

2016

# "Pinky and Kitty and a 3rd thing": Collaborative practice in the life and work of Clara "Kitty" Couch

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## Recommended Citation

Talbot, Mary, "'Pinky and Kitty and a 3rd thing': Collaborative practice in the life and work of Clara 'Kitty' Couch" (2016). *Senior Capstone Projects*. Paper 563.

*“Pinky and Kitty and a 3rd Thing”: Collaborative Practice in the Life  
and Work of Clara “Kitty” Couch*



A Senior Thesis in Women's Studies

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Poughkeepsie, New York

April 15, 2016

### ***Introduction:***

Memories of my maternal grandmother, Clara “Kitty” Couch, are dreamlike and fragmented: Kitty moving for the open door, her hands cupped around a blue-grey mourning dove trapped in her studio, Kitty making shadow puppets on the walls of a sheet fort, Kitty taking me to a party on a riverbank, as extravagant and miraculous as the riverside picnic which opens *The Wind in the Willows*—one of Kitty’s favorite books, and now one of mine. Sense memories of childhood visits are sharper: I smell clay, bird seed, wet rhododendron leaves, and tomato vines in the sun. Throughout my young adulthood, Kitty has often appeared in my dreams: talking to me about my studies, visiting me at college, enthusiastically present at the bar where I ordered a margarita on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday—an ungraspable presence with whom I desperately want to connect.

My fascination with her life began as an early teenager, several years after her unexpected death in 2004. I began to catalogue stories and images into an ever-expanding mental library: Kitty and her best friend Aunt Flo rolling down a hill in the snow, or sipping vodka in fur hats from Moscow as they chugged across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Rail, or leaving a joint they had long anticipated sharing in the freezer for so long that someone else helped themselves. Kitty putting soap in place of Oreo cookie cream to dissuade whoever had been snatching my aunt’s lunch at the public pool (it worked). Kitty smashing any flawed ceramic pieces she’d made, piling fragments of clay pots behind her house where they still lie. Most of all, the enticing family legend shone in my mind: Kitty standing in St. Mark's Square in Venice, Italy in 1962, and having an epiphany that life as she was living it was not meaningful. She realized during that trip that she needed to create art, and more astoundingly that’s exactly what she did: she came

home, attended classes, read, taught, and worked as a successful ceramicist for the remainder of her life. My yearning to write about her settled permanently in the bottom of my stomach.

I am not the only person hooked on Kitty. From the time she was alive to the course of my research for this project, conversations with those who knew her inevitably touch on the “thing” that she had, a quality that drew people towards her, made the smallest of interactions memorable, and created a Kitty following of sorts. She was intensely energetic, and combined charisma with a wickedly fun sense of humor. Her oldest daughter, my aunt Kate, called it “zest,” and also told me that if she needed someone to carry the conversation at a dinner party, she invited her mother.<sup>1</sup> Janey Zietlow, a close friend from the mountains, wrote to me that upon meeting Kitty, “right from the beginning it felt like a heart/soul connection. Lots of people felt this way about Kitty, and we all thought we were her ‘best friend.’”<sup>2</sup>

Kitty and her lifestyle seemed “different” in a way that was dazzling. In an interview in August, 2015, Kitty’s oldest friend, Florence “Flo” Glasgow Vaught, recalled,

I think what attracted me to [Kitty] ... in the very beginning was that she was so different from anybody I had known... The way she decorated her house, the way she prepared foods that I’d never eaten, or heard of ... I had said to you earlier that she lit up a room when she walked in, but it... was more than that. ... I found that when you went to her house for dinner no matter how simple it was it was like going to a party. ... She seemed worldly even though her life’s experiences hadn’t been that different from mine... she’s always been curious.<sup>3</sup>

Kitty’s curiosity made her a seeker: an avid reader, a perpetual discussor of deep ideas—even when, as Kitty’s son-in-law and my uncle Dan recalled, you may have hoped to talk about the weather<sup>4</sup>—and serious about the meaning and process behind her artistic work. Her ceramic pieces were typically container forms, massive vessels built up from pinch pots, unglazed and

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, interview by Mary Talbot, January 19, 2016, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>2</sup> Janey Zietlow, e-mail statement sent to Mary Talbot, February 29, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Florence Vaught, interview by Mary Talbot, August 15, 2015, transcript 2 of 3.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Cogswell, interview by Mary Talbot with Dan and Margaret Cogswell, August 19, 2015, transcript 1 of 1.

glowing earthy orange. She was fascinated with the human relationship to the earth, the relationship between the earth and her materials, and human body forms.



*Figure 1: A pot from the earthworks series, Kitty pinching a pot, one of Kitty's pieces with a butterfly. Photographer and dates unknown.*

As I soon came to realize, Kitty's full complexity is belied by any characterization which only evokes gregariousness and charm. Especially in the later years of her life, Kitty would acknowledge a difficulty being vulnerable in her closest relationships, an independent streak that masked a fear of dependency on others. In "10 Bites of Enough," a short documentary about Kitty produced by her close friend, Jeff Goodman, Kitty says that she realized her "greatest fear was loving people"<sup>5</sup>—a surprising sentiment from a woman who seemed to be the most open those who knew her had ever met. Kitty's daughter Margaret recalled in an interview:

I think that mother—I think she was very sophisticated in some ways and then I think what was masked, because she was so good with people, was her neediness. Because she was charismatic and she could really touch you with her genuineness, it masked the fact that she needed ... [those intense relationships] to feel OK about herself—and that she didn't—I think she understood somewhere deep down in herself, but could not admit that or own that for years.<sup>6</sup>

I do not include these observations in order to "uncover" the "real" Kitty—or perhaps I do, but only in the spirit of doing justice to her life story and the story of her collaboration. What I have ultimately found most inspiring about Kitty has been her desire to move into her insecurities, to explore the unknown and the uncomfortable as an essential element of her spiritual journey. As Kitty's close friend, ceramicist and dancer Paulus Berensohn said: "I would say she was a person that had...a sense of her soul and worked on it. On the mystery."<sup>7</sup>

Although I wanted to write the story, I did not know, at first, where or what the story was. I found the answer while visiting one of Kitty's closest friends, and the artistic partner whose name shares this piece's title: photographer Marion "Pinky" or "M.M" McCall Bass. I flew into Mobile, Alabama in August of 2015, and stayed with Pinky at her home in coastal Fairhope for

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffery Goodman, "Ten Bites of Enough: Kitty Couch on Life and Art," YouTube video, 15:45, posted by Margot Atuk, December 5, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0BDxQmt-X4>.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>7</sup> Paulus Berensohn, transcript 1 of 1.

three days. Prior to this visit, Pinky and I had met on occasion, most recently in North Carolina during the summer after my freshman year of college. Knowing Pinky much better now than I did then, she seems quite different from Kitty, but at the time their similarities were uncanny: short hair, big t-shirts, a soft, deeply southern accent and a full bellied laugh.

Sitting together in the huge open room that makes up the front of her house—part living room, part studio space, modeled after my grandmother's own house—Pinky showed me her journals, pulled out her photographs, and made gifts of original show catalogues, letters, and even a pot that Kitty had made during one of their camping trips. She told me about the collaborative art project that she and Kitty had undertaken in 1992, the most surprising part being that it had been painful to the point of trauma for Pinky herself. This was not because they had argued or for any other reason besides the success of the collaboration itself: Pinky felt that she had lost herself.

