

Projects 24 : Kiki Smith : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 9, 1990-January 1, 1991

Author

Smith, Kiki, 1954-

Date

1990

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2099

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24

kiki smith

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

November 9, 1990–January 1, 1991

Our bodies have been broken apart bit by bit and need a lot of healing; our whole society is very fragmented.... Everything is split, and is presented as dichotomies—male/female, body/mind—and those splits need mending.” —Kiki Smith

Over the course of history, visual and performing artists have dealt not only with the body proper and its intricate interior architecture, but also with the body as political tool. Kiki Smith's work delves into these timely issues and addresses related questions as well. If we think of the history of art as largely the history of the human form, and of the present as a moment in this history, Smith's work emerges as particularly compelling now: the body itself has become a political battleground—the territory across which warring factions battle to stake their claims. Rather than launching a didactic counterattack on any of these forces, or staking her own programmatic claim, Smith's work allows the body to speak for itself. At its most powerful, her work reminds us that it is the body, not the mind, that is “our primary vehicle for experiencing our lives.” With its sometimes homemade quality, Smith's work bespeaks the vulnerability of the occupant whose home is often beyond his or her control. It's a position with which we can all identify.

In Smith's democratic, rather than hierarchic approach to the body, life-sustaining fluids, organs, limbs, and joints are invested with equal meaningfulness. Simultaneously shaman and scientist, the artist relies on precise experience and vivid imagination to inform her work. Thus, a trace of an internal function or bodily fluid may provide as much information as a complete figure; a part of the body may impart the beauty and expressiveness of the whole. While society tends to keep most of the body's functions hidden or separated, Smith attempts to demystify our bodies and motivates us, as viewers, to take back what is ours.

Untitled (detail). 1989–90.
Lead crystal, dimensions variable.

Though some minimalist tendencies in her work may remind us that she is the daughter of sculptor Tony Smith, Kiki Smith has drawn more on the work of her father's female contemporaries, artists such as Eva Hesse, Lee Bontecou and Louise Bourgeois. Like other aesthetic descendants of these three, such as Rosemarie Trockel and Liz Larner, Smith makes use of traditionally feminine forms of domestic production—quilting, sewing, weaving. She sees herself as “making things, not sculpture.” In her 1987 *Nervous Giants*, for example, she embroidered nine biological systems onto oversize muslin sheets, making something otherwise remote immediately accessible. This interest in maintaining such conventional techniques which she whimsically describes as “outdated technology” makes sense when one considers the artist's preoccupation with letting the body speak for itself; it roots aesthetic experience not in the conceiving of the idea, but in the process of making the idea a reality by the direct touch of one's hands.

By the close of the 1970s, after working on her own in New York for close to five years, Smith became involved with Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), an artists' organization committed to political involvement and social change. In *The Times Square Show* of 1980, which was organized by Colab members including John Ahearn, Mike Glier, Robin Winters and Jane Dickson, Smith exhibited her first anatomically derived work. That same year Smith produced an untitled work that would set the tone for much of what was to come—an isolated wax hand, covered by algae, floating in a simple mason jar filled with dark green water. Following soon after her father's death, the piece was simultaneously a disturbing and consoling

evocation of a life after death. Though most of her more recent pieces deal neither with the beginning nor ending of life but rather with the notion of what it is to be alive, this poignant merging of elegy and celebration remains a mainstay of her work.

By 1985, Smith had taken the training necessary to become an Emergency Medical Technician. Like the artists of the Renaissance, she would study the body inside out. One result of her intense exposure to the body in crisis is a series entitled *Possession Is Nine-tenths of the Law*. In this suite of prints, images of anatomically correct human organs—the bladder, liver, lung, and pancreas, for example—were laid down and then loosely covered with the excess ink. By further obscuring the image with agitated yellow drawings over the smeared black ink, Smith conveys the intensity of those moments when life hangs in the balance.

