

**Comfort and Memory:  
Artist Kit Keith and the Oral History Process**

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the career of St. Louis-based, self-taught artist Kit Keith and the development of my personal relationship with the artist through the interview process. While telling Keith's story and exploring her art, I analyze my use of an oral history methodology. The paper is broken into four parts, following four days of in-person interviews (two in September 2019, two in January 2020). Part 1 opens with our first day of official interviewing and explores Keith's permanent return to St. Louis in the late 2000s and several major events in her career around 2013, including her inclusion in the New York Armory Show, her award for Best Local Artist in St. Louis, and the screening of *The Comfort of Memory*, a short documentary about Keith's life, at the St. Louis Film Festival.<sup>1</sup> Through analyzing events during 2013, I grapple with questions of "greatness" and categorization in art history. Part 2 explores Keith's childhood spent performing in a circus troupe, her diagnosis with bipolar disorder, and her move from Sarasota, Florida to St. Louis, Missouri. I introduce the difficult beginning of our interviews, brought on by unclear boundaries and painful memories. Part 3 analyzes our second day of interviewing and takes the reader into the 1990s, when Keith developed a signature style and began to have professional success in New York City. Part 4 jumps to January 2020 and my return to St. Louis to interview Keith, following her story into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we viewed *The Comfort of Memory* and several reviews of her work together. I expand on the relational changes which occurred through the interview process and the disintegration of my art historical categorization framework. Throughout each of these sections, I expound on the changing dynamic of our conversations as we ventured out of the range of an impersonal, art historical narrative and analysis. Ultimately, the project attempts to demonstrate how the personal relationship between interviewer and narrator—preexisting or not—becomes inextricable from both the process of recording oral history, and the character of the resulting narrative itself. It is an addition to an expanding body of literature grappling with feminist and "human-centered" oral history.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Comfort of Memory*, directed by Annette Apitz (2013), video.

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## Introduction

In 2019, I began talking to artist Kit Keith about the possibility of an extensive oral history project documenting her career and life as a local woman artist who uses found materials in her collage/assemblage pieces. In addition to being a nationally known “self-taught” artist, Kit Keith is a family friend, someone I have known my entire life. As I thought about what artist or artists I might want to focus on for my research on recycled art, I was repeatedly drawn to Kit Keith, partially, if I was truthful to myself, because I knew that I would have easy access to her for the interview process. What I didn’t realize was how complicated the process of interviewing someone who is simultaneously an “objective” figure in public life and a family friend would be.

My interest was thus spurred by my own affection for Keith’s work and by an interest in the process of interview, and from September 2019 until January 2020 I collected recordings from in-person visits to Keith’s home and studio as well as many phone conversations. The exploration of those two given circumstances has produced this project, *Comfort and Memory*, which dissects and interprets my interviews with the artist in order to offer insights on the impact which pre-existing relationships have on the interview process. The primary insight offered here is the importance of establishing what I will call “comfort” in the interview field, something which is perhaps more available to the interviewer and narrator with a shared personal history than to others.

In defining comfort, I looked to feminist methodology in oral history for examples of personal scholarship which reflected my own experience. I was enlightened by a study co-authored by Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner entitled “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History” which discusses the need for close listening and empathetic questioning with women subjects in particular. In the

introduction to their collection of short reflections, they state, “Women have much more to say than we have realized. As oral historians, we need to develop techniques that will encourage women to say the unsaid.”<sup>2</sup> In my own project, I hoped to encourage open and empathetic conversation through a framework of “comfort”: a shared willingness between interviewer and narrator to venture into topics which may appear unrelated to the stated purpose of the interview but which could develop the capacity for honesty between the two subjects.

The interview between pre-acquainted people inherently builds on some sort of foundation, contributing new dialogue to an already existing collection of experiences and memories which allows both people to settle into an embodied feeling of relationship and familiarity—what I call “comfort”—that impacts every aspect of the interview experience. For Keith and I, practicing “comfort” became our own formulation of what Michael Frisch dubbed “shared authority”—the recognition of the collaborative nature of our interaction as we built not only Keith’s story but shared our narrative together.<sup>3</sup> Along with authority, our project required considerations on vulnerability. In her essay “The Vulnerable Listener,” Martha Norkunas points out that,

The hope is that in the telling there is solace, and in the interpretation there is personal, social, or historical understanding. Because a genuine listening environment involves trust between the narrator and the listener, and trust entails some measure of vulnerability, shaping the direction of a difficult or potentially painful interview is based on the narrator and the listener judging their vulnerabilities, and negotiating emotional boundaries throughout the interview.<sup>4</sup>

Where a history of non-recorded conversations precedes the interview, shared vulnerability—through mutual confession, relation, and questioning—creates an environment in which the

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Anderson, et al. “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History” in *Feminist Research Methods*, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Frisch, “Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process” in *The Oral History Review* 30.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Norkunas, “The Vulnerable Listener” in *Oral History Off the Record*, 93.

recording itself is only one of many access points to knowing, which build on multiple temporal and spatial access points of memory and meaning. Vulnerability was intrinsically tied to the idea of “comfort” during the interviews represented here as Keith and I made room for boundaries that relocated more than once throughout the project.

*Comfort and Memory* began as a very impersonal dive into the topic of recycled objects and assemblage in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American art, but ultimately my interest in oral history overshadowed this origin point. As I officially began research for the project in August, I held onto an extensive list of individuals who I wanted to incorporate into a comparative study. By this time I had also chosen a specific research methodology to practice: that of gathering first-hand accounts through audio recorded interviews. When I looked to my list of potential artists, a clear pathway into the depths of a still ambiguous project emerged. While I could have used any one of a diverse group of artists to demonstrate the expanse of ideas I had in conjunction to found objects in art, Kit Keith was the only artist on the list to which I had ready access. She seemed to fit the bill in terms of the theoretical questions I had already decided that I wanted to address in my thesis: although she first found success in New York City in the 1990s, Keith is best known as a regional Midwestern visual artist now residing in St. Louis, Missouri. She primarily defines herself as a painter, but incorporates collage into many of her works and has for many years constructed assemblage. She has at times been identified by critics and friends as a “self-taught” or “outsider” artist, and in describing her work she often returns to topics such as the representation of women, experiences of both mental and physical disability, and art as a spiritual endeavor. In the process of interviewing and writing about Keith, justifying the project to myself became a bulwark. Predetermined art classification systems functioned as a constantly disappointing fallback. There were many reinventions of the subject matter, beginning with

“artist who works with found objects” to “outsider artist” and “self-taught artist,” “regional Midwest artist” to “woman artist” and “artist with disability.” All of these statements of identity hold a kernel of truth for Kit Keith, but ultimately I found myself much more drawn to and interested in the ways in which our relationship and the interview process impacted each other.