Later, after six weeks of wading through the material I had collected and enjoying the wealth of information I now had access to, Pinky's description of the collaboration was still with me. Questions were flickering. I did not understand how or why my belligerently independent grandmother had decided to undertake this project. I did not understand how Pinky's sense of self could have been undermined through the process of working with another person. I did not understand how Kitty had experienced the process and aftermath of collaboration. This paper primarily centers on the collaborative project that the pair undertook, in an effort to understand what it means for two women who came to artwork in their forties to open back out—to choose to work together.

The trajectory of Kitty's life is legible to me as a process in three stages. After seeking the stability of social and economic capital through traditional family life, Kitty then chose to

reject many of the most conventional elements of her lifestyle in favor of pursuing artwork—a means to express who she was and champion a sense of individual autonomy. The third stage of her life represents an opening back up and out, a testing of the security of her integrity of self, a pushing of her weak spots, and an effort to be more vulnerable. My project seeks both, as my wonderful thesis advisor Professor Lisa Collins put it, “to tell a story and make a point.” The story of my grandmother’s life is ultimately one of moving towards collaboration, both in art and as a way of life: an open, reciprocal approach to living which did not come easily but which she sought with the boundless energy that she brought to everything she undertook. The artistic collaboration itself provides the case study around which my thesis revolves: posing central questions that link back to my grandmother’s experiences throughout the rest of her life, and investigating her project in relation to artistic collaboration’s own highly political history. Questions about the political potency of artistic authorship, collaboration, and female bonding arose through this study.

This project about collaboration has also been a collaboration—Kitty and I working together to write her life. To be sure, I am the most powerful one in this equation: no longer here, Kitty is unable to contribute her own voice to the story, to conceal pieces of writing that she would like to conceal, or even, through her very presence, to dissuade the inclusion of certain unflattering passages. I have chosen the narrative of her life, and written it in my own language. I’ve used what’s been compelling to me, and left out things that she would have considered as centrally important. I’ve exposed the places where I knew she felt the weakest—in fact they form the crux of my work. The constructs that she used to make sense of her life are not meaningful or comprehensible to me in many respects—it quickly became clear that trying to write about her life in the language she would have used was impossible, a foolhardy and pointless goal.



However, the sacredness I have attributed to her, my obsessive concern with being fair to her story and her role (silent) has meant that she has held a significant power over me as well, haunting me, in some ways, and challenging me to be more precise and more open to the concepts that preoccupied and entranced her. In many ways, I have also had to surrender to her story. By choosing to commit to making meaning from her life, I have had to allow what I have found to direct me in often uncomfortable ways. Collaboration stuck out to me as worth examining and theorizing. Soon I found myself in deep—writing creatively and writing about art, writing and thinking outside of my discipline of Women’s Studies.

Kitty would have liked that the fact that loss—the loss of her life, the loss of our relationship—was in this case generative, spurring a cross-country, cross-disciplinary investigation—both a physical, social process of searching and communicating and an emotional, mental process of synthesizing and meaning-making. Born of my desire to bond, in many ways I have had to remind myself that the completion of this project will not result in her coming back to life—it is not a resurrection, but a piece of detective work born of love, obsession, and burning curiosity.



*Figure 2: Kitty and I having a laugh together in 1997.*

## ***Chapter 1 (1921-1982): Early Years, Wife- and Motherhood, and Development as an Artist***

### 1.1: Life in Georgia

Clara “Kitty” McCreary Rountree was born on December 27, 1921, in Decatur, Georgia, a small, leafy suburb of Atlanta. She grew up in a large house which sat adjacent to the railroad tracks, watching passing trains rush by through the window at the end of her family’s dining room table.<sup>8</sup> Her father Walter Rountree, an intelligent man who had attended The Naval Academy and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, worked for the Insurance Commission of Georgia.<sup>9</sup> Her mother Adeline Rountree did not work.<sup>10</sup> The youngest of three surviving children, Kitty had an older brother and sister who were named for their parents, Walter and Adeline. The Rountree’s had had another daughter, who died as a toddler from either tetanus or staph before Kitty was born.<sup>11</sup> Although it has been difficult to access much information about Kitty’s earliest years, Kitty’s oldest daughter and my aunt, Kate Breckheimer, told me that it was her impression that Kitty’s home life had been “charmed,” although comments by both Kate and others also suggest that in many ways, Kitty was unlike and sometimes at odds with her immediate family.<sup>12</sup>

The information I was able to gather about Kitty’s relationship to her parents and siblings suggests that it was an ambivalent one. In an interview in August of 2015, my mother and Kitty’s second oldest daughter, Adeline Couch Talbot, said that her impression was that Kitty

had very little respect for her mother because her mother was a very aesthetic person but was really weak...So, she (Kitty) always used to tell it in different ways, oblique ways, but one I always remember is that she would say ‘oh she always retired in the afternoon

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<sup>8</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>9</sup> Adeline Talbot, interview by Mary Talbot with David and Adeline Talbot, August 14, 2015 transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Adeline Talbot, text message to Mary Talbot, March, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

to take a nap and to listen to opera.’ So she would indicate that she was refined but that she...also... wasn’t up to life, kind of. And... [Kitty] had disdain for that.<sup>13</sup>

As my own mother articulated, Kitty’s “disdain” for her mother’s daily sessions of resting and listening to opera speaks to the type of lifestyle Kitty did not want for herself. Disinterested in refinement at the cost of being “up to life,” Kitty’s description reveals two qualities that would exist in her for the rest of her life: a boundless, joyfully energetic approach to living, and what she would call her “either/or” nature, an occasionally judgmental attitude aimed at those whom she considered overly conventional in a stultifying way.

Along similar lines, Kate described her maternal grandparents as being “pretty humorless people,” expressing that she had always found it “kind of amazing that [Kitty]... came from [the family that she did].”<sup>14</sup> Kate observed that “when you see family reunion type photographs, you can still kind of see how she is—more vibrant and more—you know, big smile.”<sup>15</sup> I also know from conversations with Pinky and my mother that Kitty and her sister, Adeline, though in touch throughout their lives, had a challenging relationship. Therefore, it appears that there were many times when Kitty’s highly energetic nature contrasted with the rest of her family.

My mother noted that both of Kitty’s parents were from small towns in Georgia where their families had been prominent and respected, which translated into a strong sense of social pride that permeated Kitty’s family life.<sup>16</sup> My mother described Kitty’s family as being upper middle class until this status abruptly changed with the onset of the Great Depression when Kitty was eight years old.<sup>17</sup> I have heard conflicting and uncertain accounts of the impact that the Depression had on the Rountree family’s financial status. While my mother stated that Walter

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<sup>13</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>14</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

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

<sup>16</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Rountree “lost everything”<sup>18</sup> in the Depression, something he experienced as a painful blow to his sense of identity as a well-educated man from a prominent family, my aunts recalled few details about the impact the Depression had on their mother’s home life. I was only able to discover one specific detail of the shift in my grandmother’s life due to the Depression, and the fact that this story was mentioned independently by two of Kitty’s four daughters suggests that it was something that had an impact on her. Kitty’s older sister Adeline had attended Finishing School in Europe upon graduating high school, which Kitty was not able to do by the time she reached the same age, due to the family’s financial circumstances having changed.<sup>19</sup> This example is telling: it was a marker of high-class status, not a basic necessity, that the Rountree’s had to sacrifice. However, for a family that invested heavily in the idea of itself as socially prominent, losses such as these seemed were experienced as a blow.