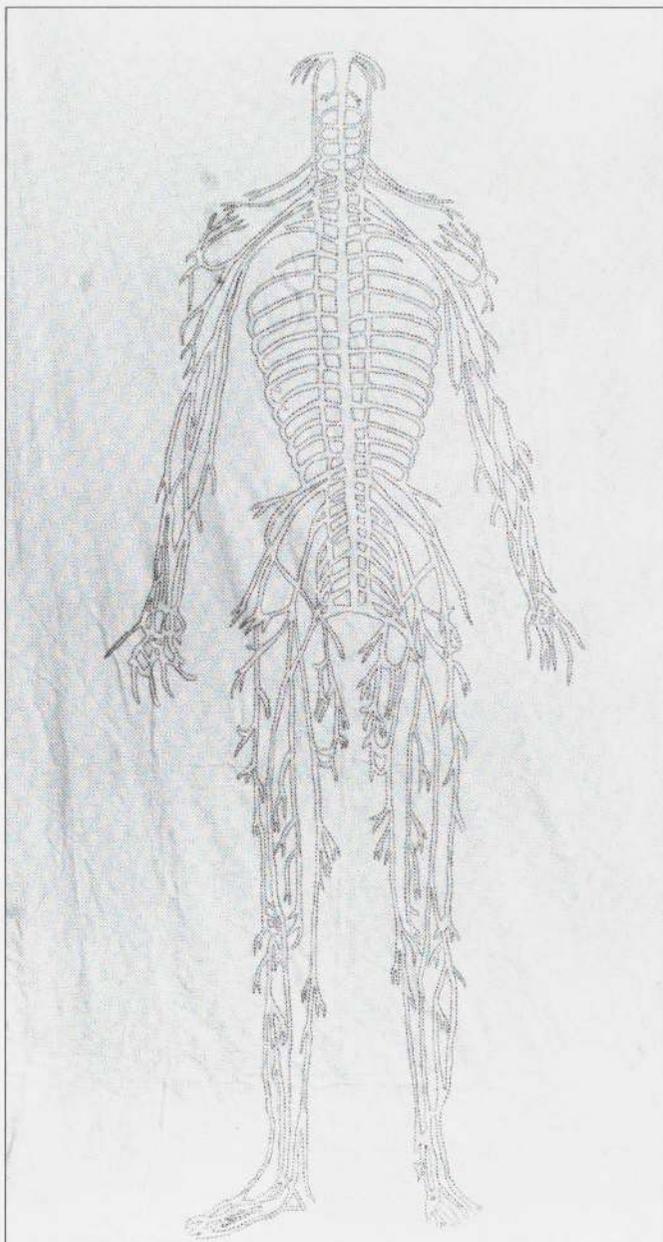
Smith's vision of the body as an “open vessel,” subject to both clinical and metaphorical interpretation, is paralleled by her open-ended movement between and manipulation of materials. The primal and the high tech speak to one another in her work. In one untitled piece, twelve empty water bottles stand side by side, each one engraved with one of the following words: Blood, Tears, Pus, Urine, Semen, Diarrhea, Mucus, Saliva, Oil, Vomit, Milk, Sweat. The scale of the bottles—far from the tiny vial or test tube one might otherwise link with these substances—forces us to confront what might otherwise be quickly disposed of or removed from public sight in our now contagion-phobic culture. Furthermore, the reflective surfaces of these jars project images of ourselves, encouraging an identification between the inanimate object and the viewer.

Smith's newest work, exhibited for the first time in her **projects** installation, is similarly comprised of dozens of six- to eight-inch clear lead-crystal glass representations of sperm. Glass, having liquid and therefore fluid properties, seemed like an appropriate choice of medium, according to the artist. All are unique and separately cast, with Smith's fingerprints deliberately allowed to remain on the surface of each, suggesting an artist's version of DNA. Here sperm takes on multiple meanings, oscillating between substance and image; between transmitter of the biological body (and of information, our culture's most precious commodity) and the political body.

Kiki Smith strives in her diverse yet persistent oeuvre to provide ways of dealing with the body, be it fragmentary or whole. Her puzzling yet familiar pieces often ask: Is there a language of the body and if so is it gender-specific? Smith's poignant works may not provide definitive answers, but her voice is forceful, and by forcing us to confront what society often hides, she compels us to reckon with what we possess.

Jennifer Wells
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture





Panel from *Nervous Giants* (detail). 1987.
Muslin and thread, 11' 9" x 54"

The artist would like to acknowledge the assistance of The New York Experimental Glass Workshop, Universal Limited Art Editions, and Liza McLaughlin.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from The Bohlen Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Support for this brochure has been provided by The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

biography

Born Nuremberg, Federal Republic of Germany,
January 18, 1954

Lives and works in New York City

selected individual exhibitions

1990 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland

Fawbush Gallery, New York

The Clocktower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York

Tyler Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia

1989 Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut (brochure)

Concentrations 20: Kiki Smith, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas

1988 Fawbush Gallery, New York

selected group exhibitions

1990 *Figuring the Body*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Witness Against Our Vanishing, Artists Space, New York (catalog)

Fragments, Parts and Wholes, White Columns, New York

1989 *Projects and Portfolios*, The Brooklyn Museum, New York (catalog)

1988 *Committed to Print*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (catalog)

selected bibliography

Decter, Joshua. "Kiki Smith," *Flash Art*, no. 148 (October 1989), p. 134.

Lyon, Christopher. "Kiki Smith: Body and Soul," *Artforum*, vol. 28, no. 6 (February 1990), pp. 102-106.

McCormick, Carlo. "Kiki Smith," *Artforum*, vol. 27, no. 2 (October 1988), p. 145.

Smith, Roberta. "Kiki Smith," *The New York Times*, June 1, 1990.

All work courtesy the artist and Fawbush Gallery, New York

Cover: *Untitled* (detail). 1990. Mirrored glass.