The paper’s four parts are loosely structured around particular time periods in Keith's life while following the consecutive flow of four days of our in-person interviewing. This structure combines my original understanding of the project as a documentation of Kit Keith as an artist, with my later understanding of the centrality of the oral history process and its own, independent time frame. Part 1 focuses on the year 2013, when Keith received a considerable amount of attention through the screening of a documentary film about her life and an award for Best Local Artist in the St. Louis *Riverfront Times*. I engage with art historian Linda Nochlin’s article “Why Are There No Great Woman Artists?” in order to evaluate my own compulsion to categorize Keith’s artwork and demonstrate her importance as an artist. Part 2 jumps backwards to Keith’s early life, covering the 1960s-80s. I attempt to follow our conversations on our first day of interviewing while also constructing a dysfunctional two-decade timeline. I explore the dynamics of our conversing and its somewhat stunted nature and interpret Keith's interest in centering her daily journaling within our conversation. I end the section at the point in our interviews when we begin to discuss her Mattress Series, made during the 1990s and considered by the artist to be her masterpieces. Part 3 begins with our viewing of three works from the Mattress Series that reside in her apartment. I survey her artistic process and return to journaling as an integral part of her creative life. I summarize the development of Keith's career success in the 1990s and end with questions about the topics of outsiderdom and authenticity which I situate as defining concepts of the 1990s art scene in New York. Part 4 spans the 21st century, returning the reader to the



paper's origin point. In this final section, I address head on my own struggles in trying to categorize Kit Keith the artist, in terms of standard heteronormative art historical definitions. I begin to explore the value and insights in focusing more on the feminist process of oral historical interviewing when narrating the value of a person's life in art.

## Part 1: Indelibly St. Louis

In 2013, Kit Keith won the title of “Best Local Artist” in the *Riverfront Times*—the standby arts and culture magazine of St. Louis, Missouri—after three decades of making, showing, and talking about her work. It was not the first time the *RFT* placed a spotlight on Keith, having regularly published positive reviews of her shows since the 1990s. The award came amongst a slew of traditional “Best Of” awards, familiar to many local newspapers as a means of ritualistically democratizing the process of regional taste-making as readers submit their vote to a milieu of annual online polls. Yet Keith’s award and the brief text written in the announcement illuminated the many complex, interwoven facets of Keith’s art practice and her identity as a long time professional artist. There’s the aura of oddity which reviewers often verbally pin to her canvases and assemblages; something pervasively familiar, nostalgic, and secretive which embeds itself in the paint, buoyed by a backstory as “the daughter of a traditional sign painter who swept his family away to the circus.” There’s the interest in found objects: the article points out “worn dolls, tossed-away keepsake cases, canvas tarps and eroding portions of historic advertising,” not to mention some iconic mattresses, which Keith regularly incorporates. There’s a nod to her in-flux travel between St. Louis and New York City. Finally, there’s the implication that, whatever that thing Keith expresses in paint and collage is, it is indelibly St. Louis: “She remains an indie character, a rare find not unlike her favored materials – the kind of humble virtuoso who fits precisely within this city of crumbling brick and elegant rust.”<sup>5</sup> It’s an award announcement that speaks from the heart, as if attempting to encapsulate all of the extraordinary details of a lifelong friend.

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<sup>5</sup> “Best Local Artist: Kit Keith.” From the Best of St. Louis 2013 series, Arts & Entertainment section. *The Riverfront Times*. Website.

The same year that Keith won the *RFT*'s Best Local Artist award, a short documentary about her premiered at the Tivoli Theatre during the St. Louis Film Festival. *The Comfort of Memory* is a snapshot of the artist, exploring her art practice alongside candid remarks from Keith about living with and drawing inspiration from bipolar diagnosis. It was filmed completely in New York, bouncing from Keith's apartment to studio to her walking her five-year-old son to school. Like the Best Of article, there's a deeply empathetic tone to the film. Keith is not only a talented artist but a subject positioned through vulnerability. She jokes about getting depressed after weighing herself and about medication. She goes into detail about the influence that nurses and social workers have had in her life as she has dealt with bipolar disorder, explaining one of the reasons that women nurses in particular show up in her work so often [fig 1]. Soft notes on the piano follow her from shots identifying her as artist, mother, and friend.

After the screening, Keith took the stage to answer questions from the audience, her son by her side. *Comfort* was part of a specific showcase on mental illness, and the audience asked primarily about that intersection between bipolar and art making. Keith and I watched the documentary together soon after the 2020 new year, almost seven years after its premiere and 16 years after filmmaker Annette Apitz started gathering footage of Keith. Discussing the film, Keith was understandably preoccupied with the *discomfort* of watching oneself on screen.

**Kit:** Like I was just so openly, so candid about my experience in the hospital, and, and all that. I thought, boy, I really spilt my guts with her. Ya know. But she really wanted to know about all those things...And they definitely are part of my life. My hospitalizations and my...All those things, all that experience in the hospital and my bipolar illness is definitely part of my work. And part of who I am.<sup>6</sup>

That both pieces of media intimately introduce Keith as a knowable person first and artist second is no coincidence. *RFT* Best Of articles are published online without author tags, but Keith

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<sup>6</sup> Kit Keith in discussion with the author, January 2020.

proudly told me that her friend Jessica Baran wrote the award announcement. A journalist for the *RFT* for many years, reviews for Keith's gallery shows in the past decade were almost exclusively written by Baran and echo the language she used to define Keith in 2013. Similarly, *Comfort* was created by Annette Apitz, a New York based filmmaker and close friend of Keith. Alongside *Comfort*, Keith and I looked over reviews of her work from the *RFT* with special attention given to the Best Of article.

In interviewing Keith and writing her story, I was drawn to markers of success—whether through recognition by others or through financial gain—as a means of legitimizing Keith as an object of my research. The recognition which Keith received in 2013 was further legitimized by the sale of one of her untitled collages for \$7,000 at the Art Dealers Association of America's 2012 Armory Show--the most for which her work has ever sold [fig. 2]. Founded in 1994, the Armory Show is a major venue for the sale of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century art and thousands of artists participate each year. Participation and the sale of her work was personally important to Keith because it exemplified ties to New York which otherwise felt as if they were fraying in this period, after Keith permanently returned to St. Louis in 2009. During our January 2020 interviews, we found the exhibition catalogue tucked in a briefcase-bound portfolio Keith carried with her during the 1990s. Looking at the catalogue, she said,

**Kit:** Yeah, it was great. It was all really famous people that I was showing with. Cindy Sherman, Rauschenberg. All the greats, ya know, all these really big important people. And it auctioned off for seven thousand dollars. My painting. Yeah. The most I've ever made. I didn't get the money. It was for an auction for Henry Street Settlement. So I didn't get the money.<sup>7</sup>

In searching for objective markers of Keith's success, I often ran into what felt like complicating factors. For one, her work is not collected anywhere except in her home and those of her friends.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Keith said later in our interview, "I know a lot of people wouldn't agree with me that you should give your art away. But I have always felt like it was a good thing."

Reviews of her work, as well, only exist in the paper archive of the *RFT* and online beginning in 2001, when the newspaper began digital publication. Diving into every source I could locate on Keith, I found nothing but praise and fascination with her. People who laud Keith's talent have personal connections to the artist: they know her backstory, they are inspired by the way she tackles personal experience through her art, and many live in the same community and thus exist in the same art scene ecosystem as she does. Keith is proud of the Armory Show auction not only because it elevated her work through the platform's inherent comparisons, but because the donation of *Untitled* supported her friends at Henry Street Settlement and allowed her to give back to her community in New York. Fame did not seem to be the driving factor in Keith's life or work. In talking about the monetary and cultural valuation of her art, for example, Keith expressed a preference for bartering paintings for services and goods, rather than selling them on the art market. Informality, reciprocity, and purposeful non-competitiveness have allowed her to develop many friendships which in tough times become an interwoven support system, something more worthwhile to the artist than selling paintings at high prices.