The powerful psychological impact of the Depression combined with that of World War II impacted Kitty as it did nearly everyone of her generation. As historian Stephanie Coontz observes, “The [post-war] call for women to return to the home...tapped into pent-up desires for stability among people whose families had been disrupted by the hardships of the Great Depression and World War II.”<sup>20</sup> My own mother once commented to me that the losses Kitty’s family experienced in the Depression—whether amounting to true financial instability or merely the curtailment of luxuries that the Rountrees were accustomed to—motivated Kitty to achieve social prominence and financial stability when she eventually married and moved to Charlotte, North Carolina in the 1950s.

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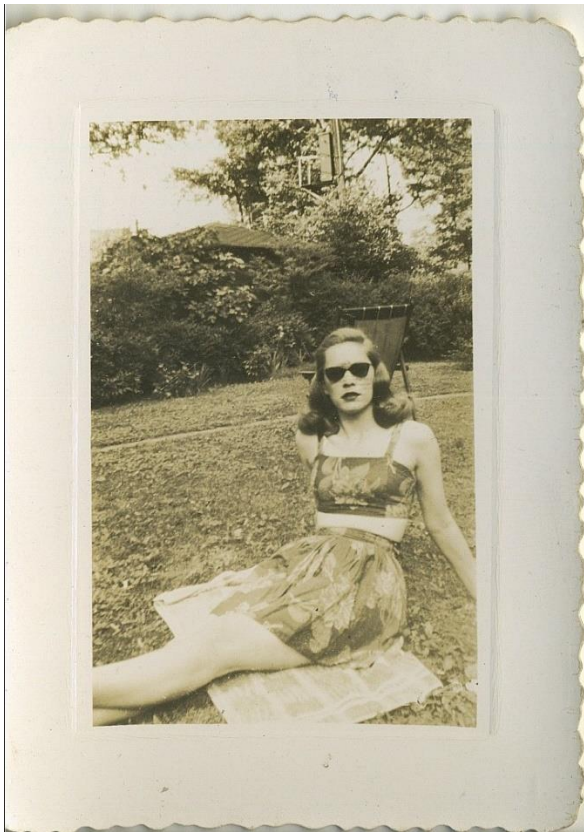
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 37.

In 1940, Kitty matriculated at Agnes Scott College, a small, elite all-women's college in downtown Atlanta. She was an athlete and studied biology.<sup>21</sup> At some point during her first two years of school, she met and fell in love with Harold "Cooch" Kennan Couch, an engineering student at the Georgia Institute of Technology two years older than herself. Harold was an ambitious student from a very different background than Kitty's.<sup>22</sup> He grew up in a poor family in the small town of Magnolia, Arkansas.<sup>23</sup> His parents had been much more heavily impacted by the Depression than the Rountrees.<sup>24</sup> This background made him famously thrifty through the rest of his life, even after establishing a successful career in Charlotte.



*Figure 3: Kitty in her late teens or early twenties. Undated, photographer unknown.*

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<sup>21</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

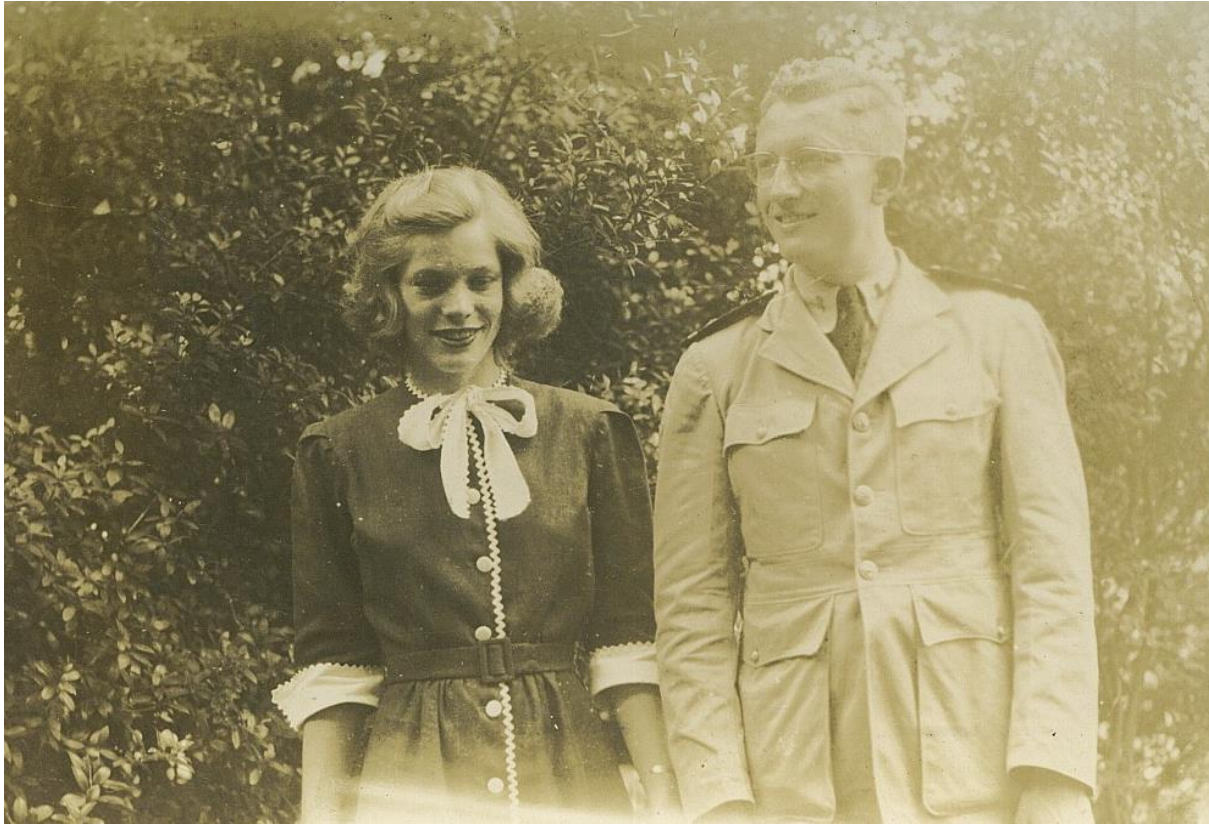
My mother recalls the most about the timeline of Kitty and Cooch's relationship in relation to World War II, but says that she cannot be certain on any of the details. As far as she knows, Cooch and Kitty became engaged during Kitty's sophomore year in 1942, after Cooch graduated.<sup>25</sup> In addition to owning a dress shop that my aunts loved to visit as children, Cooch's mother was the head of Magnolia's Draft Board. Therefore, Cooch felt obligated to sign up for military service, partly in order to avoid the perception that his mother was subject to nepotism.<sup>26</sup> He went to war for two years while Kitty finished her degree. They were married in 1944 in a small wedding at Kitty's parents' house right after Kitty graduated from Agnes Scott, after which Cooch returned to the military for approximately two more years. During this time, Kitty utilized her degree in biology and worked as a lab technician in Georgia. I wish I had access to any details about Kitty's experiences doing this work, as it would be the only nine-to-five, non-arts related job she would hold in her entire life.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

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





*Figure 4: Kitty and Cooch around the time of their marriage.*

When Cooch returned from the war, he and Kitty moved around constantly for several years, living in different cities on the East Coast and in the Midwest.<sup>27</sup> This was partially due to his job as a salesman, but also because of the housing shortage that occurred when thousands of soldiers returned ready to start their families.<sup>28</sup> As my mother recalled, during this itinerant period of her parents' lives, they once lived in an apartment that they shared with another couple, alternating on a monthly basis between the apartment and a hotel.<sup>29</sup> After this period of separation, uncertainty, and movement in the early years of their marriage, Cooch got a job

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>28</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 26.

