making Bebe's mask as one that kindled an enormous amount of affection for her physical form, despite the fact that her "life" was absent. "I loved my sister's body as much as I loved her personality," she has admitted, attesting to her curious obsession with the physical structure and presence of things and to her conviction that the body is a powerful site of subjectivity.<sup>308</sup> For Smith, it is through a body's physical form that its essence, including its spiritual life and personality, is most tangible. She has also attributed her appreciation of the basic formalist systems of art to the endless hours of preparation work and physical labor she underwent while helping build her father's

abstract sculptures. Not only did this process teach her how to look at the physical world, it also demonstrated the importance of form and physical presence as primary channels for the spiritual world. At times, she has even tried to shed the image of “figurative artist.” “Actually it was never my intention to become a figurative artist and I don’t want to be trapped by one now,” she once declared. “I probably prefer abstract things, in the end, because they make you focus on what they’re about formally....”<sup>309</sup>

Smith’s preoccupation with formal issues has subsequently led to a healthy knack for handling a range of materials which serve to heighten the physicality of the work and the body’s awareness of itself in the presence of the work. As discussed at the opening of this chapter, *Untitled* (1990) (fig. 3.1), a work that exploits the rich, palpable qualities of wax, exhibits a tactility and corporeal sensibility that provoke a visceral response. The work is as much “felt” as it is “seen.” The sense of touch is also stimulated by the gauze, which triggers the skin’s awareness of its cottony-soft, nurturing properties. Additionally, Smith has adorned other works with decorative materials for the purposes of developing their haptic properties. For example, with *Jewel Arms* (1994) (fig. 3.24), she studded a pair of bronze arm fragments with topaz to enhance their material sensuousness and textural elegance. Her inspiration for the forms came from medieval reliquaries, whose decorative features signified the precious contents within while simultaneously arousing extreme piety.<sup>310</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Reliquary Arm*, ca. 1230 (fig. 3.25) is one such object that inspired *Jewel Arms*. An oak vessel gilt with silver and bronze and inlaid with

niello and cabochon stones, *Reliquary Arm* displays an ornate richness and tactility intended to appeal to more than just the eye.

Smith's *Trinity* (1994) (figs. 3.26-3.27), a work that was inspired by Goya's *Disasters of War* series, similarly cultivates the sense of touch with its contrasting array of textures. Alluding to the Holy Trinity, this trio of forms, a rough-hewn plaster head and pair of arm fragments dangling from thin strips of burlap, is garnished with multi-colored glass beads that transform the work from a humble arrangement of cracked and blemished body casts into objects of ornate preciousness.

Thus, a heightened awareness of the body, as stimulated primarily by the sense of touch, plays a central role in Smith's art, with her materials, particularly those craft-based, taking center stage. Crafts have long been recognized for their associations with fluidity, tactility, and malleability yet only recently has their ability to cultivate the sense of touch and their compulsion to foreground the body as a legitimate site of perception and subjectivity been the source of scholarly inquiry. For example, the conference "The Body Politic: The Role of the Body and Contemporary Craft," held in 1999 at the University of Northumbria, examined craft and its associations with the body and human perception with the chief purpose of rescuing it from its denigrated status in contemporary critical theory and practice.<sup>311</sup> Art critic Polly Ullrich has also written extensively on the corporeal properties of craft materials, observing that artists who employ such body-based materials inevitably bring into question the "longstanding western European preference given to vision in aesthetics...which defined vision as more 'intellectual' and, therefore, along with hearing, one of the 'higher' senses."<sup>312</sup> Ullrich draws on



phenomenological theories of embodied consciousness and perception, as set forth by philosophers such as David Katz, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Renée Weber, all of whom dispute the Cartesian concept of a mind/body dichotomy, to radically reposition the role of the body in human perception and to accentuate craft's integral function in this process. Ullrich argues that for too long the body has been denied a crucial role in human perception, and she posits touch as a privileged site of subjectivity and knowledge.

For example, Ullrich notes that, in his tome *The World of Touch*, David Katz reminds us how touch and the hand have influenced language, providing terms, or “linguistic images” that describe a variety of experiences, such as “grasping” ideas, “handling” a task, “feeling for” or getting “in touch” with someone. Something can “touch,” “hit” or “go all the way through” you, for example, and when it does, you “take it to heart.”<sup>313</sup>

For many artists, touch in art has as much to do with a direct involvement with the body as it does materiality, according to Ullrich. For example, she has noted that “bodily oriented art uses its visceral qualities...to engage our total being, not just our mental consciousness.... This is art that is more than language; it taps into a silent reality. Its transcendent ideas are intermixed with the fabric of the world. We are touched by this art not only because we understand it cognitively, but because we ‘feel’ it.”<sup>314</sup> She recognizes how the materials Smith employs have the uncanny ability to “exude the palpability of matter and of bodily fluids.” She also acknowledges the affective quality of Smith's art, asserting that Smith creates her art

with the intention of reaching her viewers on a corporeal level: "... [S]he anticipates that the viewer will 'feel' it and identify with it, too, in the deepest somatic sense."<sup>315</sup>

By emphasizing this dynamic, body-focused function of Smith's art, Ullrich ultimately poses questions such as "What does it mean to make or understand art using our tactile sense? Why is it important to talk about our senses at all?" She argues that it is our perceptions, driven by all of the senses, which define who we are and what it means to be human, and that relying on vision alone to experience a work of art necessarily limits its full impact and meaning.<sup>316</sup> She uses the writings of art historian Bernard Berenson, who coined the phrase "tactile values" to emphasize the sense of touch as essential to effectively taking in a work of art. According to Berenson, tactile values not only enliven a work of art, they call the body into action. They impel us to "feel their bulk, heft their weight, realize their potential resistance, span their distance from us, and encourage us, always imaginatively, to come into close touch with, to grasp, to embrace, or to walk around them."<sup>317</sup>

The handmade quality of Smith's work also calls the body into action. As previously discussed, Smith values the process of making art as much as, if not, at times, more than the final product.<sup>318</sup> In works such as *Untitled* (1990), which so palpably reveals the conditions of its own making, process is critical to the work's ability to communicate on a haptic level. She once declared, "I'm into fetishy things: gluing sheets of paper together, complicating the work, seeing the touch, the evidence of the making."<sup>319</sup> Smith is often showcased as a hands-on artist who maintains an intimate relationship with her materials. She has been characterized as "compulsive..., always fiddling with materials and things,"<sup>320</sup> and one who is most

interested in “getting her hands dirty.”<sup>321</sup> Her hands have been described as “amazing” and essential to her identity as an artist.<sup>322</sup> In the video *Kiki in Flesh*, a psychedelic portrait of Smith created and directed by Charlie Ahearn, Smith’s hands are the primary focus. In various scenes throughout, they are shown drawing, gluing, knotting, threading, making a plaster cast from a model, even fingering the delicate underside of a tiny mushroom. Smith’s mouth is also featured as a site of creativity and subjectivity where she cuts a piece of thread with her teeth and probes the underside of a rock with her tongue. Such portrayals of Smith so intimately engaged with her raw material reveal the profoundly physical nature of her art making process.

This physicality is also evident in the way Smith creates art with such ease and fluidity, as if it were second nature to her. In my own experience once while interviewing her in her home/studio, she never once put down a drawing she had been working on when I arrived. Throughout the entire course of the interview, she intermittently caressed the paper with tiny marks and countermarks, treating the pencil and paper as natural extensions of her body. During another interview, where we sat at her dining table, she nonchalantly massaged and molded tiny pieces of clay into various forms which would later become works of art.

Smith is also the kind of artist who, with seemingly little effort, can miraculously make something out of nothing. She has been characterized as someone who “seems able to create figures with god-like power,”<sup>323</sup> a “magician” who “coaxes beauty from...unlikely places,”<sup>324</sup> an “innovator par excellence,”<sup>325</sup> and one who has the “Midas touch,” whereby everything she touches turns into art.<sup>326</sup> Her experiments in a wide variety of media and techniques, according to another observer, “suggest a

nearly metaphysical relationship between the materials and the forms they are used to represent.”<sup>327</sup> Smith’s artistic sorcery also affirms her conviction that making art is a process that entails the transference of one’s own bodily energy into creating another object, and once the object is made, it retains that energy. As she has explained, “I like that feeling when you’re making art, that you’re taking the energy out of your body and putting it into a physical object...Artists are people who are making a physical manifestation of their sense of possibility.”<sup>328</sup> Elsewhere she has attested to the power artists hold by simply offering proof of their own existence through their art: “I love the way people make things. It’s people making the world; it’s the way you keep self-empowerment, through creation, making things physical.”<sup>329</sup> *Untitled* (1990), for example, marks this transfer of energy in the most literal sense not only by revealing the actual imprints of the model’s entire skin surface from toe to tiny pore, but also by disclosing Smith’s own mark-making process.

Smith’s faith in the incarnate nature of the art making process also coincides with her belief that her work is her offspring, her legacy, and her dowry: “I like that art is accumulative by nature,” she once said, “that you are physically creating the world, making physical manifestations of the world, and that you are in one sense, responsible for the world, for the image you’re making it in.”<sup>330</sup> In a similar statement, she made the corporeal metaphor all the more graphic: “[My art] is really about me, being here in this life, in this skin. I’m cannibalizing my own experience, my surroundings.”<sup>331</sup>

While Smith regards the art making process a feat of incarnation, she also considers it an act of redemption. She uses the cannibalism analogy to further

describe the way in which her works “feed” on one another, exchanging not only select materials and forms but also ideas. Notorious for taking the remnants of one work and reincarnating them into others, Smith describes her studio as a “chop shop of bodies” waiting to be resurrected into living works of art.<sup>332</sup> She also uses the same mold to make multiple versions in different finishes, as in *Untitled* (1990) and its aluminum complement *Untitled (Skins)* (1992) as well as in a series of Saint Genevieve sculptures, all of which are based on one standing form.<sup>333</sup>

The corporeal nature of Smith’s art making processes also awakens her spiritual energy. Repetitive gestures such as cutting, threading, drawing, layering, piecing together, and printmaking are spiritually reinforcing, even healing for Smith. “There’s a spiritual power in repetition, a devotional quality, like saying rosaries,” she once explained.<sup>334</sup> For Smith, making art is as much an act of piety as it is meditative. There is also a spiritual component to the way in which she allows for physical imperfections to remain in her work. Not only do the structural flaws in works such as *Trinity* create abstract, secondary patterns within the work, according to Smith, the visible seams, cracks, and other openings also allow the work to “breathe,” making it easier for spirits to fly in and out of it and not become trapped.<sup>335</sup>

Thus, it is important to talk about materials, process, and visceral perception in Smith’s art because in doing so, the full spiritual impact of her work can be realized. As this study is ultimately an examination of the spirituality of Smith’s work, its physical properties cannot be overestimated. As Smith reminds us, “Spirituality is nothing if it’s abstract.”

While Smith's work can be examined within the context of the body as it relates to somatic piety on a universal level, it cannot be ignored that a large portion of Smith's subjects are female. While Smith clearly acknowledges the importance of thinking and living through the body for humanity's sake, she is also aware of the particular effects of the body for women. What does Smith have to say about gender and the body as they relate to female mysticism and Catholicism, and how does her work particularly contest the validity of a mind/body opposition and the association of "body," the inferior term, with femininity? And finally, how does her use of craft materials and her interest in "women's work" underscore the importance of corporeally-based knowledges, subjectivities, and pieties for women?

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<sup>232</sup> Smith, quoted in Acker, 20.

<sup>233</sup> Smith, quoted in Wallach, 19.

<sup>234</sup> This universality is further emphasized by the work's generic "title." This model's skin surface was greater than 3,000 square inches, so Smith trimmed the casting of excess flesh and stored the rest in her refrigerator for use on a future work. See Wallach, p. 19.

<sup>235</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 133.

<sup>236</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 38.

<sup>237</sup> Idem.