If an artist's popularity is regional, if they thrive in an informal economy, if no one is archiving their work, can we say that they are successful? This doubt led me into insecure waters, in which I questioned my motivation for devoting my research to Kit Keith. In truth, the project had been guided by access and by my own love of Keith's work. And yet I felt pressing internal need to explain away these realities through my other interests in art history: how could I fit Keith into the history of collage and assemblage? Could I come to conclusions about the use of the outsider art category through overemphasizing Keith's relation to the descriptor? Could I frame Keith through feminism, disability, and access to education? An unstated lesson of my art

history education was that the discipline relies on value judgments, and that such judgments subsequently rely on fame and categorization.

As I ran up against the limitations of art categorization, which allows us to designate one artist as worthy of intense research and another as not, I found the important early work of art historian Linda Nochlin enlightening. Analyzing the traditional constraints inherent to the discipline in her ground-breaking 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” Nochlin points out issues of access, expectation, and internalized oppression which leave us grasping for women artists in the historical record, let alone examples of what she terms “greatness.” She turns her initial question on its head, arguing that there are no “great women artists” because no such possibility has existed. In Nochlin’s 1971 America, feminists scoured history for exceptions instead of challenging the patriarchal political circumstances which allowed such a question to be asked in the first place. In 2020, I found myself falling into a similar willful misinterpretation of my own interviews in order to demonstrate the “objective” importance of the artist.

In looking for a justification for citing Keith as an example of “a great woman artist,” I found myself returning to the year 2013 as a pinnacle moment of documented praise in Keith’s career. It could overshadow the many other years in which there is no record, essentially lumping Keith in with all of the anonymous artists just waiting to catch a break. Yet in my attempts to press Keith to talk about this year and its importance to her career, I realized that 2013 is not a defining moment in her own understanding or narrativization of herself and her career. Throughout our interviews, she focused, rather, on her recollections of her childhood trapeze career, her brief education at the Art Institute of Chicago, and her first years in New York. For Keith, the highlights of her career have been the gallery shows which produced new friends, as

well as her brushes with fame as she developed her signature style in the mid-1990s. This is the “greatness” revealed through our interview process, uncovering personal triumphs situated in a tapestry of historical memories. In contrast, 2013 represents a time of personal struggle for Keith. Jumping back and forth between St. Louis and New York for roughly 20 years, Keith landed permanently in St. Louis in 2009 after she and her long-term husband divorced. There, her two sisters helped support her and she was able to find commissions through her long standing ties to various galleries and local artists. She found a living space in a historic downtown building with artist subsidized apartments and gallery space on the first floor. Despite this, the balancing act between St. Louis and New York connections, spaces, and communities always favored the latter. Keith was constantly planning her return route to the east coast. On her first trip back, Keith realized that she was becoming increasingly hindered by a persistent pain in her feet brought on by rheumatoid arthritis, a pain which she believes originates in her teenage career as a trapeze artist.

**Kit:** I miss New York very much. So I feel like, well, I couldn't live in New York because of my feet. It started when I was visiting there. It started and it felt like there was a pain in my foot and I couldn't figure out what it was and that was the beginning of it and it got worse and worse. I was in New York and I couldn't walk!<sup>8</sup>

Returning to St. Louis, Keith was frustrated and uninspired. The combination of bipolar and physical pain was exhausting no matter where she was, and forced her into difficult decisions about where she had reliable support. While she maintained many professional and personal connections to New York, her Midwest family was best equipped to help her life day-to-day. St. Louis had once again become her home at a time when she was receiving a significant amount of recognition from a career largely grown in New York, a bittersweet reality for Keith.

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<sup>8</sup> Kit Keith in discussion with the author, September 2019.

Sitting together in her living room in September 2019, it felt fitting to tape Keith mulling over the circus, diagnosis, and schooling in the renovated turn-of-the-century Arcade Building in downtown St. Louis. The room was spacious with high ceilings and a short walk up to a private balcony. Perhaps her best known works and what she considers to be her masterpieces, three painted mattresses lounged against the apartment wall surrounded by piles of prop books and trinkets. Later in the day, we took an elevator ride down to her studio on the fourth floor of the same building, where she had a similar assortment of carefully placed drawings, tchotchkes, and thrown-out home goods decorating every space of the room. Could such a meeting occur elsewhere? Both the city location and the personal space in which we interviewed felt indelibly St. Louis, marked by decay and repurpose. As a native St. Louisan, I was hit by a wave of nostalgia, but it is worth considering the “Rust Belt” status of St. Louis City and its visual markers of former glory: the grand library funded by Andrew Carnegie, now a daily indoor reprieve for St. Louis’ homeless community, the monumental Gateway Arch only a short walk away from abandoned factory buildings. The Arcade Building itself, the tallest concrete structure in the world at the time of its construction in 1918, functioned for many years as a symbol of St. Louis exceptionalism.<sup>9</sup> Abandoned in 1978, the Arcade Building sat empty for more than thirty years before it reopened as an apartment complex in 2015—the façade restored and the interior more or less gutted. Inside Keith’s apartment, arrangements of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century kitchenware, hair brushes, antique compacts, and gilt frames containing black and white photographs of anonymous women seemed to reflect a similar interest in preserving the representational surface of the past while reinventing the interior. The antiquity of the objects suggested a symbolic interior, a lost history waiting to be imagined by Keith. For me, these circumstances reflected Jessica Baran’s statement in the *RFT* Best Local Artist announcement—

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<sup>9</sup> “About the Arcade Building,” Webster University. Website.



that Kit Keith “fits precisely” into this place, that there is a distinct regionalism to her paintings which translates into complex feelings of home for many local viewers.

## Part 2: The Pain of Remembering

That Friday in September, I headed downtown to the St. Louis Arcade Apartments with my notebook and audio recorder. There was a miscommunication about when I was going to arrive and that set the stunted nature of our interviews for the day. I plopped the recorder down on the coffee table when we finally sat, and Keith became visibly nervous staring at the tiny digital screen on the face of the device as its levels moved to the left and right. I planned to keep the recorder on all day, but she asked at several points that I turn it off. We cycled from the living room to the balcony over and over for smoke breaks, and it was too windy outside to record anyway. Keith seemed to be vacillating between anxious alertness and lethargy. Despite all this, our talks led us into a multitude of topics. It seemed appropriate to dive into her background—growing up, joining the circus, moving to St. Louis—during our first person interview. Although I’ve known Keith since I was a young child, the details of her life were general and vague for me. People have exaggerated her life in print, sometimes with her blessing, and I wanted to get the facts straight.

Kit Keith was born in Springfield, Illinois on April 16, 1963. Her father, a traveling sign painter, moved the family to Sarasota, Florida soon after that, and Keith spent her childhood drinking fresh squeezed orange juice on the shores of the Ringling Brothers World Headquarters. The first art museum Kit visited was a public institution donated to the people of Florida by John Ringling, and when she was twelve she in turn joined a small circus as a trapeze artist. The troupe performed eight times a year, mostly for senior citizens. She says:

**Kit:** In the beginning I didn't think anything of it, about my father being a sign painter. I just didn't think anything of it but now I'm like this is great. But I started the circus when I was 12 and the circus was an amateur showcase and I started doing trapeze the second year that I was in there and the first year I did a low trapeze act. But the second year I started doing more advanced trapeze. It changed my life, it really did.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kit Keith in discussion with the author, September 2019.