<sup>29</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.



selling power plant equipment at Brown and Morrison Power and Equipment in Charlotte, North Carolina, and my grandparents settled there in 1949.

## 1.2: Family Life in Charlotte

*“She was really good at being herself” –Margaret Cogswell, Kitty’s third daughter.*

Many historians have described an apparent ‘return’ of middle and upper class white women to intensive domestic life in the 1950s,<sup>30</sup> often attributing this rush to the perceived safety of affluent home life as a response to the anxiety of the Depression and the War.<sup>31</sup> Countless women who had joined the workforce during the labor shortage years of war were encouraged, were forced, or chose to leave their jobs once the soldiers returned.<sup>32</sup> The 1950s conjure images—drawn both from cultural sources, like “Leave it to Beaver” or “Ozzie and Harriet,” and popular writing, like Betty Friedan’s 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*—of white, wealthy, suburban, nuclear families.<sup>33</sup> Two dichotomous, one-dimensional stereotypes of 1950s family life prevail: it is considered either a blissful encapsulation of all that America has lost,<sup>34</sup> or a bastion of sexist oppression, in which oblivious husbands and children made soul-sucking demands on their

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 495-96.

<sup>31</sup> Wini Brienens, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 49. Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 2.

As Nancy Woloch observes, “...the domestic ideal had been gaining ground since the 1920s. After World War II, it was cloaked in modern garb, bolstered by experts, and advertised in every form of popular culture. In part antifeminist, domestic ideology incorporated the backlash against women and the fear of female competition that had followed the war. ... Most important, during the 1950s, domestic ideals had a fresh constituency: women who had grown up during depression and war and looked forward to stable, traditional roles in secure and prosperous environments. Domestic ideology was reinforced, finally, by the dominant trends of postwar life—a consumer economy, an expanding middle class, a tremendous spurt of suburban growth, and a fifteen-year baby boom.”

Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 496.

<sup>32</sup> See Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, xvi for one example, my grandmother’s own life for another.

<sup>33</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, “Introduction: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960,” in *Not June Cleaver* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 1. Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 2. Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 1-2.

increasingly bored, depressed, and frustrated suburban wives and mothers.<sup>35</sup> Historians have responded to these stereotypes with a call for nuance: many of the troublesome and fulfilling elements of 1950s family life (not as different from twenty-first century family life as we tend to think) existed simultaneously in the same families.<sup>36</sup> A more nuanced approach to 1950s family life is certainly necessary to describe Kitty's relationship to her husband and children. In many ways, she followed a conventional path for a woman of her generation and social group, while in others her domestic arrangements were unusual, acting as innovative solutions to her needs and desires as an intelligent, ambitious, and independent woman.

When the Couchs first moved to Charlotte, they lived in an apartment complex called Scotland Colony, where they met several of the young couples who would eventually make up part of their lively social circle. This group engaged in activities typical of the white middle and upper classes in 1950s: bridge club, book club, and multitudinous dinner and holiday parties.<sup>37</sup> Kitty also joined the Junior League, one of the few women not from a "Charlotte old family" to be accepted,<sup>38</sup> and despite her personal doubts about Christianity, she and Cooch were very involved in the Trinity Presbyterian Church.<sup>39</sup> Cooch did well in his new company, where he would ultimately become a partner. After less than five years in Charlotte, the Couchs bought a five-acre plot of land in the country, a section of a former dairy farm that had been subdivided.<sup>40</sup> They lived in a small cottage on their property while they built the house they would raise their daughters in. Kate told me it was largely Kitty's vision to live in a rural area, as she had been

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<sup>35</sup> See Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), and Meyerowitz's discussion of Friedan's oversimplified narrative on the American housewife.

<sup>36</sup> In particular, see Meyerowitz (*Not June Cleaver*) and Coontz (*The Way We Never Were*).

<sup>37</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>38</sup> Florence Vaught, transcript 3 of 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, transcript 1 of 3.

<sup>40</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

devoted to the natural world from a young age. As Kate recalls, their house was “right in the middle of the woods,” and Kitty made rare use of curtains because she wanted to “see her trees.”<sup>41</sup> For the rest of Kitty’s life, home would mean a place that interacted with instead of sitting apart from the natural world.

Kitty and Cooch tried having children for years before finally deciding to adopt a baby girl, my Aunt Kate, in late spring of 1952. She was born on April first of that year, and the Couchs brought her home seven weeks later.<sup>42</sup> While planning a second adoption, Kitty became pregnant with my mother Adeline, who was born on August 29th, 1956. Kitty and Cooch had two more daughters: Margaret, born on July 9, 1959, and Jessie, born on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1961. My mother recalls that she and her sisters

grew up feeling like we were really special for that if for no other reason...there was a lot of joy in the fact that they’d had kids when they’d wanted them for so long. And we also lived in this lovely place...it was out in the country, and then the city grew up around us, and we had a horse, and... we felt kind of adventuresome where we lived.<sup>43</sup>

Kitty’s relationship to motherhood, and her daughters’ relationship to her as their mother, was often tumultuous. All four Couch girls expressed a sense of their upbringing being different from those around them in ways both joyful and painful. This would be particularly true after Kitty decided to pursue art in 1962—an event discussed at length in the next section—as the Couch household grew more chaotic and more centered around Kitty’s pursuits. An exciting sense of being “special” came from living in the country when most of their peers were from urban Charlotte, eating foods their classmates had never heard of, doing strange art projects,<sup>44</sup> and having a mother different from anyone else’s. At the same time, my mother in particular described being embarrassed by incidents like arriving at school with dirty or inside-out clothes

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<sup>41</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

because “nobody was paying attention to that anymore,”<sup>45</sup> being constantly late, and in general getting the feeling from her teachers that she came from a “crazy” household.<sup>46</sup>

Having an eccentric mother who was fiercely committed to her own needs was a mixed bag for the Couch daughters. My mother described Kitty as a “strong, self-focused person,”<sup>47</sup> which I believe she meant as both a recognition of Kitty’s drive to follow her own path and a comment on the ways in which this often left Kitty’s daughters without guidance or structure. The benefit of Kitty’s model of womanhood was that she instilled a life-long sense of female power in her daughters. In independent interviews, Margaret and Jessie expressed that unlike many of their female contemporaries, they had never experienced doubts about their abilities as women. As Margaret noted:

I grew up thinking that women were very powerful, which is really positive. ... I think some of that is because of what she was demonstrated in the relationship with Dad,<sup>48</sup> and ... what was coming to fruition in her life. There were also four girls in the family. ... I never thought boys were better than me. ... I didn’t come with that kind of thing that I hear other women talk about ... it was always like, ‘I was just as good as anybody else.’ ... I think that sense ... that women are equals, was somehow really important—it was important for me, and I didn’t even know it was happening.<sup>49</sup>

In almost identical language, Jessie recalled:

When I talk to a lot of my friends about ... deciding what they wanted to do when they grew up and when they were goin’ through college there was a lot of ... doubt about—and growing up too—about what they could be, become, and that never entered my mind. ... She brought me up to know I could do whatever I wanted to do—the way she lived her life and the way she... was my mother.<sup>50</sup>

Kate referred to the Couch family as “matriarchal,” noting that her father was often on the road selling power plant equipment.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> As I will discuss, Kitty’s intense, dominant personality informed her relationship with her husband.

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>50</sup> Jessie Brinkley, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>51</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.