<sup>238</sup> Aquinas, quoted in *Kiki Smith* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art; The Hague: Sdu Publishers, 1990), p. 10. Smith also mentions in the quote in SAIC lecture and Frankel, p. 38. See also, Thomas Aquinas, *Concerning Being and Essence (De Ente et Essentia)*, translated from the Latin with the addition of a preface by George G. Leckie (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965).

<sup>239</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>240</sup> Smith, quoted in McCormick, 87.

<sup>241</sup> Tony Smith's "Die" (1962), a steel cube, measuring 72 3/8 on all sides, has been described as the "prototypical minimalist object." See Kristine Stiles, "Geometric Abstraction" in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 63-73, for a summary of the characteristics and historical development of minimalism, also called ABC art, Primary Structures, Systemic Art, Concrete Objects. Also see Donald Judd's uncompromising decree of the essential qualities and conditions of this "new three-dimensionality" of art in his essay "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook 8* (1965); reprinted in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints* (Halifax and New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1975), 181-89. Judd and fellow minimalist artist Frank Stella also outlined the central aesthetic objectives of their work in an interview with critic Bruce Glaser, printed in "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Art News* 65, no. 5 (September 1966), 55-61.

<sup>242</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten coined the term "postminimalism" to designate the style's simultaneous reception and modification of minimalism's formal tenants. See Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art, 1966-1986* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).

<sup>243</sup> James Meyer has argued that although often described as a postminimalist, Hesse "was equally a part of the Minimalist field," as she participated in numerous minimalist exhibitions. See James Meyer, "What You See is Not What You See," in *Eva Hesse*, exh. cat., ed. Elisabeth Sussman, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>244</sup> See *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse*, exh. cat., curated by Barry A. Rosenberg and Dr. Marc J. Straus, with essays by Elizabeth Hess and Mel Bochner (Fairfield, Connecticut: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 1.

<sup>245</sup> Mel Bochner, "Remembering Eva Hesse," 2.

<sup>246</sup> In a letter to Rosie Goldman, December 14, 1964, Hesse described the process of her first three-dimensional work, which involved threading cords through a screen, as "compulsive work."

<sup>247</sup> See, for example, Robert Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse: More Light on the Transition from Post-Minimalism to the Sublime," *Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1972); Douglas Crimp, "New York Letter," *Art International* XVII, no. 3 (March, 1973): 40; Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 209; and most recently Elisabeth Sussman, curator of the long-anticipated retrospective of Hesse's work, launched at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002, In her introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue, Sussman specifically notes Hesse's near-obsession with repetition, as seen not only in her sequencing of a single formal motif within a work, her habitual recycling of materials, and her exploration of their varying properties in series, but also in the physical creation of a work. "Letting It Go as It Will: The Art of Eva Hesse," *Eva Hesse*, 17.

<sup>248</sup> "Roundtable Discussion," edited by Chad Coerver, in *Eva Hesse*, 295.

- <sup>249</sup> “A Conversation between Kiki Smith and Lynne Tillman,” a public program of the Museum of Modern Art, held in conjunction with *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books & Things*, The Gramercy Theater, New York, NY, January 28, 2004.
- <sup>250</sup> See Smith’s discussion of her process in Kimmelman, “Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies,” 22.
- <sup>251</sup> *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse*, 16.
- <sup>252</sup> Although the work is not intended to be touched, it can be argued that one is able to “touch” with the mind. As art historian Polly Ullrich explains, we approach such works with a “tactility born of deep remembrances within the body that can be called up when confronting art. It is a tactility that, when observing the art, brings a flood of reactions based on past experiences: the actual physical stuff of the memory becomes startlingly real.” See Polly Ullrich, “More than Just a Touch: The Tactile Element in Fiber Art,” *Fiberarts* vol. 19, no. 2 (September/October, 1992): 34.
- <sup>253</sup> This is another characteristic of Hesse’s work, which, unlike Smith’s, is labeled more often than not “abstract.” Critic Lucy Lippard has theorized Hesse’s work, among that of other artists, in terms of a particular condition of certain abstract works of art to be able to elicit a strong visceral, sensual, or even erotic response in the viewer without ever making direct reference to the body or body parts. Lippard organized a group exhibition in 1966, entitled “Eccentric Abstraction,” to feature this kind of art, whose non-traditional, sensuous materials produced an “eccentric” air. See Lucy Lippard, “Eccentric Abstraction,” *Art International*, vol. 10, no. 9 (November 20, 1966), reprinted in *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 54-58.
- <sup>254</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 32.
- <sup>255</sup> The Doctrine of the Incarnation was formalized as the “Nicene Creed” in 325 A.D at the Council of Nicea.
- <sup>256</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 130.
- <sup>257</sup> Smith, quoted in *Kiki Smith* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art; Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1992), 71.
- <sup>258</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 22.
- <sup>259</sup> Kiki Smith, “When the Spiritual Turns Physical,” A55.
- <sup>260</sup> Dom Robert Le Gall, Abbot of Kergonan, *Symbols of Catholicism*, Assouline (September, 2000), 9.
- <sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 14.
- <sup>262</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 25, 272.
- <sup>263</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 38.
- <sup>264</sup> PBS interview.
- <sup>265</sup> Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1978), 11
- <sup>266</sup> McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 25.
- <sup>267</sup> Heartney, “Postmodern Heretics,” 37.
- <sup>268</sup> See Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Eleanor Heartney uses Greeley to discuss these characteristics in Smith’s- and others’- art in *Postmodern Heretics* (2004).
- <sup>269</sup> PBS interview.
- <sup>270</sup> Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.
- <sup>271</sup> *Idem*.
- <sup>272</sup> This belief that inanimate objects can take on spiritual power and be transformed into sacred objects draws on the doctrine of Transubstantiation, which maintains that during the Eucharist, at the moment of Consecration, the “gifts” of God, bread and wine, are literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ, leaving behind the bread and wine as mere “accidents.”
- <sup>273</sup> Smith, quoted in Shearer and Gould, *Kiki Smith*, 67. Also, Michael Kimmelman has noted that to Smith, “art is closely akin to the human body, even art that doesn’t have anything to do with figuration, meaning that to her art is actually a body: it’s alive,” “Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies,” p. 22.
- <sup>274</sup> Kiki Smith, “When the Spiritual Turns Physical,” A55.
- <sup>275</sup> For example, when discussing what kind of art has influenced her own, she has said “... what I get off on more than anything is the world made in the Middle Ages. It’s definitely one of my favorite periods to look at,” Winters, p. 133. Also, Michael Kimmelman discusses Smith’s “affinity for the expressionistic, sometimes macabre art of northern Europe,” relaying that she links this to the fact that



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she was born in Nuremberg, Germany. See Kimmelman, "Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies," p. 22. A great number of Smith's works were inspired by medieval and northern European art, including "Bronze Baby" (1987), which was based on medieval carvings of the Infant Jesus and "Virgin Mary" (1992), was inspired by medieval German wood carvings. Smith has also turned to medieval prayer books, known as girdle books, as sources for her work. See Weitman, *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things*, p. 27. Hans Belting's *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, translated by Mark Bartusis and Raymond Meyer (New Rochelle, New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1990), also provides in-depth analysis of the affective nature of Medieval devotional images ("Andachtsbild") in their direct appeal to emotional and sensory experience.

<sup>276</sup> See [www.saintpeters.org](http://www.saintpeters.org) for a description of the entire program of Saint Peter's art and architecture.

<sup>277</sup> The corporeality of the cruciform shape is also evident in the Catholic ritual of giving the sign of the cross, which involves tracing the shape of the cross on one's body as a form of blessing. This is accompanied by the pronouncement of the three figures of the Holy Trinity: "In the name of the Father [on the forehead], and of the Son [down to the waist], and of the Holy Spirit [from the left to the right shoulder, or the other way around for the Orthodox]. Amen." See Le Gall, *Symbols of Catholicism*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>278</sup> Smith has made a number of works that use actual hair or reference hair as a subject, some of which will be discussed in Chapter Four. She once explained her connection to Saint Chiara and hair as the result of a childhood experience: "When I was very young, the first movie I remember seeing—my aunt took me—was the lives of Saint Anthony, Saint Francis and Saint Chiara. She renounces her family and takes a vow of poverty, the symbol of this is that she cuts off her hair. For me it was really important because I think women have a thing about hair...." Quoted in Winters, 139-40.

<sup>279</sup> Smith, quoted in Balson, 37.

<sup>280</sup> Fawbush Gallery, 1994. This exhibition was devoted to the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary that was exhibited will be discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>281</sup> PBS interview.

<sup>282</sup> For a discussion of chachal necklaces, see Martha Egan, *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>283</sup> Logs of ship inventories show, for example, that Cortés carried Milagros and ex-votos with him when set forth to conquer Mexico. See Priscilla E. Muller, *Jewels in Spain 1500-1800* (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1972), as cited in Martha Egan, *Milagros: Votive Offerings From the Americas*, p. 14. In addition to its proliferation in regions of the Mediterranean, Milagros is also practiced in most parts of the Caribbean, Central and South America, the Philippines and the French-speaking provinces of Canada. See Egan for an in depth history and analysis of the Milagros tradition.

<sup>284</sup> Ex-voto is Latin for "from my vow." A milagro depicting a head, for example, could be offered for headaches, mental illness, memory loss, learning disabilities, and/or head injuries.

<sup>285</sup> There is a Saint for nearly every body part, ailment, and predicament. For further analysis of the Milagros tradition in Latin America, see, for example, Eileen Oktavec, *Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros Along the Border* (The University of Arizona Press: Tucson, 1995).

<sup>286</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 183 and 230; notes 9 and 151.

Eleanor Heartney also discusses the sacred nature of relics in relation to medieval belief. She maintains, "Medieval theology teaches that, far from being separate and separable entities, body and soul are inextricably linked. The elevation of saints to heaven is not complete until their souls are joined by their bodies, and until then, the bodies they leave behind are imbued with special powers which reflect the exaltation of their souls." See Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, p. 12.

<sup>287</sup> Interview with the author. Also, in keeping with this, priest and writer Andrew Greeley suggests a "propensity among Catholics to take the objects and events and persons of ordinary life as hints of what God is like, in which God somehow lurks." *The Catholic Imagination*, p. 18. Even St. Teresa of Avila is known for having said: "God is in the pots and pans."

<sup>288</sup> "Untitled (Jars)" was also in her 1990 "Projects Room" at the Museum of Modern Art's along with "Untitled" (1990). The work is now in MoMA's permanent collection. It held center stage in the contemporary gallery for the grand Manhattan re-opening of the museum in Fall, 2004.

<sup>289</sup> Each vessel is 19" high, roughly the size and shape of a water cooler.

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<sup>290</sup> It is worth noting that when I first encountered this work, I tried, with equal amounts of repulsion and attraction, to discover evidence that these fluids were actually inside the jars. Furthermore, in my subsequent experiences while watching others' reactions to the work, most of them, too, searched fervently for some indication of jars' actual contents. This turned into an amusing experiment the dozen or so times I've since revisited the piece at MoMA. While people initially cringe with disgust upon reading the script, most are fascinated by the possibility that these jars actually contain body fluids. Appropriately, most people, including myself, examined the works not only with our eyes, looking for scratches or gaps in the silver coating or peeping down through the bottles' openings, but, bravely, with our noses.

<sup>291</sup> Smith has commented on the fact that the silvered surfaces force you to confront your hang-ups about the body, while another version of the work, made with clear glass bottles, allows your imagination to run wild, SAIC lecture. Smith made five versions of this work between 1986 and 1990, some clear, some mirrored, some with the names of the fluids written in German, as cited in Weitman, *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things*, note 24.

