

Kiki Smith  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 142

University Art Museum  
early February - mid April 1991

*Offering* (detail), 1986



"Darkness and dread of mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature."<sup>1</sup>

— Lucretius

For over ten years Kiki Smith's art has been concerned almost exclusively with representations of human anatomy. Her work lays bare the body and its parts for the viewer's contemplation: a blown-glass baby suspended by a filament of wire, a womb cast in bronze, a terra-cotta rib cage, a blanket made of human hair, and a hideously dismembered paper figure. As the art critic Christopher Lyon points out, Smith's strategy diverges from a strictly scientific, anatomical approach, which aims for "the figuration of an ideal or 'normal' type (by substituting) for the unitary a concept of 'multitude.'"<sup>2</sup> These are not generic forms but, rather, seem to be the organs and bodies of specific individuals. Smith's work involves an eclectic variety of materials and methods, each chosen for its appropriateness to the subject at hand. Her unpredictable practice moves strategically among a wide variety of media while eroding strict boundaries between image and object, art and craft.

Another distinctive aspect of Smith's anatomies is their appearance of being *used*. Her various organs, limbs, and systems appear both cryptic and familiar, like the neatly laid out innards of a disassembled engine. Thus, one senses not only the body's forms, but equally the mechanics of its function. Despite their keen sense of morbidity, it is not as significant that many of these forms appear to be dead, as much as that they seem

to have lived. To live is to exist in time, to become a form shaped by circumstance.

In Smith's works one sees the traces of life functions accumulated over time. As evidence of individuation and vitality, these traces point towards the existence of a kind of spiritual potency that courses through living matter. It is the after-the-factness of her works, however—their *retrospective* acknowledgment of the integration of matter and spirit—that links them to a quasi-materialist view such as that of the Roman philosopher Lucretius: "If any feeling remains in mind or spirit after it has been torn from our body, that is nothing to us, who are brought into being by the wedlock of body and spirit, conjoined and coalesced."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Smith's works do not promise everlasting life or a transcendent soul; yet, by contrast with her desiccated organs and limbs, our own bodies suddenly come alive in the present with a mysterious and continual pulse and hum.

Despite its materialistic bias, the notion of individuation alluded to in Smith's work opens toward a discourse of subjectivity that challenges the prevailing view of the self as entirely conventional and socially constructed. For Smith, it is the body, not language, that is the most common denominator of human existence. "I use the body," says Smith, "because it is our primary vehicle for experiencing our lives. It's something everyone shares, and there is no hierarchy; it doesn't distinguish between class and race."<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Smith recognizes that "every ideology and agenda is played out on the

body: trying to control people's rights about reproduction or people's economic oppression."<sup>5</sup> Smith's work is radically subjective insofar as it brings to light the body itself, and clarifies with poignant literalness what is at stake for every individual when ideology extends to physical intrusion and control.

Living in a world where bodily subjection impinges inordinately on women's lives, Smith gives special emphasis to foregrounding female biology. "A lot of it is about living through the shame of being female in public. There's an enormous amount of shame attached to your gender; nothing speaks to your experience in the culture. It seems important to hang out there with my experience of being a girl-child, to see if I could live through that in public."<sup>6</sup>

Smith's art calls for an understanding and acceptance of the brute facts of our physical being. She objectifies skin, bones, and flesh with tender and unflinching honesty. These forms, she reminds us, are not merely machines, they are the armatures of consciousness. "A tree cannot exist high in the air," wrote Lucretius, "or clouds in the depth of the sea, as fish cannot live in the fields. . . . There is a determined and allotted place for the growth and presence of everything. So mind cannot arise alone without body or apart from sinews and blood."<sup>7</sup> This kind of prosaic logic permeates the descriptive clarity of Smith's anatomies. The power of her art lies not simply in her penchant for objectivity and classification but in the subtle ways by which her disparate representations of the human form suggest simultaneously the spirit

and mechanics of life.

Kiki Smith was born in Nuremberg, West Germany, in 1954 and currently lives and works in New York.

Lawrence Rinder  
MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*, trans. by Ronald Latham (London, Penguin Books, reprint 1952), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lyon, "KiKi Smith: Body and Soul," *Artforum* (Feb. '90), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Lucretius, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Kutner, "Free Association with the Human Body," *The Dallas Morning News* (19 Jan. '89), p. 1C.

<sup>5</sup> Kiki Smith, in Charles Ahearn, "Kiki Smith's Gut Reaction," *Interview* (Nov. '90), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Lucretius, p. 119.

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by the artist, courtesy of Fawbush Gallery, New York, unless otherwise indicated):

*Offering*, 1986, two Cibachrome photographs, 80 1/2 x 46 1/2"; 18 x 12".

*Womb*, 1986, cast bronze, 20 x 24". Private collection, New York.

*Man*, 1987, ink on gampi paper, 48 x 38 x 7".

*Ribs*, 1987, terra-cotta, ink, thread, 22 x 17 x 10".

*Helles Feld (Lit Field)*, 1988, glass, water, copper, 16 x 4 1/2 x 3".

Untitled, 1988, ink on gampi paper, 324 x 27 x 20". Lent by Penny Cooper and Rena Rosenwasser.

Untitled, 1988, ink on gampi paper, dimensions variable.

*Veins and Arteries*, 1989, dyed linen, 216 x 45".

Untitled, 1989, human hair, wool, dimensions variable.

Untitled, 1990, plaster, two pieces, 18 x 19" ea.

Untitled, 1991, media and dimensions unknown at time of publication.

#### Selected one-person exhibitions:

The Kitchen, NYC, *Life Wants to Live* '82; Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT '89; Dallas Museum of Art, *Concentrations 20* '89; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *Projects: Kiki Smith* '90 (catalog); The Clocktower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, NYC '90; Fawbush Gallery, NYC '90; Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland '90; Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam '91 (catalog).

#### Selected group exhibitions:

COLAB, NYC, *A More Store* '80; *Times Square Show*, NYC '80; P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY, *New York, New Wave* '81; ABC No Rio, NYC, *Erotic Psyche* '82; The

Kitchen, NYC, *Potato Wolf* '84; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *Committed to Print* '88; Artists Space, NYC, *Witnesses Against Our Vanishing* '90; White Columns, NYC, *Fragments, Parts, and Wholes* '90.

Bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Adams, Brooks. "Kiki Smith at Joe Fawbush," *Art in America* (Sept. '88), pp. 182-83.

McCormick, Carlo. "Kiki Smith, Fawbush Gallery," *Artforum* (Oct. '88), p. 145.

Decter, Joshua, "Kiki Smith, Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University," *Flash Art* (Oct. '89), p. 134.

Smith, Roberta. "Kiki Smith: Comments on Human Physiology," *The New York Times* (Nov. 26, '90).

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