*Figure 5: Left: Kitty and my mother, Adeline, age 2, April 1958. Right: At home in Charlotte in the early 1970s. Kitty standing, Jessie on horse, Margaret on bike, and Adeline in chair.*

Kitty's relationship to her husband was both conventional and unconventional. As my father, David Talbot, recalled of Cooch, "He never washed a dish...the expectation was: Kitty was gonna make the dinner and make him breakfast and wash the dishes...he expected that...and she did it."<sup>52</sup> Cooch's responsibilities, such as taking care of the family's finances and their cars, were those of the traditional masculine head of house. However, Kitty's dominant personality strongly influenced her relationship to her husband. My mother told me about an interchange that Kitty had relayed to her: Kitty and Cooch were in the car together and passed a particularly beautiful house that had been converted from an old barn. Kitty asked if Cooch would have ever

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<sup>52</sup> David Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

been interested in building a house like that, and he replied “Honey, I guess I would have lived in a barn if that’s what you had wanted to do.”<sup>53</sup> This sweet story encapsulates the pair’s relationship—while Cooch may have taken care of the practicalities, Kitty was acknowledged as the driving force behind the family’s decisions, something that Cooch accepted. Cooch was also supportive of Kitty’s desire to change her life. As my father noted: “for example, he was very tolerant of this chaos, people coming in and out, and her going back to school and changing roles and changing the way she dressed.”<sup>54</sup> My mother said that Cooch, a deeply ethical and intelligent man, was proud of Kitty’s artwork.<sup>55</sup> Although Kitty and Cooch clashed constantly, especially over Kitty’s extreme impracticality,<sup>56</sup> there was also a deep bond between them.

The longest relationship of Kitty’s life was her friendship with Florence “Flo” Glasgow Vaught, born in 1927 in South Carolina. In 1949, the year they both moved to Charlotte, Kitty and Flo met at an event held by Flo’s sister-in-law. They became close friends, and were a daily presence in each other’s lives throughout the most mundane and significant events of family life.

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<sup>53</sup> Adeline Talbot, phone conversation with Mary Talbot, April 13, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>56</sup> In our interview, my father laughed recalling Cooch standing in the driveway, waving the dipstick from one of the family’s cars in the air and shouting “There’s not a drop’a oil in this car!” No one else in the family would ever think to check the oil in their cars, regardless of how many times they had been reminded. My father also said that poignantly, after Cooch’s death, Kitty became religiously attentive to checking and changing the oil on her mini-van.



*Figure 6: Left: "Miss Aunt Flo" in the 1940s. Right: Kitty and Flo in Moscow in 2002.*

Their friendship provided laughter, support, and intellectual, emotional, and spiritual exchange, grounding Kitty's domestic life before she became an artist. In the early years of their friendship, they would do their ironing together every Tuesday, and borrow one of their husband's cars to go grocery shopping together each Friday.<sup>57</sup> Each adopted a daughter around the same time after struggling to have children, and when Kitty found out she was pregnant with my mother Adeline, she told Flo before anyone else. As they raised their families together, Flo became "Aunt" Flo to the Couchs, an honorary title often given to close family friends in the south. Eventually returning to work as an elementary school teacher, Aunt Flo taught my mother and her aunts' kindergarten class, and became "Miss Aunt Flo". During this period, Kitty packed sandwiches and met Flo every weekday at noon, after her classes let out. The pair would lunch together, play tennis, and talk—"I don't know what the children were doing," Flo recalled.<sup>58</sup> During another period, they walked together each day in Freedom Park. They ran a Girl Scout troupe together, acted in Junior League charity plays, and took their families on camping trips together. Both

<sup>57</sup> Florence Vaught, transcript 1 of 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, transcript 1 of 1.

would return to school in their forties—Kitty to art school and Flo to study childhood clinical psychology—the only women in their social circles to do so. They supported each other through the premature death of their husbands.

I think of Kitty's friendship with Flo as an early and lifelong "collaboration". Two seekers, both women were curious, avid readers, preoccupied by similar questions, but usually differently widely in their intellectual and spiritual worldviews. Flo invested heavily in the Christian faith and the principles of psychology, while Kitty had a doubting relationship with Christianity that eventually led her to Buddhism, and also understood the world through her artwork. While Kitty could be quick to dismiss people who were different from her ('those people'), particularly if she considered them to be overly conventional in a way that was limiting, she and Flo were able to maintain a strong relationship in spite of—perhaps because of—their differences. The deep mutual respect on both sides allowed each to consider the other's beliefs and ideas with interest and enthusiasm, and in our interview Flo and I discussed how they seemed to reach the same place through different avenues. It is the "daily-ness" of Flo and Kitty's relationship that I find the most moving. They were hooked into each other's lives as only female friends can be. As Mary Wollstonecraft once wrote, "I like the word affection, because it signifies something habitual." As Flo recalled, "we talked a lot about [this]. Our ... relationship was so ... strong, that it was different than with Cooch or with [my first husband] Tom ... it was maybe even more connected."<sup>59</sup> Intense female friendships would be a hallmark of Kitty's life.

### 1.3: A "Late Bloomer": Development as an Artist and Relationship to the Feminist Art Movement

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*



“[Her] expression carried the message that by kicking hard into the stone of inert matter, one would break through to an experience of self, a self that will imprint its image into the heart of that matter”<sup>60</sup> –Art historian Rosalind Krauss on German artist Eva Hesse.

In the fall of 1962, Kitty and Cooch took a trip to Italy, the first of many international adventures. This was the coming of age trip denied Kitty by the circumstances of the Depression over twenty years earlier, a “Grand Tour” during which she saw many of the most famous works of art in the Western art historical canon. This exposure shifted something in her, clicked something into place. As she wrote years later in *The Penland Book of Ceramics*, “My romance with coiled pots goes back to the first Giotto that I saw in Italy in the 1960s. The large, generous shapes of the Italian women that he painted made my hands itch. I came home knowing that I would make art. I needed desperately to repeat that sensual line and create that sense of volume.”<sup>61</sup> According to family legend, Kitty was standing in St. Mark’s Square in Venice when she had her epiphany: her life as she was living it wasn’t meaningful, and art would act as antidote.

I asked nearly everyone I interviewed about this trip. It was this story, the glorious, eye-popping image of my grandmother standing in St. Mark’s Square, that had sent me on my own obsessive journey. There is a romantic, unwavering quality to it: realizing with complete clarity, in the space of a moment, exactly what she would go on to do for the rest of her life. However, not everyone remembers Kitty’s decision to become an artist as being such a sharp shift. My mother remembers everything changing after she returned, their way of life becoming more chaotic, old friends and activities slipping to the margins in place of art colleagues and students. Her sisters and nearly everyone else remembers it as a more gradual transition, although each of

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<sup>60</sup> Rosalind Krauss quoted in Peggy Phelan, “Survey,” in *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>61</sup> Kitty Couch, “Clara ‘Kitty’ Couch’ in *The Penland Book of Ceramics: Master Classes in Ceramic Techniques*, 10-20, (New York: Lark Books, 2003).

my aunts does remember the same story as the one first told me by my mother. As best I can figure out, this story came from Kitty. It has been impossible for me to fact check, and that she characterized it that way is interesting in its own right. Kitty had a sense of her own story, her life as being “storied”—she described a paradigm shift.