<sup>292</sup> Kimmelman, "Kiki Smith: The Body is a Political Battleground," C1. and Susan Tallman, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons," *Art in America* (April, 1992): 147. Gothic letters recalling early science and the ancient theory of humors (Lyon, 106). See also, for example, Helaine Posner, "Separation Anxiety," *Corporal Politics*, exh. cat., p. 28 (a clear glass version, simply called, "Untitled," 1986 was featured in this exhibition, discussed in Chapter Two). Posner has also explained that, for Smith, "our vulnerable body and its essential fluids represent in microcosm many of the ills plaguing our world as a whole. While she disavows overt moral intentions or social reforming aims, works such as the bottles take on an ethical or moral significance simply by the fact of being made during a decade that witnessed the deadliest years of the AIDS crisis, Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 15. Also, artist Mona Hatoum recently featured "Untitled (Jars)" in an exhibition she curated at MoMA, which addressed "the body politic," including issues of sexuality, AIDS, gender, and identity representation. Hatoum commented on context in which the work was made, remarking: "I'm not sure whether she was thinking about how these bodily substances have acquired dangerous connotations, but it certainly has that aspect for me." (Fereshteh Daftari "Interview with Mona Hatoum," *Artist's Choice: Mona Hatoum: Here is Elsewhere*, exhibition brochure, MoMA, NYC, 2003. Also see Ilka Becker, "Traces of Contact: Motifs of Impression and Contact in the Art of Kiki Smith," *Kiki Smith: Small Sculptures and Drawings*, exh. cat. (Ulm: Ulmer Museum, and Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001): 35.

<sup>293</sup> Smith, quoted in Amei Wallach, "The Way of All Flesh," *Newsday*, December 16, 1990, Part II, p. 19. In an interview with Helaine Posner, Smith also explained that the fluids "have very personal meaning but also carry social, political, and economic meaning," Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 15. "Fluids come out of the body under different circumstances—some are natural to the body and some are about invasion." Smith, quoted in Winters, 138. Smith also expressed this to David Frankel ("...these things had personal meanings, but you could also think about their social, historical, and spiritual implications in your life."), Frankel, 34, and she noted this as well in SAIC lecture.

<sup>294</sup> Smith has explained in reference to this work, "One reference to body parts is the reliquary. And the fluids I refer to—blood, milk, and tears—are made holy in Catholicism," as cited in Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics," 37.

<sup>295</sup> Tallman, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons," 151. For a history and analysis of the role body fluids played in the medieval imagination, see Caroline Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*. The work also holds associations with Egyptian canopic jars, which contained the body's viscera and were buried with the mummy, as well as with the ancient Roman tradition of using a 'prefica,' or hired female mourner, to collect tears in containers, to be buried with dead. Paolo Colombo and Elizabeth Janus, "Some Thoughts on the Art of Kiki Smith," 144). They can also refer to the 12 plagues that rained down on Pharaoh, stations of the cross. See Christopher Knight, "Body Language: Kiki Smith," *Los Angeles Times* (July 7, 1991): 74-76.

<sup>296</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 34.

<sup>297</sup> For example, Smith discussed tears in a clinical sense, as mediums through which certain poisons in our body are released, but also on a personal level, in that she cried "hysterically most of the time" during which she made the works, and meditating on tears held significant meaning.

<sup>298</sup> See *Kiki Smith: Small Sculptures and Drawings*, 35: "They may offer occasion for filling the receptacles with thought within the context of a ritual."

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<sup>299</sup> SAIC lecture.

<sup>300</sup> Paolo Colombo and Elizabeth Janus have noted that the jars resemble pharmaceutical vases and that they “conjure up sterile, clinical environments where medical experiments are performed. “Some Thoughts on the Work of Kiki Smith,” 144.

<sup>301</sup> This was the closest she could get to approximating human blood.

<sup>302</sup> Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.

<sup>303</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 92.

<sup>304</sup> “A conversation between Kiki Smith and Lynne Tillman,” a Museum of Modern Art Public Program in conjunction with the exhibition *Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things*, The Gramercy Theater, New York, NY, January 28, 2004. See Linda Shearer and Claudia Gould, *Kiki Smith*, 68, for a discussion of blood and Catholicism.

<sup>305</sup> Smith relayed her fascination with the Isenheim Altarpiece in an interview, saying “The *Isenheim Altarpiece* drives me crazy,” as quoted in Frankel, 36. Also see, Kiki Smith in an interview with Robin Winters, New York City, summer 1990, in *Kiki Smith*, exh. cat. Bonner Kunstverein, 1992, 36.

<sup>306</sup> In Kimmelman, “Making Bodies and Metaphors of Art.” Smith’s humble, laid back approach has been inspired, in part, by her extensive travels to Asia, Africa, Europe, and Mexico. Throughout her interview with Kimmelman, which consisted of walking around the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smith was continually drawn, according to Kimmelman, to non-Western works of art. He notes how Smith “crusades for unorthodox or marginalized techniques: not just metalwork but also glassware, tapestry, ceramics, paper constructions. She calls them ‘outmoded technologies’ and says ‘there’s a power in art forms that are neglected.’” I personally witnessed her affection for the decorative, in particular, during a discussion of the work of Elie Nadelman, which was on exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the Spring of 2003. As Smith walked a small crowd of us through the exhibition, she noted how Nadelman never feared making works that were very unpopular at the time. Phrases she used to talk about his work included: “He wasn’t afraid of being gushy”; his use of polychrome with highly refined, polished surfaces, electro-plating has been described as “poor man’s casting;” “super opulent” surfaces and materials (the decorative); he takes classical subjects (female nudes, stags) and dresses them up, “turns things up a notch.” In “A Discussion of the Work of Elie Nadelman,” Whitney Museum Public Program, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, April 22, 2003).

<sup>307</sup> As previously mentioned, Smith grew up with a death mask of her grandmother hanging in the hallway right at the front door of her home. She and Bebe also together made a death mask of her father.

<sup>308</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 135. It is also interesting to note that Smith uses the word “form” interchangeably with matter, whereas Aquinas used “form” to mean spirit. To Smith, there is really no difference between form and matter and spirit.

<sup>309</sup> Kimmelman, “Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies,” 22. Smith is interested in Elie Nadelman’s formal interests, as seen in works such as “Sur la Plage,” which she describes as a purely a formal exercise that is not about subject but about how one material plays off of another, how one surface complements another—the bronze with the marble. Nadelman also wrote a treatise on “significant form,” which advocated talking through the physicality of materials first and foremost, exploring formal curiosities. As Smith described it, “meandering through various subjects, but always grounding art in formal concerns, the materials that make it come alive.” Smith in “A Discussion of the Work of Elie Nadelman.”

<sup>310</sup> Veronica Sekules describes this particularly medieval quality as an “aesthetic of preciousness.” See Veronica Sekules, *Medieval Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94-96.

<sup>311</sup> Art critic Janet Koplos, who has written extensively on the craft and fine art divide in American culture, was one speaker who addressed the relationship of the body and craft. In her article “Knowing Objects: An Unfinished Ruminations,” *New Art Examiner* (April, 1996, vol. 23): 31-34, Koplos also examines the sensual and intellectual properties of craft objects. Philosopher and psychologist Margaret Boden was another conference participant who spoke about the functional and tactile features of crafts and the particular way in which crafts prompt the body into action, compelling it to experience its environment more fully. In an article based on this conference paper, Boden underscores the ability of crafts to “not only exploit the possibilities of the body [but to also] help us to

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see them more clearly and/or imaginatively.” See Margaret A. Boden, “Crafts, Perception, and the Possibilities of the Body,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 40, no. 3 (July, 2000): 289-301.

<sup>312</sup> Polly Ullrich, “Touch This. Tactility in recent contemporary art,” *New Art Examiner*, v. 24 (December 1996/January 1997): 10.

<sup>313</sup> David Katz, *The World of Touch*, edited and translated by Lester E. Krueger (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989); as cited in Polly Ullrich, “Touch this. Tactility in recent contemporary art,” 11. Thomas Aquinas also considered touch to be the foundation of all the other senses to the extent that each sense could be said to involve touch. See Rebekah Smick, “Touch in the ‘Hypererotomachia Poliphili’: The Sensual Ethics of Architecture,” in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 205- 223.

<sup>314</sup> Polly Ullrich, “Beyond touch: the body as perceptual tool,” *Fiberarts* vol. 26, no. 1 (Summer, 1999): 44.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>316</sup> See Polly Ullrich, “More than Just a Touch: The Tactile Element in Fiber Art,” 33.

<sup>317</sup> Berenson, quoted in *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>318</sup> “That’s the fun part of making art—what you’re making is incidental. What you make may come from some emotional or personal drive, but how you make it is the real pleasure.” Smith, quoted in Frankel, 35.

<sup>319</sup> Kimmelman, “Making Metaphors of Art and Bodies,” 22.

<sup>320</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 34.

<sup>321</sup> Weitman, 32.

<sup>322</sup> Tom Jones of Fawbush Gallery, New York, NY, quoted in *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994).

<sup>323</sup> Joan Key, *make* (June/July, 1997): 3.

<sup>324</sup> Chris Waddington, “Earthly Style, Heavenly Magic,” *The Times-Picayune* (June 10, 1994): L21.

<sup>325</sup> “Kiki Smith,” *Art on Paper* (Nov/Dec, 2000): n.p.

<sup>326</sup> Claudia Gould, quoted in *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994).

<sup>327</sup> Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Kiki Smith: Night* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), np.

<sup>328</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 34.

<sup>329</sup> Smith, quoted in Winters, 133. Also, see PBS interview.

<sup>330</sup> Smith, quoted in Close, 39.

<sup>331</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>332</sup> Joanna Isaak has similarly identified her studio as “a redemption center for lumpen material and reliquary.” See Isaak, “Working in the Rag-and-Bone Shop of the Heart,” *Otherworlds*, p. 49.

<sup>333</sup> Smith explains her process of creating multiple Saint Genevieve figures from one standing mold in PBS interview. Also, Smith discussed her interest in Elie Nadelman’s “family of forms,” meaning his use of various materials and forms to play off of one another. She admires his formal experimentation and his fearlessness in synthesizing seemingly disparate mediums. He kept experimenting even when he had little support and little money. Kiki Smith, “A Conversation on the work of Elie Nadelman.”

<sup>334</sup> Smith, quoted in Kimmelman, “Making Metaphors out of Art and Bodies,” 22.

<sup>335</sup> Smith, quoted in *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Kiki Smith's "Volatile Bodies": Feminism in the Flesh

"I've been punished more for being a girl than I've been punished for having a digestive system."<sup>336</sup>

Kiki Smith's *Virgin Mary* (1992) (figs. 4.1-4.3) commanded center stage in the 1996 exhibition *Kiki Smith: Works (1988-1996)*, at St. Peter's Cathedral in Lübeck, Germany. St. Peter's, a bombed-out medieval cathedral later re-consecrated and transformed into a center for religious and cultural events, was the first consecrated space Smith designated for the sculpture. Made of wax, cheesecloth, and wood and standing nearly six feet tall, *Virgin Mary* assumes the archetypal Marian stance of compassion, generosity, and openness with outstretched arms, upward-facing palms, and bowed head. Her solemnity recalls the austerity of medieval German wood carvings.<sup>337</sup> Aside from these attributes, however, Smith's *Virgin Mary* bears little resemblance to traditional Marian iconography which typically portrays this defining figure of Catholic piety as a submissive, graceful, pristine virgin shrouded in a veil and enveloped within heavy layers of cascading robes (fig. 4.4). Not only is Smith's "Virgin" stripped of her signature mantle and veil, she is robbed of her flesh. Flayed from head to toe, her body is nothing more than a dense, fibrous network of muscle, tissue, and veins, swollen and bloody in its freshly exposed condition. Smith based the sculpture on *écorché* figures she had seen during her years studying anatomy while training to become an emergency medical technician.<sup>338</sup> These anatomical models, typically crafted out of wax or papier-

mâché, were constructed with overlays that could be peeled away to reveal layers of skin, muscle, organs, nerves, and bone, and thus served as ideal prototypes for investigating what lies beneath the skin's surface. The luminescent, visceral quality of this "Virgin's" inner flesh recalls the radiant density and malleability of the flesh cubes Smith pieced together in the aforementioned wax-based work, *Untitled* (1990) (fig. 3.1). The aluminum version, *Untitled (Skins)* (1991) (fig. 3.3) accompanied *Virgin Mary* in the St. Peter's exhibition, also sharing the same grand, ecclesiastical space with them were works such as *Nervous Giants* (1987) (fig. 2.25) *Ribcage* (1987) (fig. 2.12), *Trinity* (1993) (fig. 3.16), and *Jewel Arms* (1994) (fig. 3.14), all of which served to reinforce the corporeal thrust of *Virgin Mary* and to heighten the physicality of the spiritual setting.