While the Best Local Artist award write up describes Keith as “the daughter of a traditional sign painter who swept his family away to the circus,” in fact, she joined the Stars Circus of her own volition. Considering Sarasota very much a circus community, Keith described how joining a troupe didn’t take her far from home and was ultimately a rather un-extreme childhood experience despite its later importance in helping her identify herself and her art. Her father certainly did make a sweeping and authoritative decision to move the family, but he was never himself part of a circus as a performer or commercial artist. Keith remembers him as a heavy drinker and impulsive wanderer, having briefly abandoned her mother and three older siblings for five years before unexpectedly returning home to Illinois in the early 1960s. She was born soon after his return, and three years later he packed up the family and all of their possessions to move south. Keith’s mother, Vernabelle, was reluctant to go, but he insisted. He loved the beach.

While attending public school and performing trapeze, Keith also learned lettering and fonts from her father. Working with wooden boards and acrylic paint under his direction was Keith’s introduction to painting, but even before then she remembers being introduced to fine art through the Ringling Museum in Sarasota. Housed within a complex as flamboyant as one would expect from a circus millionaire, the Ringling collection itself contains a considerable number of Old Master paintings. As a child, Keith was particularly struck by Rubens’ multi-tone brown canvases and their impressive size. They were “stunning,” “gorgeous,” and deeply unlike the advertisement art of the Ringling Circus.<sup>11</sup> She returned to the museum many times on school field trips throughout her childhood, and soon found herself mentally juxtaposing the products of classical European training and American poster art traditions—commercial, Vaudevillian, and often formed from the expertise of self-taught artists. She learned to love the subtle rendering of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

facial expression in the Rubens which lined the walls of the museum as well as the meditative act of organizing text onto a canvas and then carefully painting each letter. She and her father were painting signs for a living and were thus beholden to not only the popular design aesthetics of the 1970s but to visual cues for what is new, profitable, reliable, eye catching. While creating art in these parameters, Keith was developing an affinity for the wear and tear which age brings to store signs. She was drawn to peeling paint and water damage, the texture of a store sign when it has been repainted ad nauseam in order to save a dime. The look of age and thrift replicated itself in her home, as well. Both of her parents grew up during the Great Depression and built an environment marked by scrimp—they hoarded the best domestic goods they could find and ended their workdays by watching daily reruns of *The Honeymooners*.

Around age 16, Keith stopped performing in the Stars Circus. She got a job at the local grocery store, bought a car, and finished high school. The summer after graduation, when Kit was 19 and still living in Sarasota, she woke up in the hospital after experiencing sudden hallucinations brought on by what her doctors diagnosed as bipolar disorder. Lounging on her living room couch with her dog by her side, she recalled her memories of that time while I recorded.

**ML:** Did you go to school while you were doing circus?

**Kit:** Yeah, yeah I did. And I had a little red car that I got. And...when did I get it? Like when I was 16. And I got that by working at the grocery store. I saved my money up for it. I can't remember how much it was, maybe \$800. And it was a Toyota Corolla stick shift—stick shift red car. It was so adorable. I loved it. And then I drove that up to New York—I mean up to St. Louis. Yeah, when I—well first of all I got very sick with my first episode of bipolar illness. And that was my first hospitalization. And that was pretty horrible. Very hard.<sup>12</sup>

Keith's sister Ruth, 18 years her senior, had returned to the Midwest several years beforehand. She settled in St. Louis, and, after Keith was able to return home from the hospital, Ruth invited

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

her to travel north for a long-term visit. She took figurative drawing classes at Meramec Community College and built a portfolio which she then used to apply to the Art Institute of Chicago. She got a job at Ziezo, a clothing shop in the Loop that catered to punk rockers, new wavers, and art school students, before being accepted to the Art Institute in 1984. She recalls her time in school with fondness, working long nights in the student studios and taking classes in abstract painting. Things were going well at school and in her personal life, and with optimism Keith stopped taking the medication she had been prescribed after leaving the psychiatric hospital two years beforehand. She experienced another severe psychotic episode about eight months after beginning at the Art Institute, was admitted into a Chicago psychiatric hospital, and, upon her release, returned to St. Louis.

Talking about these early experiences with bipolar disorder was troubling for both of us. While Keith was willing to bring old memories to the surface when I asked, this first day of interviewing was clearly exhausting for her. I felt that she was repeating a summary of early experiences which she likely also fed to therapists and psychiatrists, perhaps even other people who were simply interested in her art. As she wound further into her description of this first hospitalization and the hallucinations she was experiencing, her eyes drifted into the periphery and her voice became noticeably slurred. I didn't want to pressure her to discuss difficult experiences which she might not want recorded, or overstep boundaries I had set for myself as a researcher and training oral historian. Yet it was inevitable that we talk about the experience of bipolar. Not only was it important in constructing Keith's personal history, it is an integral theme of her artwork. She told me over the phone a couple of months after this interview that if I was looking for a framework for her art, it should be the bipolar experience. On this day she spoke generally, and in attempting to explain her experience of psychosis, she continued:

**Kit:** It's hard to describe. I guess it's like doing acid—I've never done that but I guess it's like that.

**ML:** Like visually?

**Kit:** Yeah—visually, auditory hallucinations. Like visual hallucinations. Absolutely scary and some people have—I have had delusions where I thought I was Joan of Arc or something like that. It's hard to understand, I'm sure. Can we take a break?<sup>13</sup>

After she asked for a break, she also requested that I turn off the audio recorder. Listening to the recording, I hear myself fumbling with the device. There are still three minutes of recording after the request, in which I pointed out the painted mattresses propped against her living room wall and Keith replied that they are her masterpieces. She looked at them with familiarity, but found it difficult to describe her viewing of them now—they were “not clean,” “sketchy,” “tight,” conflicts contained in old springs and plastic threaded cloth. This need for relief from the pressure of interviewing echoed an earlier interaction that day, in which Keith worried about her self-presentation on the audio recording:

[Talking about the circus]

**Kit:** We had to work very hard. We had a tent that we put up every year and um...yeah, tent that we put this...I'm sorry, can you edit this?

**ML:** Oh yeah, no one's gonna hear this. This is just like—

**Kit:** Is this for writing?

**ML:** Yeah, like I'll transcribe it and use it to talk about stuff. It's not going on the internet.

**Kit:** Oh, that's good. That's good. So you'll write it.

**ML:** And I can show you what I write.

**Kit:** Actually, I write a lot.<sup>14</sup>

Keith was talking about her daily journaling, a ritual of hers for decades. She pointed to an old record box and a stack of used journals and told me about her plans to create a sculpture in which she will trap her journals in the box and seal it with bee's wax, with a note written on the outside: “Please don't read my journals.” Every day that we interviewed, both in 2019 and 2020, Keith referred to journaling and often asked if I myself kept a journal. For Keith, there appeared to be

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

an integral connection between talking about herself and writing about her daily life. If I were to write extensively about her, it was important to know that there was a plethora of pre-existing text. Of course, I was not welcome to view any of it—no one is. In considering Keith’s art, I often thought about artist Miriam Schapiro’s categorical conception of femmage, works of collage made by women with a definite gendered context. I returned to Schapiro’s defining text on the category only to discover an inclusion of journaling in femmage. Referencing Cynthia Ozick, she says,

...a diary is a shoring-up of the ephemeral evidence that a writer (substitute artist-maker) takes up real space in the world. One does not have to probe deeply to understand that she speaks of people who are fragile, who need to hold an elusive mirror to themselves to be certain they are there.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it seemed in this first day of in-person conversation that Keith was unsure if she wanted to exist through interviews and recordings. There was a fragile flavor to our speech, punctuated by the pain of old memories and even of prior success—considering herself in the present moment, Keith was preoccupied with physical pain and a persistent artist’s block. She told me that in the past months she often found herself sitting in her studio or bed, unable to conjure a new work and spending excruciating hours staring at blank papers and unpainted collage scraps. The creative block wasn’t affecting her journaling at all, and without new paintings the diaries alone shored up weeks of her personal experiential evidence.