Soon after Kitty returned from Italy,<sup>62</sup> she began taking night classes at a local public high school with a particularly strong art teacher, whom my mother described as charismatic and talented.<sup>63</sup> These classes “really fed her,”<sup>64</sup> and as she improved she ultimately decided to return to school for an art degree. As Kitty would later describe it, this was a period rich with many forms of artistic education: “After my last child [Jessie] went to the 1<sup>st</sup> grade [in 1967], I went back for an art degree [at Sacred Heart College in Belmont, North Carolina]—which was only the beginning for it has been continuous since then—graduate courses at several universities, workshops, visits with potters on my travels which have been constant since my husband was an avid traveler.”<sup>65</sup> After receiving her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Kitty also began teaching art classes at Central Piedmont Community College, joining a large and dynamic community of artists based in Charlotte and in Davidson, a neighboring town that is home to Davidson College.<sup>66</sup> Her life revolved increasingly around work, and she often hosted students and colleagues at the family’s home for meals and events. Margaret and Jessie, the youngest Couch girls, often joke that if they wanted to attract their mother’s attention during one of these gatherings they had to ask for “Kitty” or “Mrs. Couch” rather than “Mom.” While both women

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<sup>62</sup> Through speaking with her daughters and friends and through reading Kitty’s writings, I have gained a sense of her development as an artist, her body of work and her creative process. However, my sense of the timeline of this development is unclear, particularly in the 1960s—1980s as she raised her family. Necessarily, this section is vague on specific dates but, with the help of Kitty’s thoughtful reflections on her own artistic life, rich in content.

<sup>63</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Kitty Couch, “Notes for Common Ground Talk, January 13—Mitchell Community College—a slide talk on my work, 1986.”

<sup>66</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

also expressed gratitude for their mother's strong model of womanhood, all four of Kitty's daughters noted that they wished for more of her focused attention after she began to pursue her work. Eventually, Kitty stopped spending time with much of her old social circle, and began to don denim coveralls instead of day dresses. The screened in porch of the family's home became a makeshift studio, with strange projects resting in half-completion by the front door.

Kitty's decision to pursue art represented a claiming of herself, an assertion of her need for a rich autonomous inner and outer life grounded in more than caring for her family and socializing. Over the years, Kitty would come to describe her artwork as an extension of her self—as she would write in notes for a 1988 talk, “Art work is a person's soul.”<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, she noted “Most important for me as an artist is [to] live my life and do my work in the space of the ‘not knowing’”<sup>68</sup> and that “I learn what is in my interior by observing the finished product.”<sup>69</sup> For Kitty, as for many artists, artwork was an act of both self-expression and self-discovery.

Kitty chose to break with her conventional domestic life and champion her own needs in a cultural moment when many women were recognizing a desire to do the same.<sup>70</sup> Her famous

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<sup>67</sup> Kitty Couch, “notes on talk to N.C. arts alliance 5/10/88.”

<sup>68</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Dwight.

<sup>69</sup> Kitty Couch, untitled and undated draft of notes for a talk (begins “I guess I am in love with the universe”).

<sup>70</sup> Kitty's life changing trip took place coincided with another watershed moment in United States history—the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the trip, Kitty's four little girls were left at home in the care of her mother-in-law “Nanny.” My own mother, who was six years old at the time of the trip, remembers the fear she felt from the adults around her, although she didn't understand what was going on (Mom, Mom and Dad transcript). My mother's memory conjured up an imaginary scenario in my own mind, in which the frightening drama playing out internationally inspired Kitty to change her life—in the same way a personal near-death experience or the loss of a loved one might do. I imagined her listening to the radio at the edge of a hotel room bed, clutching her husband's hand, worrying about her four children who in southern North Carolina would have been in the path of the missile. I imagined her thinking “what's it all been about” or “there must be more.” As a result, I asked many of my interviewees whether they remembered anything about the Cuban Missile Crisis in relation to Kitty's trip. Most didn't remember the trip, much less the historical event that took place. My mother said Kitty probably wouldn't have been worried even if she had been aware of the situation—she said Kitty would've dismissed it as “fear-based”. Regardless, this curious timing feels significant to me, the storyteller. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a turning point for the young JFK, an opportunity to demonstrate significant talent for diplomacy while also redeeming the military disaster of a few months before (the Bay of Pigs). It was also frightening and destabilizing, an episode in which the American people could visualize annihilation and destruction on a hitherto unforeseen scale. There is poetry in Kitty's timing—in her forties, she too ‘came of age,’ choosing to thoroughly redirect her life.

trip came almost exactly a year before the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the 1963 book that many have credited with sparking the Second Wave Feminist Movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.<sup>71</sup> Kitty's evident dissatisfaction with the circumstances of her life coupled with her brave and dramatic move towards something else initially seemed a classically 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave Story, with Kitty as the typecast mother beset with 'the problem that has no name,' and Betty Friedan's feminism as the knightess in shining armor. Friedan's book is made up of countless testimonies of women who felt like Kitty—that they needed something more than the duties of mother and wifehood. My research soon revealed, however, that not only had Kitty apparently never read the book (or if she had, no one recalls it having any particular impact), she had no explicit relationship with the Feminist Movement. Her motivations for changing her life certainly seemed to have aligned with those of many women—some of whom, like Kitty, considered their circumstances on an individual scale, and others of whom were beginning to consider themselves a member of a strategically oppressed group. For example, the all-consuming pressures of motherhood seem to be one of the reasons she decided she needed space and time for herself. In our January 2016 interview, my aunt Kate observed, "I do believe mom really had ... trouble with that many children. I learned from my mother that ... two was enough. That I couldn't ... have a life of my own and have the responsibility of taking care of a lot of

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<sup>71</sup> Broadly, this movement consisted of a large group of women in the United States and elsewhere collectively coming to understand, often through group discussion called consciousness raising or by reading texts by Friedan and many others, that the circumstances of their personal lives as women were shaped by political forces which often set them at a disadvantage as compared to men. Activism followed awareness, and the movement tackled issues ranging from sexual and reproductive rights, women's role in the family and in the workplace, and violence against women with demonstrations, writings, policy campaigns, art production and more. The mainstream strand of this movement, exemplified by organizations like Friedan's National Organization of Women (or NOW), has often been appropriately criticized for prioritizing the voices and issues of white, middle-to upper class heterosexual women.

See, among many other sources: Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 23. As many have pointed out, to consider Friedan's book or any single text or event as *the* catalyst of Second Wave Feminism is reductive and does not reflect the many factors that contributed to the movement.

children.”<sup>72</sup> My mother recalls that when Kitty returned from the trip to Italy, she told the girls that if they did not behave better she would have to go to the hospital.<sup>73</sup> While this dramatic comment was presumably born of a particularly trying moment, it links Kitty’s desire to change her life with the boredom and desperation associated with “the problem that has no name.”<sup>74</sup>

Kitty’s relationship, or lack thereof, to the Second Wave Feminist Movement, was based partially on the security of her own circumstances and partially on her temperament and worldview. Cooch was earning plenty of money by the time the couple had their daughters, which meant peace of mind, no need for Kitty to work, and access to childcare. Cooch gave her the emotional and financial support necessary for her to pursue her work. In this way, circumstance was everything—Kitty did not need the intervention of the Feminist Movement to change her life or to pursue her art. As feminist art historian Linda Nochlin observes in her essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” “the middle-class woman has a great deal more to lose than her chains.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, for women of a certain position, the motivation to join a social justice movement that seeks to separate women from the privileges accrued through their dependent relationship to men may be minimal. This being said, in other ways Kitty was the ideal ‘candidate’ for the Second Wave Feminist Movement, because she wanted to improve her life and was willing to make changes to do so. Many—some would say most—of the women who would make up the mainstream Feminist Movement emerged from equally comfortable circumstances.