Like *Untitled* (1990), *Virgin Mary* has a corresponding piece cast from the same mold in a different material. Made of bronze, *Virgin Mary* (1994) (fig. 4.5) imparts a colder and harder version of its wax predecessor, yet its fleshiness is no less palpable. By wrapping the original wax base with actual pieces of meat, Smith achieved a muscular verisimilitude to rival even the most graphic écorché. Also unique to this 1994 "Virgin" are the silver "veins" inlaid in her forearms, which offset the repugnance of the exposed flesh with their metallic brilliance. Here again, Smith draws on the decorative preciousness of the reliquary to reveal the sanctity of her subject.

Yet the 1992 wax *Virgin Mary* spares no gruesome detail, and while clearly vulnerable in her open, compassionate stance and flayed condition, this "Virgin" is, in the words of Smith, "angry." Smith has explained that she made the figure because

she is also “angry that the Virgin Mary pays for her compassion by being neutered....The position of the Virgin robs you of your femininity and sex.”<sup>339</sup> In submitting to the will of God to become the conduit for the Word made flesh, Mary was robbed of her carnality and her sexuality. As discussed in Chapter One, religion and history have also neutered her. “A paragon of virginity” in Christian doctrine and myth, Mary, according to historian Marina Warner, was regarded as a “closed gate,” a “spring shut-up,” “a fountain sealed.” “Her physical virginity post partum was as important a part of orthodoxy in the early Church as her virginal conception by the power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>340</sup> Furthermore, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—the claim that Mary was born of her mother Anne without the stain of original sin and was therefore the most perfect created being after Jesus Christ—denies Mary her full humanity.<sup>341</sup> The dogma surrounding the Virgin’s Assumption into heaven, like that of Christ’s, in which she is spared mortal decay, also emphatically refutes her carnal nature.

Smith’s *Virgin Mary*, however, gapes, bleeds, feels pain and will ultimately decay. A macabre, formidable presence, *Virgin Mary* stands heavy, encumbered by the pull of gravity on her dense musculature. She exists solely in the flesh and is, in the words of Smith, defiantly “presente,”<sup>342</sup> someone who “insists on her physicality.” According to Smith, it is as if she were saying, “When you strip away everything, I’m still here.” In her notebook, Smith wrote: “The Virgin Mary: It’s the anger of Being neutered/ reconstruction/ exposed/ she retains selfhood in the absents of the physical.” (fig. 4.6). Smith’s rendering of Mary as a “flesh body” was her way of “incarnating” Mary just as God was made flesh through the person of Christ.<sup>343</sup>

Smith incarnated the Virgin Mary in another work, *Virgin Mary* (1990) (fig. 4.7), a ragged paper figure whose headless and hollow upper body assumes the signature Marian gesture of openness and compassion and whose lower body has collapsed into a tangled mess of dangling innards, including a fifteen-foot trail of intestines spilling out onto the floor. The piece was, in part, a reaction to a comment a boyfriend had made about wanting her to always have her arms open wide for him. Unable to do this, Smith responded, “If you stand like that, it makes you generous in a way, but it also makes you vulnerable, and that made me angry. So I thought of the Virgin with her arms open wide, but I made her intestines run across the floor, and I thought that besides being vulnerable, they suggested the snake part of Eve. It’s the anger of having to take that position.”<sup>344</sup> Thus, while a manifestation of vulnerability, of losing oneself through the literal loss of one’s insides, *Virgin Mary* (1990) remains fearlessly “in the flesh,” violating the integrity of the body as a whole, closed system and exposing her carnality as an act of defiance.

Such bold and disobedient disclosures of the flesh recall Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) (fig. 1.1), who flaunts her sexuality in homage to her humanity. They also provide a rationale for Smith’s defense of Ofili’s work, when she suggested that through Ofili, the Virgin Mary may be supplicating herself through her desire “to honor all that is sacred *and* human.” Like Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Smith’s *Virgin Mary* sculptures boldly embrace their humanity, insisting that we acknowledge Mary’s carnal nature and ultimately her mortality. Like Ofili, Smith has also called attention to Mary’s humanity by acknowledging her sexuality. She finds it fitting that in traditional depictions of Mary as the Virgin of Guadalupe, for



example, which typically portray the Virgin within an elaborate, red, almond-shaped mandorla, she appears to be nestled within an enormous vagina, with the layers of her robes acting as labia and her head a clitoris (fig. 4.8). “That’s why people like her,” Smith explained.<sup>345</sup> Yet sexuality is not the only defining mark of Mary’s humanity for Smith. In two 1999 etchings, *Virgin Mary* (fig. 4.10) and *Virgin with Dove* (fig. 4.11), Mary appears old, wrinkled, and tired. In near-abstract states of elongation and distortion, both figures disprove the notion of Mary as an idealized, youthful virgin, divulging a profoundly human side instead. *Pieta* (1999) (fig. 4.12), an ink and graphite drawing on Nepalese paper, also reveals the Virgin’s vulnerable side. The work is a self-portrait, in which Smith portrays herself as a “Mater dolorosa,” mourning the loss of her beloved cat Ginzer. Reiterating the fragility and coarseness of the wrinkled paper, Smith depicts herself aged, unkempt, and distraught, hardly faithful to Michelangelo’s serene and youthful archetype.

Elements of pain and physical suffering are also essential to Catholic piety with its conviction in the mortification of the flesh as a purifier of the soul and a pathway to salvation. The bloody and wounded condition of Smith’s 1992 *Virgin Mary* only accentuates the openness of her posture and her martyrdom, making her appear more vulnerable and earthly than incorruptible and divine. Mimicking Christ’s Passion, *Virgin Mary*’s visceral carnality and earthly pain signify her humanity and, thus, her ability to have compassion for human suffering.

Thus, like Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Smith’s *Virgin Mary* (1992) is a figure of resistance and healing. Recalling one of the reasons she made the work, Smith has said, “I decided I wanted to make images that would be useful and positive

in daily life. I thought of female images that I liked, female super heroes. One was the Virgin Mary.”<sup>346</sup> She has argued that the Virgin Mary is most beneficial as a role model when she is incarnated “insistently and defiantly in the flesh.”<sup>347</sup> Smith sees the work as a rebuttal to Christianity’s marked separation of sex and divinity and a retort to the irresolvable paradox engendered by the myth of Mary as both supreme mother and sinless virgin, a symbol of unattainable female perfection. The Church’s ideological separation of the sacred and the profane, according to Smith, “makes for lots of nuttiness in people’s lives,” particularly women’s.<sup>348</sup> By acknowledging Mary’s flesh as well as her spirituality, Smith is attempting to mend this rupture.

As previously discussed, Smith considers herself a devout follower of the Virgin Mary. “[She] has been a presence both in my work and my personal life, . . . and I try to honor her in my daily life with prayer,” Smith has said.<sup>349</sup> Admittedly “a big Virgin Mary fan,” Smith recognizes that the Virgin Mary is also an historical construction and is aware of the ambiguous messages Mary conveys about female identity and sexuality. Therefore she enjoys “manipulating [the Virgin Mary] around in different ways” according to her own “perverse interests.”<sup>350</sup> While embracing Catholicism’s corporeal imagination, Smith also explores the paradoxical messages of its tenets. She finds Catholicism’s ultimate resistance to corporeal autonomy and sexual expression, particularly where the Virgin Mary and all women’s bodies are concerned, contradictory and hypocritical.<sup>351</sup> Despite its “obsession with all things physical,” Catholicism ultimately argues for the separation of sex from the divine, and because of this, Smith has also pronounced it a “body-hating cult” that “hates things that are physical.”<sup>352</sup>

While the previous chapter investigates Smith's allegiance to and utilization of traditional Catholic material culture and ritual in her art, this chapter examines her ambivalent and complex relationship to her religious roots. Acknowledging that she often feels "owned" by Catholicism, and Judaeo-Christianity in general, Smith continually grapples with its complexities, searching not only for alternative means of expressing spirituality but for a sign of what form her faith could take.<sup>353</sup> "My whole life I've wanted to believe in a god, find some kind of god that I could make a shrine to," Smith once confessed. "But I can't. I never do."<sup>354</sup> For years, she has visited countless churches, synagogues, Mosques, and temples only to come up empty handed.<sup>355</sup> Her ultimate goal is to one day build her own church, and while not opposed to cobbling together different religions, as her mother, both Catholic and Buddhist, did, Smith recognizes that most religions "are constantly being renewed, reinvented, and refuted, and they have to be all of those things in order to survive." Therefore, according to Smith, to question, to refute, and to reinvent is "what it means to be in a religion. It's just a normal relationship that one has with religion."<sup>356</sup>

How, then, do Smith's ambivalent attitudes about religion inform her work? While she attests to the incarnate nature of the art-making process, that making art constitutes "making God," much of Smith's strategy can best be described as a rescue and recovery effort in which she continually strives to "*re-make* God." While resuscitating the body from the crypts of contemporary American visual culture, Smith primarily focuses on recovering women's bodies from patriarchal constraint and manipulation. She explains,

Our bodies are basically stolen from us, and [my work is] about trying to reclaim one's own turf, or one's own vehicle of being

here, to own it and use it to look at how we are here. Certainly women's experience is much more acutely through the body. In a certain sense, we *are* the body. So in a way it's reclaiming or taking this territory as a turf.<sup>357</sup>

By reclaiming the body of the Virgin Mary through various reinterpretations of her as a corporeal figure of strength, Smith not only mends the rift between the sacred and the profane and the human and the divine, she underscores the importance of what it means for all women to think, know, and live through their bodies autonomously. Aware of the conflicting messages the Virgin Mary model conveys about ideals of purity, femininity, submission, compassion, and female strength, Smith recreates the stories and mythologies surrounding her in ways that address not only the constructed persona of the Virgin Mary but also the complexities of the female role in contemporary society.

**“This is my flesh.”**

Several years prior to her appearance at St. Peter's Cathedral, *Virgin Mary* (1992) debuted at Vienna's MAK—Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst—in the 1992 exhibition *Silent Work*. Smith's favorite exhibition to date, she dedicated it to the Virgin Mary, Lot's Wife, and Peter Noever, the exhibition's curator. As a benefit to the museum, Smith made a work based on *Virgin Mary*, entitled *Silent Work* (1992) (fig. 4.13), a composition comprised of a screenprint on Nepalese paper and a candle perched on a small wooden, altar-like shelf mounted below. The screenprint was developed from drawings Smith made from *Virgin Mary*, which render the figure's exposed tissue and musculature in starkly contrasting black

and white. Similar to devotional candles used in Viennese cathedrals, Smith's candle is adorned with white-metal-leaf bearing the German inscription: "Nehmet und esset alle davon, das ist mein Lieb" ("Take, eat, all of you, this is my flesh"). Signifying the Sacrament of the Transubstantiation, these words reportedly spoken by Christ are here intended to be the words of Mary. As someone whose sexuality was sacrificed and whose agency was compromised by the will of God, Mary finds her voice through Smith. Smith has explained that the composition's title refers to "women's work," such as sewing and decorating, which is typically quiet and introspective. Yet it also resonates with the fact that this kind of work has historically been silenced by culture, denigrated to the status of craft and dismissed as unoriginal and mindless busy work. For someone who readily and quietly surrendered her physicality and strength of character for humanity's sake, Mary's plight has gone largely underappreciated, as she is scarcely mentioned in the Bible and is more often than not regarded as an empty vessel vulnerable to God's command.<sup>358</sup> Yet, through Smith, Mary wields her agency by brandishing her flesh. Smith's reiteration of her as a wounded, decaying body in the two-dimensional, conjoined with the devotional candle, a symbol of evanescence and mortality, only heightens Mary's earthly strength, placing her on par with humanity, as she offers her own body as the pathway to grace and salvation.