We took a break to eat and for Keith to smoke on her balcony, taking our time to return to the recorder. When we did return, I drew our attention back to the three mattresses propped up against the living room wall. Keith remembers making them in her 20s, during the mid-1980s. However, text from *The Comfort of Memory* states that Keith officially moved to NYC in 1989. Keith’s intermittent travel between St. Louis and New York makes it difficult to say when she

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<sup>15</sup> Miriam Schapiro, “Femme” in *Collage: Critical Views*, 303.

began collecting the mattresses, and she herself is unsure. Their creation marked the beginning of a deeply memorable period for Keith, finding financial and artistic success in Manhattan and making a name for herself as a talented self-taught illustrator with a penchant for 1940s ephemera and circus-inspired aesthetics.



### Part 3: Confessions in the Park

Before I left Keith's apartment on Saturday, we took a long look at three paintings from her Mattress Series [fig. 3-5]. From what I could gather from our interviews and other sources, their creation spanned several years from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. When we situated ourselves on the couch once again, focusing our attention on the mattresses to our right, I framed my interest and interview questions around the streets of New York. During this early period in our interviews, I was very focused on Keith's integration of found objects into her work as well as her process of looking for possible canvases in thrown-out things. At some point before the project officially began, Keith had mentioned to me that she ritualistically compiled stacks of trash she found on the street, tying them together to make assemblage. This was as much a form of meditation as it was art practice for Keith while in New York. But the mattresses were something completely different: she purposefully sought them out and scavenged apartment dumpsters looking for them with a particular artistic vision in mind. Her understanding of the project was based in the medium and from there she relied on vintage photographs and a highly personal spirituality to create the portraits which she placed on her makeshift canvases.<sup>16</sup> On this first interview day, she said:

**Kit:** I just had this idea to paint on box springs. They're like stretched canvases. They're like stretched canvases so... I don't know what the stories are, it's kind of a mystery. I don't know—and then there's part of me that thinks, how did I create these? I don't remember. I don't remember how I created them. Somebody else made them, ya know?

**ML:** So you don't remember making them?

**Kit:** No, I don't remember making them. I have that with some of my art. It's hard to describe. It's like, um, it's hard to describe.

**ML:** Is it like an out of body experience?

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<sup>16</sup> During our interviews, Keith referred to her belief system as spiritual. She continued, "...I feel like I'm channeling somebody or something. 'Cuz I believe in a higher power and I believe that this higher power works through me. It directs me in how to do things. It's kind of miraculous." Kit Keith in discussion with the author, September 2019.

**Kit:** Yeah, it kind of is. Like I feel like I'm channeling somebody or something. 'Cuz I believe in a higher power and I believe that this higher power works through me. It directs me in how to do things. It's kind of miraculous.<sup>17</sup>

Although the mattresses stand out to Keith as exemplary of her style and artistic ability, they were made in the same way that she makes all of her works. For Keith, the beginning is a search for old photographs (she favors ads from the 1940s) and domestic objects—mattresses, but also bath mats and kitchen appliances. Keith's sister Ruth operated an antiques store in rural Missouri for many years, providing her with a plethora of potential canvases. These days, she prefers the Goodwill Outlet across the highway from her apartment.

After the photograph and the canvas have been located and brought together in the studio, Keith enters what she considers a creative trance, in which an entity both within and without her guides her through the process of multiplying layers of mixed media on top of the found object, distressing the surface with sandpaper and other tools, and painstakingly replicating the chosen photographed portrait in acrylic paint. Ivy Schroeder of the *RFT* describes her work as conjuring a “nostalgic world of faux memory,” which brings to life “fictional fragments of a lost cultural history,” one experienced through the eye of an individual captured within a time which is vaguely mid-century, certainly not our own.<sup>18</sup> The impulse to keep working the surface often feels endless, and Keith especially loves her painted mattresses because she sees a perfect amount of labor in them. While we looked at them together, she commented on the detail of the text on *Readers Wives*, marveling at her own creation in a way that evoked her amnesiac experience of making (“how did I create these? I don't remember. I don't remember how I created them. Somebody else made them”).

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ivy Schroeder, “Life History: Brian Novatny, Richard Knights and Kit Keith use their love of everyday objects to create warm, engaging art.” *The Riverfront Times*. Website.

Keith and I enjoyed viewing the mattresses together, and she was especially interested in talking about the mystery involved in her making process. Yet in trying to pinpoint the *when* within the *how* of art practice, I inadvertently shut down the flow of our conversation for the day. It hadn't been easy to begin with, but in prodding Keith to pull apart a tightly wound ball of memories and separate them according to years or decades, the illusory nature of time overpowered our dialogue and we ended up calling it quits for the day. Looking back at my transcripts of the interview, it seemed like the logical place for Keith to go from a starting point of artistic success—the creation of masterpieces—and the subsequent altering of time from their realistic creation in the early 1990s and not the 1980s was to a place of fond reflections, getting to know a new city and becoming part of an artistic community. Instead, when I asked Keith what else was going on in her life while she was creating the Mattress Series, she could only answer that it was a very hard time that she couldn't talk about. She then returned to complaints about her feet, and the ongoing reality of chronic pain pushed her to her conversational limits for the day. I left that evening, hoping that the next day's dialogue would feel more natural. I spent the night thinking about how I could better guide the conversation and mold it into the form I believed I needed it to be in.

On Saturday, after Keith and I settled on a park bench a block away from her apartment, I simply said, "You don't like being recorded." This assumption, although I soon realized it was untrue, expanded the capacity for honesty and forthrightness in our conversation for the day. I was sure that the recording device was going to continue to inhibit her statements, and while it was a factor the day before, she clarified that it had been a difficult mental health day even before I arrived. While we discussed mental health the day before, it was in the context of the past—of being diagnosed, of early hospitalizations—and not about her contemporary experience.

When this was placed on the table, it allowed us both to relax into more casual conversation, with my direct questions woven throughout. It was a successful day for me, not only because I acquired information I was looking for, but because I felt we parted on good and equal terms. It was also a painful day in its own right, as growing honesty in our interview led us into discussions of addiction, lost friends, and suicide. Saturday was a windy day, and Keith wanted to get out of the house. Several parts of our interviews were lost to loud wind and ambient city sounds, but when I discovered this in the audio recordings, I was thankful not to have to listen to myself telling Keith about my brother-in-law's recent death. There is likely valuable information about Keith's life and art in those mis-recordings, but all I can remember is this one part of our talk.

What is available from my Saturday transcript includes a return to the topic of journaling, something that proved itself perennial in our meetings. I asked a question to steer our conversation towards Keith's art practice, and while we did end up there, she showed me that my focus was in the wrong place.

**ML:** I'm interested in the recycled material aspect of your art. Like where you find the stuff you use for canvases, why you pick it.