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<sup>72</sup> Katherine Breckheimer transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>73</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>74</sup> “Just what was this problem that had no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say ‘I feel empty somehow...incomplete.’ Or she would say, ‘I feel as if I don’t exist.’ ... ‘A tried feeling...I get so angry with the children it scares me...I feel like crying without any reason.’” Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company: 1997), 63-4).

<sup>75</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” extract from *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (Westview Press, 1988), 147-158, accessed through the de Young Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco Website. [http://deyoung.famsf.org/files/whynogreatwomenartists\\_4.pdf](http://deyoung.famsf.org/files/whynogreatwomenartists_4.pdf).

Primarily, it was simple disinterest that separated Kitty from the Feminist Movement: it was not a match, temperamentally or intellectually. As a deeply internal, independent person, the act of joining a feminist consciousness raising group was not something that appealed to Kitty. As my mother observed, ‘group-joining’ necessitated, to a degree, a giving over of herself that Kitty would not find possible until much later.<sup>76</sup> Flo told me that while she, Flo, once attended a feminist consciousness raising session, she quit after two meetings, and Kitty never attended one. The friends talked about the meeting, and the phenomenon of feminism in general, and Flo explained that neither was compelled by the idea that negative parts of their lives were caused by oppressive male power. Flo’s narrative is illuminating:

I did join—about that time [in the early to mid-1960s]—a women’s consciousness group, and after two sessions I left, because all they were doing were bashing men and I remember talking to Kitty about [it]. She said ‘why did you go? And why did you not go back?’ and I remember we talked about the fact that the... power of women—now these are not her words or my words, but this is the sense of the conversation was that—the power of women was not dependent on the bashing of men...and that’s what was going on with that—I don’t know about with [*The Feminine Mystique*]<sup>77</sup>—but that was kind of the era in which that book came out and all these groups started. ... I didn’t think the issue was puttin’ men down I thought the issue for me was that I was not steppin’ up to the plate. I was not recognizing that I had—I don’t like the word power, but that’s the word that was used—that I had something to give, and I wasn’t doing anything with it. And so about ... the time she went back to school, I went back to school too.<sup>77</sup>

Kitty and Flo both understood their place in the world as being more tied to themselves as individuals than a social phenomenon like sexism broadly, meaning that changes in their lives must be driven by individual decisions.

My conversation with Margaret and her husband Dan further clarified the ways in which Kitty’s worldview made feminism an irrelevant or uninteresting phenomenon to her. As Margaret recalls, although Kitty must have experienced incidents of gender bias in her personal

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<sup>76</sup> Adeline Talbot, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>77</sup> Florence Vaught, transcript 3 of 3.

life or career, because she did not understand the world in terms of sexual power imbalances she may not have framed those incidents that way to herself. As Margaret said, “maybe it didn’t happen to her much because she wasn’t seeing it that way.”<sup>78</sup> Along similar lines, Dan ponders Kitty’s response to the frustration of domestic life by becoming an artist, observing that

it was an individual response. The way that she experienced it was: this is an individual response to her life experience. And that her life at that point was not giving her what she needed and she needed to push back against that and explore something new, but it was not part of, ‘because this is happening in broader culture,’ or ‘this is part of a broader movement.’<sup>79</sup>

As discussed above, Kitty did not understand the world through a lens of gender imbalance and power, and as a result none of her artwork reflected explicitly political aims. She considered all her work to be a manifestation of her inner life, connected to the experiences of others through a perceived universal human and animal interconnectedness rather. However, Kitty’s interest in the human form as connected to nature, her conceptions of women and fertility as being linked to nature and the ‘divine feminine,’ her fascination with Jungian archetypes and mythology, and her engagement with collaborative art practice all put her in conversation with explicitly Feminist artists who worked with similar ideas. Indeed, as editors Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad note in the introduction to *The Power of Feminist Art*, by the 1970s “emerging feminist consciousness in an ever-broadening spectrum of artists was making it impossible to identify a ‘pure’ woman artist who could be said to... [be] untouched by feminist ideas.”<sup>80</sup>

After experimenting with porcelain and other mediums, Kitty came to clay as her preferred source of expression, attracted to it as a material that connected her to the earth. She would work with clay for the remainder of her life. Unusually for a ceramicist of her time, she

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<sup>78</sup> Margaret Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>79</sup> Dan Cogswell, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>80</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad, “Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 24.

soon abandoned the pottery wheel,<sup>81</sup> choosing instead to create massive forms out of clay coils pinched together. In notes for an unnamed, undated talk, Kitty describes her process as being intimately connected to her profound respect for natural systems, and her spiritual connection to the energy of the earth. Describing both the technical process and internal inspiration behind her work, she writes:

[The] story from the center of our planet outward to the innumerable galaxies fills me with such wonder, awe, curiosity, and respect that I realize over and over that Nature is the artist and we living beings are the art.

So it seems for me so natural to take coils [of] the Earth to replicate the movement of the spheres. I begin with a small pinched form and after it has ‘set up’ as I call it I then begin slowly to add and integrate large coils of clay all the time unconsciously reacting to the beat of life. The results are often somewhat a surprise. ... This building is a slow very precious experience for me and I savor it. I spend a great [deal] of time refining the pieces. I often ask why I use the container as a statement and I am really not certain but it seems to be a control, just as the cell needs an outside membrane for protection and to define itself. It is comforting in this vastness to be contained. The surface decoration is a rather technical experience for I spray terra sigillata, very refined clay particles that have been separated from the heavier ones by being suspending in electrical charged water made by adding a teaspoon of sodium silicate to water. I fire the terracotta or earthenware pieces to 1950<sup>0</sup> F in an electric kiln. The pieces are finally finished with an attempt to reproduce nature’s primary colors of red, yellow, and green. I water down acrylic paints in many variations of the colors and spray these on... Always I try for movement in and out and around and around.”<sup>82</sup>