Another incarnation of Marian strength and agency is Smith's *Standing* (1998), a sculptural commission for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego (figs. 4.14-4.15). Her first permanent outdoor work, *Standing* features a bronze female figure who stands nude atop a twelve-foot concrete column

cast from the mold of a dead Eucalyptus tree Smith found on campus. Presiding over a quiet, grassy plot between the basic Science and Medical Teaching buildings on the UCSD campus, the figure assumes the traditional Virgin Mary pose, head bowed and arms open. The composition also operates as a fountain, as water steadily trickles from channels cut into the figure's wrists, dripping down through her fingers and falling into a circular stone basin at the base of the column.

Like that of *Virgin Mary* (1992), this figure's body reveals an anatomical understructure. Based on an Indian papier-mâché écorché model discovered in a classroom on campus, the figure is flayed at the wrists and the backs of the calves, a subtler, "toned-down version" of its predecessor. The sculpture was cast from a live model, artist friend Peg Wood, a petite woman approximately five feet tall, in her mid-forties, and, as Smith characterized her, physically strong, yet "very quiet and plain looking." Having used Wood as a model for several previous works, Smith has said that she likes making people smaller than herself because "their forms then seem more abstract."<sup>359</sup> She saw Wood as an ideal model also because her form differed so markedly from idealized, classical statuary, resembling instead a "real-life figure—the kind [students who will encounter her] try to heal every day."<sup>360</sup> This was especially poignant given that at the time Smith cast her body for *Standing Wood* was dying of lymph cancer. Smith sees the sculpture as her way of "immortalizing someone in another material." She explained, "Maybe in a sense this is my Catholic reliquary, which comes from earlier ideas of...saving the dead, keeping the dead around. Trying to immortalize the dead, to give life to the dead, regenerate the dead."<sup>361</sup>

Thus, Smith resurrected both the Eucalyptus tree and Peg Wood to make a live sculpture, and she reanimated them with the motion of the water, the source of life.<sup>362</sup> Smith also intended for the water to enliven the space around the sculpture. The site, a modest, nondescript path located between the medical and science buildings, was exactly what Smith envisioned with its feeling of intimacy and seclusion. She explained that, in wanting the water to give “life to a dull place,” she was reminded of a trip she made to Guatemala, where she saw women gathering water from wells in the center of town. She was fascinated by the notion that in addition to being associated primarily with women and women’s work, water “activates spaces” and “makes a space a real space.”<sup>363</sup> *Standing* was also based on a fountain Smith saw in Cincinnati’s Fountain Square (fig. 4.16), which features, as she recalled at the time she conceived *Standing* a *Virgin Mary* or “Diana” figure “with water sprouting out.” Known as the *Tyler Davidson Fountain*, the sculpture was designed by August von Kreling and installed in downtown Cincinnati in 1871. Water sprays from the out-stretched hands of the 9-foot female figure as the “Genius of Water,” who signifies Mother Nature and the origin of water as rain. Below her, four adult figures dramatize the life-sustaining uses of water, four children illustrate the life-enhancing pleasures of water, and four relief panels depict the industrial uses of water. Four drinking spouts on the lower tier of the fountain once had communal cups for pedestrians to use. Smith liked the idea of reiterating these life-affirming, regenerative qualities of water in her own work.

Water also holds significance as a Christian symbol of sustenance, purification, and healing, in both a spiritual and physical sense.<sup>364</sup> Water is used in

the sacrament of Holy Baptism to bless and cleanse all sin and to prepare the faithful for eternal life. Catholic parishioners sprinkle themselves with Holy Water to ward off evil and sin and to insure the good will of God. In *Material Christianity*, Colleen McDannell discusses the miraculous powers attributed to water gathered from the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France, explaining “For the devout, water was not merely a symbol of a spiritual growth; it could actually link the natural to the supernatural. Those who traveled to Lourdes believed that the water had affective presence; they felt the physical presence of the holy.”<sup>365</sup>

Smith also infused *Standing* with a sense of the holy by linking it to the larger cosmos. By the time she completed *Standing* animals and stars were prominent subjects in her work, as she strove to take her “bodies” out of isolation. Adorned with tiny bronze stars arranged on her chest in the shape of the constellation Virgo, this “Virgin” figure stands poised and confident. As the progressive voice of the title suggests, she perseveres. Yet, as is the case with Smith’s other virgin figures, she is also vulnerable. While Smith originally planned to affix the stars flat onto her chest like tattoos, she ultimately shaped them into starfish-headed pins that pierce the figure’s bare flesh for better visibility. Suggesting tools of martyrdom, the pins combine with the areas of exposed skin to enhance the visceral character of this saintly figure.<sup>366</sup>

One of Smith’s initial proposals for the fountain also heightened the physicality of the composition as a tripartite arrangement with one figure peeing, one vomiting, and one spewing milk from her bosoms. The idea for the structure was inspired by the countless fluid-emitting fountains and sculptures Smith has seen



throughout her travels, including Iranian fountain sculptures of martyrs which pump blood-red fluid instead of water. Other sources include the *Fountain of Virtues* in Nuremberg, Germany, Smith's birthplace. Built in the sixteenth-century, the fountain features seven allegorical figures heartily lactating as a symbol of the fertility of virtue. Virgin Mary statues that miraculously cry tears of blood also come to mind as possible resources, including the "Rosa Mistica" from San Damiano, Italy, a miraculous plaster statue that reportedly began to cry tears of blood in 1982 (fig. 4.17). Smith tried to reproduce a similar effect once when she transformed a sculpture she had made of an eye into a water fountain, in which tiny ducts inserted around the base of the eye emitted teardrops, and one hole set in the pupil shot water straight up into the air. When she explained the piece once to artist friend Chuck Close, he likened it to the ubiquitous weeping Madonnas in Catholic Churches, noting "You'll probably have thousands of people praying at the feet of your sculpture thinking it's a miracle."<sup>367</sup>

Smith also envisioned *Standing* as a solitary female nude atop an even taller, eighteen-foot steel column. As indicated in her original 1993 proposal drawing for the Stuart Collection, the figure was to be fully flayed, "veins" of a not-yet-known material were to fall from the figure's wrists like "maypole" ribbons, and natural ivy was to grow up the column base, emphasizing the figure's integration of nature with humanity (fig. 4.18). Of course, neither of her original proposals materialized, as even Smith agreed that neither was particularly "right for the Stuart Collection."<sup>368</sup> Water trickling from the Virgin's palms, as embodied in the final version, seemed a

much more appropriate metaphor for blood and martyrdom in this case. As far as Smith's other works are concerned, however, it is an entirely different story.

### **Oozing out all over**

Smith has attributed her affinity for representing bodily fluids to the fact that as an artist, she wants to “ooze out all over the place.”<sup>369</sup> As previously discussed, Smith's interest in the human body and its multiple indiscretions, as seen in works such as *Fountainhead*, informed a large portion of her artistic output, particularly during the 1980s and early 1990s. She initially dwelt only on the body's interior and its parts because it felt safe to her, not only because it was a subject she knew well, it was also a “universal language” in which she so easily “talked.” Yet as Smith recalls, “My work [then]...was cool, fact- and information-based; I was defending myself with facts or quasi facts—used language like a moat....”<sup>370</sup> For Smith depicting entire figures was a frightening prospect. Addressing specifics like individuality, personality, gender, race, class, and ethnicity initially made her uncomfortable, yet it seemed to be the natural course for her to take with her art, and when she did, she most often turned to what she knew best, the female body.<sup>371</sup> Expanding on the anatomical themes of her earlier work, Smith has most often depicted female figures leaking or oozing a signature body fluid. Women's bodies, according to Smith, are bodies from which “things naturally fall out.”<sup>372</sup> In addition to sharing with men the capacity to sweat, urinate, defecate, vomit, bleed, and exude pus, women are unique in their ability to produce and secrete milk and menstrual fluid.

While a work such as *Standing* offers a fairly sanitized view of women's permeable nature, Smith's other "Virgin" and "powerful female goddess" figures aren't quite as pristine and orderly.<sup>373</sup> *Mother* (1992) (fig. 4.19), for example, a white, faceless paper body mounted high on a modest, make-shift pedestal of boxes, appears to embody a universal life force in her stoic grandeur. Imitating the ropey rivulets of hair that cascade down her torso, torrents of paper milk gush from her breasts and spill to the ground. Her hands clutch at her breasts, but not with the intention of stopping the unruly flow. Instead they help it along. According to Smith, the figure is a "mother as endless bounty," the "Dea Nutrix" or nourishing deity, taking her lead from traditional representations of lactating Virgins, such as Portuguese artist Josefa de Óbidos' *Holy Family* (1672) (fig. 4.20), which depicts the Holy Mother offering her copious flow to the Christ child. *Milky Way* (1993) (fig. 4.21) is another goddess figure who, in paying homage to Mary's pagan origins, generously proffers her bounty. A life-sized sculpture made of paper, wire, gold and silver leaf, *Milky Way* encounters a similar breach of bodily discipline. Alluding to popular Greek legend, the figure recalls what resulted when the mortal infant Hercules was secretly suckled at the breast of an unwitting, sleeping Hera in order to attain immortality. When his forceful draws awoke and startled her, causing her to shake him off with great fury, her excess milk splashed into the heavens, creating the galaxy of our solar system. The work also pays homage to Hera as "Queen of the Goddesses," who, in all her abundance and fortitude, nurtured our universe into existence. By honoring Hera, not God the Father, as the originator of the universe, Smith claims the supernatural mysteries of women as worthy of veneration. In this

regard, *Milky Way* also recalls Christian art that expounds the sacredness of the Virgin Mother's milk by depicting its miraculous transformation into precious jewels. Bolivian artist Melchor Pérez de Holguín's early 18<sup>th</sup> Century *The Virgin of Belém*, which captures the moment when droplets of Mary's milk morph into a rosary of rubies, is one such example (fig. 4.22).

Furthermore, *Milky Way* flouts the universal, idealized, porcelain-skinned goddess of antiquity, as seen in traditional versions, such as Tintoretto's late 16<sup>th</sup>-century painting *The Origin of the Milky Way* (fig. 4.23). Rough-hewn, ungainly, and standing alone on a lowly platform of cardboard, *Milky Way* is not a graceful, voluptuous beauty surrounded by exotic birds, lavish jewels, and blissful cherubs. Her power lies in her breasts, which spurt stellar jets of silver and gold by the will of their own Herculean force.

*Milky Way* signifies what Smith recalls was her way of "anthropomorphizing" the world and reclaiming women's powers of creation, playing on the notion of natural, motherly abundance as a constructed feminine ideal. Within these discursive spaces she designates as "feminine," Smith turns the simple and the everyday into the mythical and the consequential. With *Milky Way*, Smith affirms that the body-- in this case the female body-- is a body that is worthily uncontainable. Indeed, it is a body "from which things naturally fall out." Breasts are naturally open and effusive, defiant in their fluidity and abundance.