**Kit:** Well my sister had—like a lot of the good stuff that I had that I made art on—I had gotten it from my sister's antique shop in Augusta where I worked when I first moved back here. And I mean, god, she had an abundance of great things for me to work with. Also...thrift store of course, dumpsters, um, what else. You know the Goodwill Outlet, have you been there?

**ML:** Oh yeah, we went yesterday. I found a little book.

**Kit:** Was it a journal?

**ML:** It was a little copy of the poem *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran from 1943...

**Kit:** I'm not a reader.

**ML:** Oh yeah?

**Kit:** No, I'm a writer. I write all the time. Every day of my life I write. I have piles of journals. Which I've always told my friends, please don't read these. 'Cuz they're for me. Not for anybody else. I write, I don't read them, I really don't. Not even the old ones because they'll always bring back weird awful memories to me vividly.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kit Keith in discussion with the author, September 2019.

I was approaching Keith's art from a place of interest in recycled materials, believing that the origin of her practice lay in the process of scavenging. While this is certainly crucial to her art practice, journaling is what seems to buoy her creative life from day to day. Keith doesn't make complex plans in preparation for a new painting, but she does spend a considerable amount of time organizing her thoughts and feelings through journaling. This helps her to get out of artistic ruts, to clear her mind, and to motivate herself to enter the studio. She told me that she sometimes will make small sketches in her journals, but this isn't necessarily a conscious warm-up for later works. Keith never directly connected journaling to visual arts or suggested that there is a purposeful plan of action which leads her from the written word to the painted portrait. Yet this snippet of conversation, in which she veered from the assumption inherent in my prompt, was repeated during our phone interviews: I would ask other direct questions about art practice, and she would reiterate her disinterest in reading about art (she's a *writer*, not a reader) or thinking that much about how she makes art.

Talking about journaling eventually wound us back to the 1990s. Journaling (along with chain smoking) is ultimately a release of pain for Keith, something stored up from "illness, from childhood, from relationships like with my husband, and he still smokes, too."<sup>20</sup> Her husband, who had originally invited her to New York, introduced her to all of the cultural institutions of the city. From recalling visits to the Met and MoMA, she went on to describe her gallery exhibitions at places like OK Harris and Exit Art. She recalls meeting Ivan Carp of OK Harris and landing a show which was doomed to obscurity by the NY snowstorm of 1996, although the show in fact happened in 1994.<sup>21</sup> From there she received jobs in *The New Yorker*, *The New York*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Exhibition Schedule 1989-1990." OK HARRIS. Website.

*Times Book Review*, Calvin Klein, and other companies looking for illustrators. She worked day jobs waiting tables, booking time in a recording studio, and at a city animal shelter.

Keith remembers this time as definitive of her artistic career, an era in which she developed a signature style that was welcomed by an art scene preoccupied with authenticity and outsiderdom. The Outsider Art Festival was founded in New York in 1993 and was followed two years later with the opening of the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. A year before the publication of Keith's illustrated *Book Review* and a week before the 1996 Outsider Art Fest, *New York* printed the article "But Is It Art?" in which Larissa MacFarquhar labeled the genre "a somewhat maudlin, neo-modernist longing for art that feels *authentic*—the product of social exile and misery...A typical outsider either lives in a rural hamlet in the South or suffers some sort of debilitating mental disorder."<sup>22</sup> Although Keith never sold her work under an explicit outsider label, there was clearly a growing interest in work that could be subsumed under the name through an association of whatever *looks* like outsider art. Keith's illustrations for the *Book Review* exemplify this style association [fig. 6]. They purposefully replicate the style of freak show banners, combining exclamatory text with cartoonish renderings of the bodies on display inside the hypothetical show. The size of the figures in relation to one another is secondary to the visually readable details which clarify the left figure as "bearded woman" (beard and bikini), the right as "tattooed man" (tattoos, bare chest, short haircut) and the center as announcer (arm raised, cane in hand). Keith got the job by bringing her portfolio to the *NYT* office. The portfolio she carried with her included images such as *Legs*, and the editor commissioned her to create a set of freak show-inspired images for the *Review* [fig. 7]. At one point during the project she told the editor that she had in fact been part of a circus troupe, but Keith doesn't believe that her story—which could be viewed as authenticating her style—impacted her employment. During

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<sup>22</sup> Larissa MacFarquhar, "But Is It Art?" *New York*, January 1996, 38.

our last interview in September of 2019, we discussed Keith's style in relation to the label of "outsider":

**ML:** I've seen some stuff online describing your work as an outsider artist?

**Kit:** I guess I am a little bit. I didn't go to school very long.

**ML:** You went to school for a little, right?

**Kit:** But you know, my work looks like that.

**ML:** Like what?

**Kit:** Like an outsider artists' work. I think it's a little bit primitive. But I'm very primitive. I don't use computers really. I'm kind of a nut job...

**ML:** Have galleries ever labeled your art in a specific way? In order to sell it?

**Kit:** No. I think it's cool that people would think that. But I did have some training so I'm not a true outsider artist. But that's my favorite, probably my favorite work. That and children's work.

Later that day Keith and I moved ourselves and the recorder into her studio, a couple of floors underneath her apartment. Here, the walls were covered in old newspaper ads featuring portraits primarily of white women with coiffed hairdos. There were treasures from scavenger hunts in thrift and antique stores, as well as from the streets around St. Louis, and thick art books were stacked on the window sill. We talked about musicians and movies, tattoos, the accessibility of collage, and ended our day with an elevator ride back to Keith's apartment. She was considering a nap before sunset, as she usually works in her studio late into the night. After I returned home to Austin a day later, I'd often get calls from Keith around 11 pm, her voice bright and her mind turning with new ideas for paintings and memories she thought would be helpful for my project. In retrospect, starting our interviews at 10 at night might have allowed me to catch Keith at her clearest. I returned in January with new assumptions for Keith to break down, as well as my own clarity about how to conduct new interviews.

#### Part 4: Finding Comfort

I realized while reading over the transcripts of our conversation several weeks later that it was in Keith's moments of personal connection with me as a person she knew—the kid of a close friend, a creative type in their mid-20s—that she really remembered the stuff I was interested in. I recalled that in our very first conversation under the pretense of the project, by phone in early September, Kit began to talk about herself through a relation to me: “When I was your age, I’d stay up all night painting.”<sup>23</sup> We reached a comfortable place in our dialogue through such comparisons, which ultimately felt like a leveling of our shared field of communication. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli points out that, “an inter/view is an exchange between *two* subjects: literally a mutual sighting. One party cannot really *see* the other unless the other can see him or her [or them] in turn. The two interacting subjects cannot act together unless some kind of mutuality is established.”<sup>24</sup> Reviewing the September recordings in preparation for the next interview, I realized that I did not need to pretend to be a professional of any sort while conducting this research. Keith and I already shared a kind of equality, or at least a balancing of power relations. While I held some power through my control over the recorder, Keith's position as an adult in my childhood and a formative presence gave her a sense of ownership over the situation. Of course, as the subject of the interviews, she also had the power to reveal or hide information as she chose. In our first day of in-person talks, she used this dynamic to evade my awkward prompting. On the second day, the sometimes confessional subject matter we found ourselves fading in and out of allowed more openness and honesty from Keith regarding her art practice. The experience altered both our personal relationship and my research, providing the backbone of mutual recognition which could then support comfort in questioning each other's

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<sup>23</sup> Kit Keith in conversation with the author, September 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, 31.



motives and ideas. Oral historian Linda Shopes suggests that this kind of shared authority is actually one that invites *discomfort*, “striving instead to create a dynamic in which interviewer and narrator feel free to ‘agree to disagree’ and [ask] the hard questions.”<sup>25</sup> Yet without first establishing comfort in our interview field, Keith and I never would have entered into the topics that we eventually did reach.