Other "powerful female goddesses" who rebelliously spew their liquid bounty include the aforementioned *Untitled (Train)* (1993) (fig. 3.13), a figure made of ivory-pure plaster, who spills strands of red, glass beads from between her legs and

*Pee Body* (1992) (fig. 4.24), a wax figure who squats on the ground and “pees” copious strings of amber, glass beads. *Untitled (Train)* radically violates the sanctity and universality of classical sculpture by “mucking up” a fine art archetype with “dumb decoration,” in the words of Smith.<sup>374</sup> The strands of red beads, which suggest menstrual blood, also mar the integrity of the monumental and uniform marble statue. A powerful taboo in many cultures, menstrual blood generally evokes the messiness of the female body, emphasizing it as changeable, unstable, multiple, controlled by its leaking orifices.<sup>375</sup> Yet Smith finds ideological significance in them. She made the work, in part, as a crafty retort to the heroic Pollock drip paintings which have been seen as manifestations of male piss trails or ejaculate. “Women are natural stainers, . . . and this was an equally creative kind of mark,” Smith once explained, believing menstrual “trains” to be powerful counter-gestures to phallic residue, which has been celebrated in art history as the mark of universal heroicism.<sup>376</sup> In this regard, Smith exposes the gendered enterprise of modernism and responds with her signature: “I want to ooze out all over the place.” Furthermore like most of her figural sculptures, *Untitled (Train)* was modeled from a specific body and has characteristics of one unique individual. The short and plump body form refuses to stand for the traditional “Woman” as object of the male gaze and instead promotes women’s individual agency and identity, rupturing the traditional sculptural renditions of the nude as unitary, solid, closed, and idealized.

*Pee Body* similarly refutes the classical ideal with her heavy limbs, fleshy midriff, and slumped posture. The golden streams of “urine” that pool in decorative swirls on the floor behind her also amplify the work’s subversiveness by threatening

to encroach upon the viewer's space while simultaneously delighting the senses with their delicate opulence. Partly based on medieval gargoyles that "pee" on passersby whenever it rains, *Pee Body* was originally entitled *Lot's Wife* as an homage to the wayward biblical figure who was turned into a pillar of Salt when she looked back at the doomed city she was forced to flee, disobeying God's orders (Genesis 19:26). A page from one of Smith's notebooks reveals her initial thinking on the work (fig. 4.25). Written above a sketch of the squatting *Pee Body* figure are the words: "Lot's Wife. She looks back to the physical, returns to the flesh. Disobediant (sic), defiant, insistant (sic), present. She's the physical returning to the flesh. Celebration." Smith esteems *Lot's Wife* as a "superheroine" precisely for her deviance. By God's command, looking back to her city, Sodom, which was being destroyed, and longing for the material comforts of her past was a punishable sin, yet she insisted on recapturing her physical life in a single gesture worthy of commemoration. "She gets punished...but immortalized," Smith explains.<sup>377</sup> A woman of the flesh, *Lot's Wife* is upheld in Smith's pantheon of deities as a pudgy squatter who revels in her physicality, valiantly letting it all hang out. She is human, and so much so that Smith felt compelled to paint her "toenails" with red fingernail polish, just as a "girl's joke."<sup>378</sup>

Thus, with all of Smith's "Virgin figures," there is an easy slippage between the sacred and the profane. By changing the name of *Lot's Wife* to *Pee Body* a more general term that denotes a predominant category within her oeuvre, Smith underscores the compatibility of her religious subjects and the body.<sup>379</sup> Subversive adaptations of fluid-emitting sacred statues, like the Madonnas who miraculously

weep tears of blood, Smith's figures suggest that all body fluids, regardless of their orifice of origin, are sacred substances because, for Smith, they are true vestiges of resistance and autonomy.

### **Realizing a Corporeal Feminism**

As previously mentioned, Smith was not always so comfortable depicting the full human figure and its fluids, and she was even more reluctant to portray women's bodies, especially in such a manner that accentuated their physicality and their alleged closeness to nature. As articulated by art critic Joanna Isaak, when making and exhibiting these female figures, Smith was constantly worrying that she was going to be "burned at the theoretical stake of essentialism."<sup>380</sup> Even though Smith created works such as *Mother*, *Milky Way*, *(Untitled) Train*, and *Pee Body* during a time when other artists and theorists were investigating ways of re-thinking and reconfiguring the female body as a constructive force of female subjectivity, she admits to her own "somatophobia" as a symptom of feminism's own mercurial relationship with the body.<sup>381</sup> "Essentialism," as it has been associated most strongly with the female body, based in part on its unique reproductive processes, had become a dirty word in feminist theory and practice during the 1980s and 90s, not least for its implication of a body that is given, ahistorical, and unchanging-- a body that patriarchal culture has deemed intrinsically fragile, unruly, and an impediment to the loftier, more rational pursuits of the intellect. Feminist aversions to body-centered theories and imagery are further compounded by Western reason's centuries-long acceptance of a mind/body dualism, based in part on Descartes' formulation of the *res*

*cogitans* (the dynamic, powerful mind and the site of identity) as superior to the *res extensa* (the essential body of raw, unchanging, and uncontrollable matter), as discussed in Chapter Two.<sup>382</sup>

Yet Smith ultimately combated her “somatophobia,” choosing to dispute the validity of this enduring mind/body binary and the association of the inferior term with the feminine by strategically embracing the female body and “femininity” and “shoving it in people’s faces.”<sup>383</sup> And as one critic confirmed: “Smith approaches the body with a matter-of-fact attitude of a mother cleaning a baby’s bottom.”<sup>384</sup> While venerating the female body and its subjective powers, however, Smith’s strategy is not one of simply reducing women to *only* their bodies. Hers is one that combines flesh-power with brainpower and body with soul. As she explains,

I think one struggles to integrate the spirit and soul and physical and the intellect in a kind of healing and nurturing way that is more promoting life than trying to negate and destroy, or deny. It’s to embrace one’s sexuality, and one’s smell, one’s palpitations—embrace all these things as your own and have a deep, meaningful experience that the body is temporary; it’s a thing that’s being changed, it’s interfacing. The inside and the outside are constantly in a shift of what you’re letting go and leaving behind—you’re breathing in and out and that’s becoming you and then being expelled from you. The parameters of where you exist are ambiguous sometimes, and you’re constantly being made new all the time. You’re a flexible thing; you’re not this inert definition. You’re something that’s constantly changing, and that fluidity is not to be lost.”<sup>385</sup>

While Smith’s thinking on this important marriage of body and soul recalls Aquinas’ medieval theories on spirituality, it also resonates with contemporary feminist theories of the body, particularly those put forth by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz. Like Smith, Grosz seeks to sort out the complexities surrounding the feminist “problem of essentialism”—that foregrounding the body in feminist theories of



subjectivity necessarily confines women to a pre-given, unchanging, and acultural “essence.” As explained in her 1993 book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Grosz endeavors to perceive subjectivity in terms other than the dualisms that have for so long tainted our understanding of human knowledge and being— that any “thing” is necessarily made up of mutually exclusive categories, such as body and mind, biological and social, inside and outside, in which one term dominates. One of her objectives is to rescue the body from its status as pure, raw matter, impervious to the sways of the intellect and incapable of affecting anything “external” to it. She upholds the body as a source just as powerful for gaining insight into Western cultural productivity as the mind, and she considers the body an equally significant site for debunking powerful myths, especially where sexual difference is concerned. She maintains that, unlike feminist theories of social constructionism, for example, which accept a passive, biologically fixed notion of the body onto which culture writes its codes and society takes its effects,<sup>386</sup> corporeally-centered feminisms can propose the body, or rather bodies, as lived, or “volatile” — bodies that extend the frameworks that attempt to contain them, and bodies that are continually in flux and actively engaged with the production of their own knowledges as well as with those of society. She argues that the body must not be read as an already given entity, complete and pure prior to its intellectual and cultural inscription and simply written over and re-coded. Rather, for Grosz, the body is organically open and incomplete without social organization. Bodies, in other words, both constitute and are literally constituted by the social.

Grosz acknowledges the dangerous territory she navigates when advancing feminist theories of the body, admitting that her project, indeed, “hovers close to many patriarchal conceptions of the body that have served to establish an identity for women in essentialist, ahistorical, or universalist terms.”<sup>387</sup> Yet she refuses a constructionist denial of the body’s importance in forming subjectivity, a denial that risks erasing women’s sexual specificities beneath a universal category of a masculine-based humanism.

To demonstrate what she sees as a dynamic interplay between the corporeal and the intellectual, Grosz uses the Lacanian model of a Mobius strip, an inverted three-dimensional figure eight, as a working metaphor. She argues that bodies and minds, rather than existing as two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance, proceed somewhere in between these two alternatives. She explains:

The Mobius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the...uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.<sup>388</sup>

The Mobius strip model explains the ways in which both the outside is determined by the inside, i.e., the ways in which the psyche literally shapes the body, how our bodies are constituted and “performed”<sup>389</sup> by our self-image, ideas, beliefs, experiences, etc.; and the ways in which the inside is determined by the outside, i.e., the ways in which social inscriptions upon the surface of the body— surgery,

clothing, diet, exercise, tattooing, piercing, etc. — manifest internal thoughts, beliefs, feelings, etc. The model permits a continual slippage between surface and depth, where no one “thing” necessarily dominates, and nothing is ever fixed. Thus the body as Mobius strip, according to Grosz, is “neither— while also being both— private or public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined.”<sup>390</sup>

While other feminist scholars have also contributed sufficient possibilities for theoretical “volatile bodies,” few have shown what a “volatile body” might look like or how one might behave.<sup>391</sup> Other than the Mobius strip model, however, Grosz does not offer any concrete visualization of an “embodied subjectivity” or “psychical corporeality,” nor does she suggest any specific materials that would be useful for advancing women’s autonomous representations. As she stresses throughout her text, it is not her intent to arrive at any solutions for a corporeal feminism (hence the use of the phrase *Toward a Corporeal Feminism* in her title). The value of Grosz’s project is that it provides the preliminary materials for further explorations into ways of actualizing corporeal subjectivity. Grosz affirms the great need for body-motivated, cultural and intellectual contributions, especially in a culture that continues to value to a greater extent a masculine, noncorporeal subject. She affirms that any endeavor to realize an embodied subjectivity would “involve producing new discourses and knowledges, new modes of art and new forms of representational practice outside of the patriarchal frameworks which have thus far ensured the impossibility of women’s autonomous self-representations....”<sup>392</sup>

Kiki Smith's art production is one such endeavor. Although Grosz notes the difficulty in formulating solutions to women's self-understandings, many of which have yet to be realized within the current tenets of patriarchal society, and others that are only in the process of realization, possible alternatives for female subjectivities do exist and continue to radically challenge the persisting mind/body dichotomy. As integral to this challenge, Smith's art values the body's importance in assessing and conveying knowledge and subjectivity. In searching for a middle ground between the dueling dogmas of "biology as destiny" and "gender as construction," Smith has most often turned to Catholicism's espousal of a body and soul alliance as her paradigm.<sup>393</sup> Her art theorizes in the three-dimensional, posing various ways to rupture binary oppositions and activate the already powerful connections between body and mind. Thus, Smith's "volatile bodies," bodies that "ooze out all over," confronting the very source of women's cultural subjugation, are one answer to Grosz's call for a psychical and spiritual corporeality.

The materials Smith uses also contributes to her bodies' volatility, especially when they encode them as "feminine." As previously discussed, Smith values materials that are "highly accessible" and hold "little cultural significance and power," and she is aware of the strong associations such materials have with femininity and women's work. Also sensitive to the repercussions the use of such materials could have on one's artistic career, especially during a time when the hierarchy of art and craft remained stubbornly intact, Smith deliberately chose to construct her female "bodies" out of craft materials, thus making them all the more volatile.

### **“Decorative” is not a dirty word**

For her inaugural show at Pace Wildenstein gallery, a notorious bastion of male chauvinism, which she joined in 1994 as only the fourth woman in a roster of 31 “blue-chip” artists, Smith unapologetically introduced some of her most overtly feminine and delicate work, made from decorative doilies-- works she calls “super girlie” and “annoyingly fem.”<sup>394</sup> The rebellious gesture was further compounded by its arrival on the heels of a pair of “events” occurring the year before which condemned Pace Wildenstein as a discriminatory white boys club. After the October 3, 1993 publication of *New York Times Magazine*, whose cover featured a photograph of art dealer and gallery owner Arne Glimscher with his faction of “art world all-stars,” all middle-aged white males, the Guerrilla Girls responded with their own version of the magazine cover (fig. 4.26). The Women’s Action Coalition (WAC) also launched a scathing attack on Pace Wildenstein in response to the photo, during which they protested outside the gallery, squirting paint out of dildo squirt guns. Smith was not actively involved in either event, but her jab at Pace Wildenstein as a privileged insider was without question its own political statement.

When asked whether she made the works to play hardball with the “big boys,” Smith cheerfully responded, “I don’t know, I’m just a hippie, and the work I make is totally sentimental and schlocky.”<sup>395</sup>

Featured in her show was *Untitled (Doily Picture)* (1994) (figs. 4.27-4.28), which combines the oozing corporeality of vaginas and breasts with the decorative elements of craft. Made from Nepal paper, the wrinkling fragility of its “skin” evokes

the delicacy of human flesh, and the juxtaposition of the doily patterns with the female body parts accentuates their formal similarities. As a way of reclaiming and exploring women's varied and complex anatomies, Smith likens the circular patterns in the doily-collages to the aureole-patterning of a nipple and to the multifaceted, concentric folds of labia. She also sees the doilies, ordinarily placed beneath teacups, as "holy, cosmic mandalas"—symbolic portals into the universe. Here again, Smith unites the humble with the celestial and the corporeal with the spiritual by locating intimate and handmade craft-objects within the realm of the sacred.

The link between the holy and the everyday is further suggested in another series of collaged lithographs from the show, which pair each doily with a word chosen for its particularly "soft" and "feminine" overtone, as in *Flesh, Tissue, Gentle,* and *Delight*, all made in 1994 (fig. 4.29). Again, the doily patterns hold spiritual significance, as Smith intended for them to look like stained-glass, rose windows. For this reason, they were exhibited alongside *Virgin Mary* in the St. Peter's show (fig. 4.30). Smith added the words to the images as a way of re-thinking her personal life and her relationship to the multiple, constantly changing faces of feminism. "In earlier feminism, for example," she explained, "there were words one didn't want to be associated with, like *gentle*—you didn't want to present yourself as a gentle person then. But getting older, and feminism having more possibilities now, it seems to me that maybe gentleness is in reality a good quality to have."<sup>396</sup>

Smith's choice of craft materials, "feminine" subjects, and handmade, labor intensive techniques are also gestures of defiance against certain male colleagues who had warned her that she wouldn't be taken seriously if she made this kind of art. She

has admitted to her initial defenselessness in the face of such comments, confirming her anxiety over abandoning her earlier “shit and piss and vomiting” subjects for “femme butterfly/flower pictures:”

I’m frightened of it. I think, ‘Oh god, you’re going to be really disregarded.’ It’s the internalized self/cultural hatred of feminine stuff. To me it’s much more scary to be a girl in public than to talk about the digestive system. They both have as much meaning in your life, but I’ve been punished more for being a girl than I’ve been punished for having a digestive system. Being female is something I’ve tried not to be as showy about in public.<sup>397</sup>

Smith tackled these fears, however, and resolved to proceed with expressing a part of her that would not be silenced. As she explained, “So now it’s about saying ‘OK, I’m a girl. I can handle this.’ Then you really push it and make it as femme as possible. That’s about reclaiming your own territory....You demand that you get to exist as who you are.”<sup>398</sup> Elsewhere, she put it more succinctly: “I’m going to make everything delicate, fragile, and ephemeral, and I’m going to ram it down people’s throats.”<sup>399</sup>

By embracing her “feminine side,” Smith also pays homage to traditionally women’s work and is now considered a champion of it, as her participation in craft-based exhibitions and workshops corroborates.<sup>400</sup> On several occasions she has expressed her indebtedness to artists such as Eva Hesse, whose innovative and widely acclaimed handling of craft-based materials and organic forms generously “created a space for artists to exist in.” For Smith, Hesse was “a model for what an artist could be.”<sup>401</sup> Smith also acknowledges the importance of other artists working in the United States during the 1960s and 70s, particularly those associated with the Pattern

and Decoration movement, who were actively engaged in integrating traditional craft media into their work. Harmony Hammond's rag sculptures and fabric *Floor pieces*, Faith Ringgold's beaded masks, embroidered dolls, and patchwork quilts, and Miriam Schapiro's *Femmages* made of crocheted lace and doilies, embroidered handkerchiefs, and mass produced textiles, are but a few examples of the kind of work Smith credits as having paved the way for art like hers. In addition to Schapiro's formal and material contributions, her promotion of an alternative language built from materials associated with "woman's experience" in the home, is of particular interest to Smith who labels herself a "housewife artist." Smith extends Schapiro's intentions of incorporating "unexpected domestic sources" into her art in order to "close the gap between the 'pure' studio and the everyday reality of my home" by literally fusing her work space with her living space.<sup>402</sup> Her studio is her home, and her home is her studio. She often works at her dining table, a practice that is largely motivated by family tradition. Her childhood home in New Jersey also served as her father's studio and her mother's rehearsal space (she was an opera singer), and as previously mentioned, Smith and her sisters spent many an afternoon sitting at the kitchen table crafting maquettes for their father's sculptures. Creativity was simply a part of her everyday life.<sup>403</sup> The seamlessness of Smith's own work and everyday life has been captured in numerous photographs that document, for example, the jars of blood used for *Game Time* stored in her freezer, a Virgin Mary sculpture standing in her kitchen in front of the refrigerator, and an "O.B." tampon box sitting amidst a clutter of finished and unfinished artworks.<sup>404</sup> Smith described another telling incident when she offhandedly provided a museum with an artwork



that had cat fur all over the back of it because she had made it while sitting on the floor.<sup>405</sup> Smith's interest in homemade art coincides with her attraction to the decorative arts and their importance in making the home a "beautiful" domain. "I am mostly interested in...what people do for their houses...for their lives," she has said.<sup>406</sup> Elsewhere, she noted, "...I think you are supposed to have [what you believe is] a beautiful environment in your private life....Earth is to be a representation of our vision of heaven. That's why you're supposed to be attentive to your environment in your private life. Your private life is a place where you have some possibilities that are not determined by economics but just determined by paying attention, by being attentive."<sup>407</sup> Smith's most recent domestic-based project, the exhibition *Homespun Tales: A Tale of Domestic Occupation*, also challenged the hierarchy of art and craft with its decorative spectacle of the homemade. Held at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice in June 2005 and coinciding with the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale, Smith's installation of folk figures, household objects, and hand-made, American colonial style decoration transformed the spaces of this Renaissance "museum house" into a realm of domestic nostalgia.

Smith's ultimate acceptance of decoration and craft as legitimate and powerful sites of resistance, both aesthetically and politically, attest to the fact that domestic spaces can and do serve as powerful loci for creativity. Her choice to assert and defend all that is "super girly" both confirms and updates the production of women artists in the 1970s who, in the words of Miriam Schapiro, "demonstrated that 'decorative' was not a dirty word."<sup>408</sup>

## Crafting female corporeality

The decorative also holds significance in Smith's art as it relates to women's bodies. As discussed in the previous chapter, the ability of craft to evoke corporeal materiality, to cultivate the sense of touch, encouraging readings that engage the entire body, and to foreground the body as a legitimate site of perception and knowledge are critical components of Smith's art. In light of Smith's determination to advance corporeal subjectivities for women, her craft-based works are not only catalysts for extending our norms of perception beyond the purely visual and mental, they also offer alternative models for representing the female body. Her 1994 Doily works, which liken the flesh-like quality and formal design of decorative doilies to the richness of female anatomy, are prime examples of such a strategy. *Pink Bosoms* (1990) (fig. 4.31), a quilt-like collage of silkscreens printed in black ink on hand-dyed pink Nepalese paper, is another example. Four separate impressions of a woman's hands gingerly squeezing out droplets and steady streams of milk from her tender, swollen breasts signify the female body as "endless bounty or fountain."<sup>409</sup> The elegant traces of white, Pelican ink which evoke these milky spills of unbridled, life-giving female nurturance and creativity were hand applied by Smith, drop by tiny drop, further enhancing the intimate and corporeal quality of the work. Even the use of the word "bosoms" in the title suggests a raw physicality that trumps sexual or idealized connotations of "breasts" and combines with the tactility of the prints' frayed edges and fibrous, blanket-like quality to cultivate the sensation of nurturance and warmth.

*Dowry Cloth* (1990) (fig. 4.32) is another such reference to textiles and covering. Measuring approximately 9 square feet, the work, a felted conglomeration of sheep's wool and women's hair, palpably exudes corporeality and domesticity with its organic makeup and blanket-like bulk. Smith has long been "intrigued with" dowries as symbols of the physical and psychological baggage people carry with them through life and into relationships.<sup>410</sup> As previously mentioned, Smith considers everything she has made her dowry, a physical manifestation of the world. *Dowry Cloth*, according to Smith, "is about the transformation of energy into the material, its connection with love of the physical and with giving substance to one's reality. Similar to making blankets and household things: creating the physical manifestation."<sup>411</sup> More commonly known as the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage, a dowry also suggests the possession of women's bodies, and Smith is aware of the personal and political significance it holds. She made *Dowry Cloth* with the medieval hair blanket in mind as well, as it simultaneously evokes notions of self-mutilation and penance. Indeed, when the piece was hung in the 1996 St. Peter's exhibition, it resonated with the spirituality of the setting taking on, according to one critic of the show, "the talismanic quality of a relic," thus combining the corporeal and the spiritual into one.<sup>412</sup>

**"All that is sacred and human."**

While Smith's aggressive incorporation of "feminine forms" and "feminine materials" into her work realizes her objective to reclaim women's bodies and women's work, it also serves as a gesture of healing. Another work featured in the

St. Peter's exhibition, *Untitled* (1994) (fig. 4.33), a lithograph on paper with over fifty separate collaged images of nipples, renders the female body in multiple forms and serves as an intimate and potent expression of women's physical agency. Measuring a sizeable 58 x 59 inches, the work has blanket-like attributes similar to *Pink Bosoms* and *Dowry Cloth*. One of the first times it was exhibited, it was hung directly behind *Virgin Mary* (1992) in the 1996 St. Peter's exhibition, and when viewed together, as shown in an installation shot from the exhibition's catalogue (fig. 4.1), the spirit of their connectedness becomes apparent. Not only do the multiple breast forms reiterate and strengthen the corporeal and sexual nature of *Virgin Mary*, they also enhance her spirituality if read as sacred Milagros, mounted in her proximity in faithful petition for the reconciliation and healing of a body and soul. Just as Smith once proposed that the images of female genitalia which Chris Ofili incorporated into his painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* can be read as the Virgin's attempt to mend the traditional separation of her human attributes and sexuality, perhaps it is now through Kiki Smith, that the Virgin Mary, flanked by emblems of her flesh and her mortality, is pleading to us to honor all that is sacred and human.