Returning to St. Louis in January of 2020, not only did I feel more secure in what I was asking of Keith but I discovered a new relief in recognizing that the project was inevitably personal. Three months beforehand, I arrived at the St. Louis airport with the singular goal of practicing scholarly research. I subsequently woke up in my childhood home, only to realize that the walls of the place were covered in Kit Keith originals—there was even a small portrait of myself hanging in the bathroom, a delicate acrylic painting she created about ten years ago. A memory overwhelmed me. At six or seven years old, I detested washing my hair and I had successfully refused to allow anyone to touch it or to wash it myself for two months. My mom’s solution was to invite Kit Keith over. At bath time, she climbed into the tub with me, massaged my head, worked in shampoo, rinsed, and repeated. When she finished, I asked that she do it again, and another time. Her presence had turned an abysmal chore into a process of pleasure, and in returning to St. Louis for our second round of interviews I felt capable of more readily accessing such intimacy. While I did return to issues of categorization after this point, questions of memory and dialogue loomed larger and larger in my mind as our positions as interviewer and narrator readily blended into our stances as family friends.

On Wednesday, January 8, I once again travelled downtown to pick Keith up from her apartment. At my parent’s house we made a snack and coffee, Keith smoked a cigarette on the front porch, and then we worked on the interviews. The day was noticeably more collaborative

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Shopes, “Insights and Oversights,” 265.

than our last visit, and Keith brought along the suitcase-bound portfolio she kept during the 1990s. She showed me everything inside—two homemade books with prints of her work which she made around 1993 in order to bring to galleries and magazines. We flipped through both books and she commented on various pictures. Copies of her illustrations in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Book Review*, as well as the Armory Show exhibition catalog, were stowed away in the suitcase.

The number of portraits of men contained in the books stood out to me, and I mentioned it to Keith. I was accustomed to her depictions of melancholy women with painted faces and coiffed dark hair, and could only recall seeing portraits of men and boys in the Mattress Series. She told me that it wasn't until after her divorce in 2009 that she began sticking solely to portraits of women. She wanted to make a larger statement about the femininity of “a group of women, strong women,” reflecting her own experiences of womanhood and connecting those to narratives about nurses, pin up girls, and the model women of mid-century advertisements who effortlessly balance work and homemaking.<sup>26</sup> Later that day, Keith and I watched *The Comfort of Memory* together. A couple of minutes into the documentary, she exclaimed that it was “queer” to watch herself on film. It brought up old feelings about appearance and self-consciousness which she deals with primarily through painting. While there is pleasure for Keith in depicting her prototypical woman—a means of dressing up a canvas in the same way she would dress up for an evening out—there is also a statement of autonomy and power in the feminine. She asked me if and how I dealt with dissatisfaction in my appearance, “that part of being a woman,” leading us into discussion about the ongoing cultural shift in gender expression and my own

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<sup>26</sup> Kit Keith in discussion with the author, January 2020.

gender transitions.<sup>27</sup> We were not truly able to commiserate because of the difference in our genders, but the topic of womanhood resurfaced throughout these two days of recording.

The next day, part of our return to the topic of womanhood was prompted by me as I once again attempted to talk categorization with Keith. My interest in fitting her into some sort of art historical context brought me to the concept of *femmage*, a term used by feminist art historians to conceptualize the many contexts in which women have patch-worked together various materials for both artistic and utilitarian purposes. This concept and categorization seemed like perfect math: Keith's understanding of her art as impacted by womanhood and a "deep concern with women's issues [and] values," as well as her incorporation of collage and found objects, worked well in this predetermined framework.<sup>28</sup> Once again, I struggled against an internal pressure to prove how authentic and skilled Kit Keith is through the recording—to spot a living, breathing, Great Woman Artist and to capture the proof. If a lack of such artists originates, as Nochlin suggests, in the unequal, patriarchal power structures within our institutions, it also seemed reasonable to consider Keith's level of success as having been determined, in part, by her spotty history with formal education, the general circumstances of her class, and her mental health diagnosis. Although Nochlin is at odds with the concept of greatness itself, and despite the stretch of time and institutional shifts separating her analysis from my own project, my interest in justifying Keith through markers of perhaps more contemporary examples of greatness persisted.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Miriam Schapiro, "Femmage" in *Collage: Critical Views*, 296.

<sup>29</sup> Generally speaking, I would consider such markers to include artist statements on the theoretical framework of their production, a history of solo shows at famous galleries, and recognition in current scholarship.

Nochlin calls it “naïve” to believe that art, in general, translates the personal. She goes on to describe the language of art as “neither a sob story nor a hoarse, confidential whisper.”<sup>30</sup> Expressing the personal through anonymous portraiture, telling stories through sobbing faces and glances of the eye that suggest such a confidentiality, is exactly how I would describe Keith’s work. Her portraits have been praised by fans for conveying the complex of emotions which lie behind a face. While the faces are appropriated, the details of her reproductions and the found object canvases she uses create, for some viewers, fictional inner worlds that undermine the one dimensionality of advertisements. For others, it seems that Keith is “more interested in a certain style or look than concept.”<sup>31</sup> Looking at the images from her portfolio books, Keith also said she grew to prefer portraits of women because of their “soft” features and the variety of hair styles she can play with. One of the only requisites Nochlin provides for successful art, if not great art, is a “self-consistent language of form.”<sup>32</sup> A glance at Keith’s body of work certainly suggest such a consistent, if not repetitive formal language. Stuck between statements on sob stories and artistic language, I discovered the limits to Nochlin’s analysis for my project: even within her framework for critiquing greatness, I could not prove Keith was a great artist and that goal revealed itself to be beside the point of the project as a whole.

I asked Keith about femmage and some of the artists whom the label has been attached to. She wasn’t familiar with the term, but she enjoyed my description of it and in response told me a lot about her painting process. Much like our September discussions, which consisted of my prompts relating to scavenging for canvases and her responses on the topic of journaling, in January I attempted to talk about art history, and she instead dove into a detailed description of how she works her canvases. The collaging and recycling aspects of Keith’s art is what originally

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<sup>30</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Are There No Great Woman Artists?” in *Woman at Work*, 346.

<sup>31</sup> “Best Gallery Exhibition: Kit Keith, Gallery 210 and William Shearburn Gallery.” *The Riverfront Times*. Website.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Are There No Great Woman Artists?” in *Woman at Work*, 346.

drove me to center her in the project, but the excitement she finds in creating something new really comes from the craft of painting. She has “secret ways of creating texture” that involve a *mélange* of tools discovered throughout the years.<sup>33</sup> This is also where the spiritual aspect of her practice, mentioned in Part 3, comes into play. While her preferred subject matter is deeply embedded in assertions about womanhood, my framing of Keith’s work in relation to the self-proclaimed *femmagists* of the world said more about my own interests than hers.