- <sup>336</sup> Smith, quoted in Schliefer, 87.
- <sup>337</sup> Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 22. This is a medium with which Smith was very familiar, as her great-grandfather was an altar-carver.
- <sup>338</sup> Écorché is the past participle of écorcher, the French word meaning *to flay*.
- <sup>339</sup> Smith, quoted in Linda Shearer and Claudia Gould *Kiki Smith*, 3.
- <sup>340</sup> See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 73.
- <sup>341</sup> See Warner's discussion of the Immaculate Conception as a vigorously enforced dogma that, in separating Mary from humanity, has condemned all humans, but particularly women, to "perpetual inferiority," *Alone of All Her Sex*, 236-254. The Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854.
- <sup>342</sup> Smith chose to use the Spanish word for "present" here. Smith, quoted in Frankel, 39
- <sup>343</sup> Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.
- <sup>344</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 36.
- <sup>345</sup> Smith, as quoted in *Kiki in the Flesh*, directed by Charlie Ahearn (New York: Pow Wow Productions, 1993). In keeping with Smith's observation of the vaginal qualities of such Marian representations, I was struck by the vaginal nuances in an image, widely dispersed in the media, of what many believed to be the appearance of the Virgin Mary at an underpass of the Kennedy Expressway on Chicago's Northwest Side in April, 2005 (See fig. 4.9).
- <sup>346</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 40.
- <sup>347</sup> Smith, quoted in Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 22.
- <sup>348</sup> Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.
- <sup>349</sup> Kiki Smith, "When the Spiritual Turns Physical," A55.
- <sup>350</sup> PBS interview.
- <sup>351</sup> As Eleanor Heartney has observed, "In Catholicism, the female body is less a battlefield than a minefield, intimately bound up with doctrinal and political struggles over contraception, abortion, virginity, and the nature and origin of sin." See Eleanor Heartney, "Thinking through the body: women artists and the Catholic imagination," *Hypatia* (September 22, 2003): 22.
- <sup>352</sup> Smith, quoted in Linda Shearer and Claudia Gould *Kiki Smith*, 72.
- <sup>353</sup> Smith, quoted in Isaak, *Kiki Smith*, 60. John Bird has characterized Catholicism for Smith, in the words of Raymond Williams, as "a power that has to be recognized and resisted." See John Bird, "Imagining Otherworlds: Connection and Difference in the Art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith," *Otherworlds*, 20.
- <sup>354</sup> Smith, quoted in Close, 153.
- <sup>355</sup> When, during an interview, I suggested that she try the Unitarian church, she conveyed how much dislikes Unitarianism because "it doesn't believe in anything. You have to believe in something!" Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.
- <sup>356</sup> Idem.
- <sup>357</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 86.
- <sup>358</sup> See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Sex*, for detailed analysis of such concepts.
- <sup>359</sup> Smith, quoted in Joan Simon, "Interview with Kiki Smith," Mary Livingstone Beebe, James Stuart DeSilva, and Robert Storr, eds., *Landmarks: Sculpture Commissions for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2001), 233.
- <sup>360</sup> See Mary Livingstone Beebe, "Standing (1998)," *Landmarks*, 229.
- <sup>361</sup> Smith also stressed that, while *Standing* immortalized Peg, it was meant to represent "Everywoman," See Beebe, 237, 230
- <sup>362</sup> See Simon, "Interview with Kiki Smith," 236.
- <sup>363</sup> Smith, quoted in Beebe, 237.
- <sup>364</sup> For example, as relayed in John 4:1-42, Jesus stressed the spiritual significance of water when he explained to a Samaritan woman he encountered at a well, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."
- <sup>365</sup> McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 135.

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<sup>366</sup> Also suggesting Milagros, acupuncture, entomology, and dissection, the pins, according to Smith, were applied purely for decorative purposes, because the sculpture “needed something pretty.” See Beebe, 231.

<sup>367</sup> Smith, quoted in Close, 22.

<sup>368</sup> Smith, quoted in Robert Pincus, “Stuart Collection gains impressive ‘body’ of work,” *The San Diego Tribune* (October 18, 1998): E-3.

<sup>369</sup> Interview with Joan Simon and Michael Boodro, “Blood, Spit, and Beauty,” *ARTnews* (March, 1994): 131.

<sup>370</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 39.

<sup>371</sup> See Schleifer, 86, McCormick, 84, and *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994) for interesting, in-depth discussions on this topic.

<sup>372</sup> Smith, quoted in Posner, *Kiki Smith*, 17.

<sup>373</sup> Smith often uses the phrases “Virgin figure,” “powerful female goddess figure,” and “super Heroine” interchangeably.

<sup>374</sup> Smith, quoted in *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994).

<sup>375</sup> See Elizabeth A. Brown, “Sojourn in Santa Barbara,” in *Kiki Smith: Sojourn in Santa Barbara* (Santa Barbara, CA: University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1995), texts by Marla C. Berns and Elizabeth A. Brown, p. 16. Also, in her book *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), Julia Kristeva discusses shame, embarrassment, disgust and horror associated with menstrual blood’s powers of contamination: “Menstrual blood. . .stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate, and through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference,” 71.

<sup>376</sup> Brown, “Sojourn in Santa Barbara,” 29.

<sup>377</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 40.

<sup>378</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 35

<sup>379</sup> When I asked her why she changed the name, Smith couldn’t remember the reason. As far as she’s concerned, the names are interchangeable. Interview with the author, June 3, 2003.

<sup>380</sup> Isaak, 17-18.

<sup>381</sup> See Janet Price and Margrit Schildrick, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1-13, for a perceptive analysis of the various feminist stances on representing the female body throughout modern history. Also, see similar examinations in Janet Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics,” *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women & Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), among others.

<sup>382</sup> See René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols. Translated by E.S. Haldane and G.T.R. Ross. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931-34).

<sup>383</sup> Smith, quoted in Kristine McKenna, “The Art of the Body Part,” *The Los Angeles Times* (March 13, 1994): 85.

<sup>384</sup> Chris Waddington, “Earthly Style, Heavenly Magic,” *The Times-Picayune* (June 10, 1994), L21.

<sup>385</sup> Smith, quoted in Schleifer, 87.

<sup>386</sup> See, for example, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne* (London: MacMillan, 1982).

<sup>387</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), x.

<sup>388</sup> Grosz, xiii.

<sup>389</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) for an extensive discussion on performativity. Butler argues against the notion that there is such a thing as ‘the female body’ apart from specific discursive practices that name any body as female in the first place. She believes that both sex and gender are best conceptualized as “performances.” See also *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990).

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<sup>390</sup>Grosz, 23.

<sup>391</sup> Other theorists of sexual difference whom I will consider include Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, and Judith Butler, among others. Visual culture historians, such as Janet Wolff, Susan Kandel, Marsha Meskimmon, and Rosemarie Betterton, among others, have examined the work of artists who engage with the body and provide invaluable research for my project.

<sup>392</sup> Grosz, 188.

<sup>393</sup> See Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics," 37.

<sup>394</sup> Quoted in Carol Vogel, "Downtown Artist Goes Uptown, but Not Her Art," *The New York Times* (Nov. 9, 1994): C11. The three women who joined prior to Smith are Agnes Martin, Coosje van Bruggen, Louise Nevelson, as represented by her estate. Since 2005, six more women artists have joined. They are Tara Donovan, Barbara Hepworth, Elizabeth Murry, Fiona Rae, Bridget Riley, and Michal Rovner.

<sup>395</sup> See Kristin McKenna, "The Art of the Body Part," 5. Nearly every work in the show sold.

<sup>396</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 41.

<sup>397</sup> Smith, quoted in Schliefer, 87.

<sup>398</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>399</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 36. Other telling moments were when she told a reporter from *Vogue* magazine: "[Decoration] is used against you as a woman.... So... you have to use what's used against you. What I'm doing now is much closer to me, before I started doing body stuff. I want to bring the decorative back in. Because it's who I am. I love fashion, because it's the same thing as decorative arts. It's how people make their reality and how they make themselves known in the world." See Dodie Kazanjian, "Blood Ties," *Vogue* (November 1994): 213; and another interviewer, "I like delicate and fragile, so I push things to the edge of where they're going to disintegrate. Then I'm free." See Amei Wallach, *Newsday*. Also see Smith's discussion of this topic in *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994).

<sup>400</sup> Exhibitions include *The Essential Gesture*, 1994, *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse* 1994, and *Division of Labor*, "Women's Work" in *Contemporary Art*, 1995, see Lydia Yee, "Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art" in *Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art* (New York: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1995). Smith was also an artist in residence at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, PA, 2002-3.

<sup>401</sup> *In the Lineage of Eva Hesse*, 3, 11.

<sup>402</sup> See Elissa Anne Auther, *Materials that Make a Difference: 'Non-art' Media and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art of the 1960s and 70s*, Dissertation (College Park, MD: The University of Maryland, 2001).

<sup>403</sup> See Gilbert Brownstone, "There Was a Family Named Smith," 38-46, for further discussion on the Smith family history and customs.

<sup>404</sup> Indeed, in when I visited her home/studio, artworks were randomly scattered throughout her house—even on her bathroom floor-- amongst other personal belongings.

<sup>405</sup> She was angry when they made her re-make it. See Kimberly Davenport, "Impossible Liberties: Contemporary Artists on the Life of Their Work over Time," *Art Journal* (Summer 1995): 40-52.

<sup>406</sup> Smith, quoted in Bonami, 55.

<sup>407</sup> PBS interview. Also see *Kiki Smith* (New York: Inner-tube Video, 1994).

<sup>408</sup> Miriam Schapiro, "Geometry and Flowers," in *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. Charlotte Robinson (New York: Knopf, 1983), 29f.

<sup>409</sup> Smith, quoted in Frankel, 35.

<sup>410</sup> SAIC lecture.

<sup>411</sup> Smith, in the frontispiece to *Kiki Smith's Dowry Book* (New York: Anthony d'Offay, 1997).

<sup>412</sup> In Susan Tallman, "Kiki Smith: Anatomy Lessons," *Art in America* (April 1992): 151.

## CONCLUSION

This study, the first dissertation to concentrate on the art of Kiki Smith, examines the intersection of a select group of works from Smith's oeuvre and a series of historical and ideological frames—the recent burgeoning of interest in the alliance of contemporary art and religion in America and the ensuing debates over its ownership and public funding; the various ways in which contemporary artists internalize and reconstitute the ambivalent and complex attitudes they have toward their religious roots; the human body and its ideological implications as a veritable source of knowledge and subjectivity; the enduring, highly guarded hierarchical distinctions between popular notions of religion and avant-garde art, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the incarnate, the mind and the body, art and craft; and the significance of the female body within the ideological and material tenets of Christianity. It examines the ways in which Kiki Smith “makes God” through her art both by reveling in the incarnational spirit of Catholic ritual and visual culture and by challenging its doctrinal contradictions, constituting new modes of spiritual belief that operate by thinking through, rather than against, the body.

As I conclude this study, the Walker Art Center is preparing to launch the most comprehensive retrospective of Smith's work to date, entitled *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005*. A full-scale survey of Smith's twenty-year career which will travel to four different U.S. museums, the exhibition, curated by Siri Engberg, is arranged in thematic clusters Smith refers to as “gatherings.” It is fitting that the exhibition tackles Smith's oeuvre thematically and not chronologically, because of



the artist's tendency throughout her career to meander among a variety of topics and themes, including anatomy, religion, folklore, mythology, natural science, cosmology, art history, and feminism, moving from one to the next, only to return to the original theme years later. Smith's body-based works from the 1980s and early 1990s have thus far received the lion's share of critical and scholarly attention, yet there is much more material that warrants examination. Being reminded of the extensive reach and multifaceted nature of Smith's artistic career by a curatorial endeavor such as this upcoming exhibition, I realize how my study, in all that it does cover, barely scratches the surface. Even within the framework of spiritual inquiry which this study establishes and employs, other works can be examined and further questions raised, for as Smith has said, "all of my work is religious," whether overtly pious or not. For example, a large portion of her work during the mid- and late-1990s explores a sacred realm that can also be linked to nature, plants, animals, and the cosmos.

Key to this particular study, however, is the realization of the potential of Smith's body-based art to constitute new modes of religious experience through its intimate alliance with the sacred world. Examining the ways in which Smith's art embodies and negotiates spiritual belief expands the scope of research not only on Smith's art but on scholarship in the field of the visual culture of American religions as well. Perhaps the most important insight to be gleaned from this study is a fundamental understanding of the diverse and complex ways spirituality can happen visually and corporeally in American culture, for, according to Kiki Smith, both an

image-maker and an image-breaker, spiritual meaning is founded on complexity, tension, and ambiguity.

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