On this last day of interviews, Kit Keith asked me directly and somewhat suspiciously what this project was about. It had gone through many transformations and even at this point, I was unsure where exactly it would go. I was still caught in a mixture of goals, wanting to simultaneously produce a text about Keith and her work, about collage and found object art, and about the outsider label. I found myself asking Keith questions that were often my own hashing out of ideas instead of questions that were really pertinent to her art. Thankfully, her question demanded the kind of honesty which ultimately became the driving force of my analysis: how comfortable were the two of us in the interview setting? What could we discover through asking questions of each other, and how could those questions produce a more open dialogue? By the time Keith headed home that day, leaving her portfolio in my care so that I could take pictures, we had produced a collection of recordings which demonstrated the (certainly non-linear) progression of our conversation from stunted and unclear to rigorously sincere.

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<sup>33</sup> Kit Keith in discussion with the author, January 2020.

## Conclusion

The reality of the pre-existing relationship between Keith and myself inspired a process of interviewing which demanded a critical eye towards personal history. While we may consider in passing the internal reasons for a compulsion towards a certain topic of interest, it is not often assumed that individual experiences of the researcher need to be interrogated in order to come to conclusions about a given subject. Oral history perhaps guides us towards this facet of the research experience. Whether the person holding the recorder has met their subject before the interview or not, a field of impromptu expectation and communication is established. In the case of my interviews with Kit Keith, our field was influenced by the personal relationship between Keith and my family. Keith's presence in my childhood impacted the way that she interacted with me through the medium of interview and my accidental ignorance of this reality contributed to the particular development of our recorded conversation. We began in a muddled context, in which the balance between our relationship and the assumed professionalism of the interview process complicated one another. In retrospect, this confusion had its own grounding. The project began at a time when Keith and I had not seen much of each other for almost a decade. Until travelling to St. Louis in September 2019 for our first set of interviews, the last time I had seen Keith was at the memorial of my grandmother—another local St. Louis artist—the spring before. Before that, we had briefly interacted when Keith visited my grandmother in hospice. This experience likely impacted the way in which we came together to record our conversations, not to mention my inability to locate myself early on in the project. Yet these circumstances produced friendship, intimacy, and a unique recording of Keith's career and life, represented through our interviews and my interpretation of them. Ultimately, it was necessary to explore the pre-existing relationship which Keith and I brought to the interviews and my own struggle to

identify myself within a project of my own creation, not only for research accuracy but because that is where much of the meaning of this project lies.

Starting from a generalized interest in found object art and the “outsider art” categorization, my attempts to narrow the focus of my research quickly morphed into the solving of what Linda Nochlin calls the “problem-object.” While Nochlin refers to a so-called woman problem plaguing the historical record, one which feminist scholars attempted to solve by inserting any woman at all into the narrative of great artists, I grappled with my own Kit Keith problem: that of proving the importance of the artist through categorization. This inevitably concealed the real value in Keith’s words and in documenting our interviews. It also led me into territory which Nochlin warns those of us interested in the study of our fellow people about, that “‘objects’ involved in the solution to human problems are at the same time *subjects*...capable of refusing both the solution, and, at the same time, the status of being problematic at all.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Keith often steered our conversations away from the assumptions I had about her art practice and her relation to concepts like outsiderdom and feminism. Defining or situating her art was not a problem she experienced, although I was often plagued by a personal need to do just this. Through recognizing the importance of the method itself, instead of blindly placing importance on the subject matter, I was able to eventually locate the matter of comfort which Annette Apitz had already put a name to in exploring Kit Keith’s practice.

Although I located comfort during the project, there were myriad setbacks that limited my scope during the interviews and my success in reflecting on the recordings. Because of the distance between my first conceptualization of the project and its final form, much of the preliminary research I performed focused on art-related topics like “outsider” and “recycled objects,” instead of on oral history and feminist methodology. The first interviews between Kit

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<sup>34</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Are There No Great Woman Artists?” in *Woman at Work*, 348.

Keith and myself were a blind swing on my part. Even after discovering a personalized path towards comfortable and fruitful interviews, my practice lacked familiarity with the rich tradition of “sharing authority” in oral history. I worked mainly from intuitions about equality and collaboration which I developed through my non-academic life: my past labor activism, my involvement in the documentary *A Strike and an Uprising (In Texas)*, as well as my experience caretaking for someone with Lewy Body Dementia—a role which requires an incredible amount of patience, close listening, and reliance on others.<sup>35</sup> Yet Michael Frisch reminds us that “a commitment to sharing authority is a beginning, not a destination—and the beginning of a necessarily complex, demanding process of social and self-discovery.”<sup>36</sup> This project represents such a process, and culminated only at the beginning of my own understanding of oral history.

Ultimately, interviewing people you know offers the freedom to discover not only new things about your subject, but also about yourself. The recognition of personal motivation and the translation of it into more professional formats than the casual phone call or letter creates new insight into the interview process. It also alters the struggles inherent to more formal interviews. While there is a built-in accessibility to this subform of interview, there is also context which can limit the subject’s willingness to share certain stories or impressions. There is the capacity to fulfill the imperative to write what you know, but there is also a lot of pressure to develop a narrative that places the subject in a light that reflects the researcher’s own feelings. Finally, in an interview between two strangers, the product is not just the recording, but the formation of a new relationship. For better or worse, the process undertaken between people who know one another beforehand will alter a relationship that already existed. Comfort lies in the aftermath of the interaction, laying a pathway to future conversation—recorded or not.

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<sup>35</sup> *A Strike and an Uprising (In Texas)*, directed by Anne Lewis (2018, Austin: Anne Lewis Productions), film.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Frisch, “Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process” in *The Oral History Review* 30, 112.





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## FIGURES



**Figure 1**

Screenshots from *The Comfort of Memory*, Annette Apitz, 2013.



**Kit Keith**  
*Untitled*, 2012  
Mixed media on paper  
55% x 35 3/4  
Gift of the artist

[8] Kit Keith is a former Brooklynite, now living and working in St. Louis. Inspired by outsider art and her early experiences as a trapeze artist, Keith creates mixed media images reminiscent of an earlier era. Keith's alternately wistful and defiant female subjects bear a striking resemblance to the artist herself, although their expressions call to mind 1940's black and white family portraits. In *Untitled*, Keith's female subject, painted atop a vintage map of New York Harbor, smirks as with secret wisdom, as her eyes wander to the map's edge, perhaps in search of adventure or absolution. This piece is a stunning example of Keith's style, blending a delicate touch with a forceful impact.

## Figure 2

From Kit Keith's personal archives, 2012 Armory Show exhibition catalogue. Accompanying text reads: "Kit Keith is a former Brooklynite, now living and working in St. Louis. Inspired by outsider art and her early experiences as a trapeze artist, Keith creates mixed media images reminiscent of an earlier era. Keith's alterantely wistful and defiant female subjects bear a striking resemblance to the artist herself, although their expressions call to mind 1940's black and white family portraits. In *Untitled*, Keith's female subject, painted atop a vintage map of New York Harbor, smirks as with secret wisdom, as her eyes wander to the map's edge, perhaps in search of adventure or absolution. This piece is a stunning example of Keith's style, blending a delicate touch with a forceful impact."



**Figure 3**

*Ice*, from The Mattress Series, ca. 1995.



**Figure 4**

*Untitled*, from The Mattress Series, ca. 1995.



**Figure 5**

*Readers Wives*, from The Mattress Series, ca. 1995.



The New York Times

June 1, 1997

# Book Review

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**Figure 6**

*New York Times Book Review* cover, 1997. From Kit Keith's personal archives.



**Figure 7**

*Legs*, back of portfolio case, mixed media, ca. 1995.



Kit Keith in her studio with Ringo the dog, September 2019. Photo taken by author.