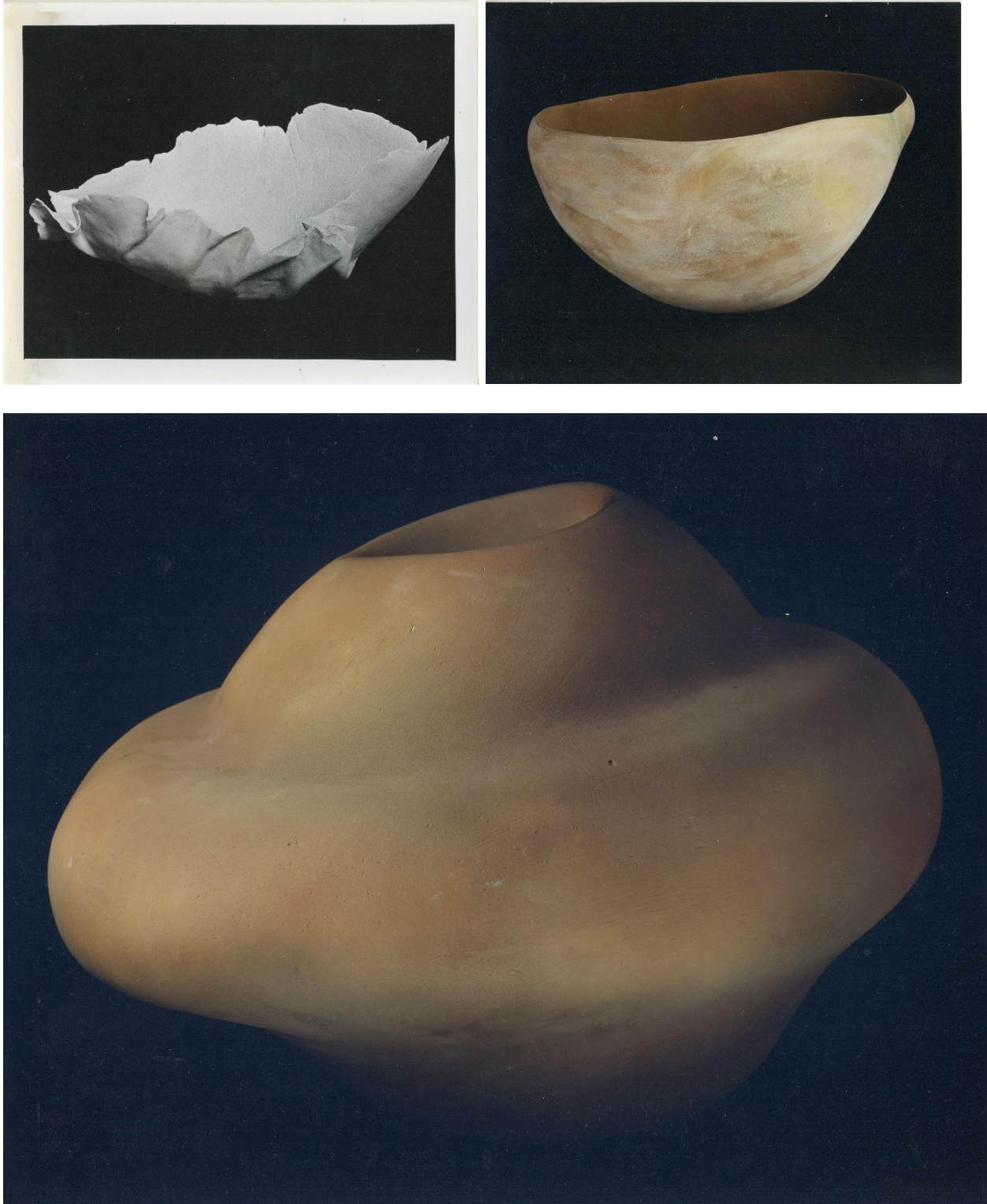
Kitty’s process, then, emerges from her worldview, and both expresses her internal life and impacts it—for example, feeling contained and comforted by the creation of container forms.

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<sup>81</sup> Paulus Berensohn, interview by Mary Talbot, August 20, 2015, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>82</sup> Kitty Couch, untitled and undated draft of notes for a talk (begins “I guess I am in love with the universe”).





*Figure 7: Early porcelain piece from the 1970s or 1980s, two ceramic containers.*

As she writes in an undated letter to a show curator, “my work...is about form. Whether it is a container, receptacle, an expression of the human form in landscape, it somehow gives voice to my passion as a potential creator.”<sup>83</sup> While abstract, the physicality of her pieces is always felt—as she would say, they are ‘forms’ that evoke a sense of volume and texture even in flat photographic reproductions. Her works, most typically rounded, delicate, and vessel-like, have also often been compared to female body forms. This connection would be made most explicit in her 1992 Collaboration Emerging sculpture, described in Chapter 3. Kitty’s work—especially the work she would do with her eventual collaborator Pinky Bass—bridges the natural world with the human body in a constant preoccupation with the interconnected processes of birth, death, aging, and regeneration. For Kitty, process, aesthetic, her own internal life, and the interconnectedness of all beings was all present in her creative life. As she aged, her work focused on the inevitability of death and aging, and she attempted to use her work to face these frightening realities with a sense of exploration and energy.

Throughout her life, the themes of her artwork would reflect the major themes addressed by the Feminist Art Movement, an arm of the Feminist Movement made up of women who sought to represent their experiences through visual art, champion previously denigrated mediums, and challenge the primarily male artistic canon.<sup>84</sup> Kitty’s preoccupation with nature as being connected to the female form particularly linked her to the Feminist Art Movement. Eco-feminist artists such as Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson, Patricia Johanson and others emphasized the female body in relationship to the natural world, often drawing on Goddess

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<sup>83</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Dwight.

<sup>84</sup> See: Helena Reckitt, editor *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001). And: Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad, editors, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

mythologies of ancient or non-Western cultures to emphasize that women's power comes from nature. In *Art and Feminism*, Phalan describes how Mendieta:

performed a series of actions she called earthworks throughout the 1970s. For Mendieta, the female body was deeply connected to the eternal grandeur of the land. Believing that Western capitalist culture was in danger of losing this connection, Mendieta traced the outline of her body 'attached' to the earth, using mud, fire, and blood to leave traces of this fading connection. These tracings, a kind of earth writing, were in turn documented in photographs.<sup>85</sup>

Mendieta's worldview and approach link to Kitty's work: by working with clay, Kitty sought the same level of physical connection with the earth that Mendieta sought in her earthworks pieces.

Kitty's work with Pinky, in particular photographs for the ERDA show that will be discussed below, are also particularly reminiscent of Mendieta's work, as they place the human body in direct relationship to nature in a way that evokes both death and life. Kitty's interest in human body forms also linked her to the Feminist Art Movement, which took the female body as a central visual and intellectual theme.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Peggy Phelan, "Survey," 32.

<sup>86</sup> Joanna Frueh, "The Body Through Women's Eyes," in *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1994), 190.

Kitty also explicitly claimed many visual artists, sculptors, writers, and poets who did not identify with the Feminist Movement as being profound influences on her work. The work of Carl Jung, in particular his concept of archetypes and the unconscious, was very meaningful to her, as were the writings of Jung's successor James Helman.<sup>86</sup> Her influences were eclectic, ranging from ceramists such as Philip Rawson, M.C. Cunningham, Ruth Duckworth, Richard DeVore, and her close friend Paulus Berensohn to poets, like Rilke, Rumi, Mary Oliver, and many more. Mythology, such as the works of Joseph Campbell, was always compelling to her as were origin stories from many cultures, as all of she considered all of her worked to be linked to big "why" questions—why we are born, live, and die.

## ***Chapter 2 (1982-1990s): Loss, “Recentering,” and Preparation for “True Collaboration”***

### 2.1: Loss and “Recentering”

*“The bomb fell”<sup>87</sup> –Kitty, writing of the massive shift in her life resulting from her children leaving home and her husband’s sudden death.*

In 1982, when Cooch was 62 and making plans to retire so that he and Kitty could travel, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and tragically died after only three months of illness. Flo told me that Cooch had been certain that he would survive his illness, and relied on Kitty to believe that he would recover as well.<sup>88</sup> As a result, his rapid and obvious deterioration did not lessen the shock of his death. Kitty was left reeling, both from grief and the sudden necessity of organizing many elements of her life that Cooch had formerly taken care of. Soon after, Jessie, the couple’s youngest daughter, left for college. When Kitty reflected on this profoundly tumultuous time in her life four years later for a talk at Mitchell Community College, she wrote:

The bomb fell—for the things that had made up my life other than the clay changed in a few brief months. My children left and my husband died very unexpectedly. So as I picked up the pieces of my life there was clay. And I find that it has given form to my life.<sup>89</sup>

Unmoored, Kitty reorganized her life even more intensely around her artistic work. Despite being an independent person by temperament, in many ways this was the first time Kitty had ever been truly alone: a hyper social person all her life, she had gone from her parent’s home to college and was married upon graduation.

Neither at the time nor in retrospect did she see Cooch’s death as undermining her work, but rather providing her with the emotional energy and space to focus on her ceramic practice in

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<sup>87</sup> Kitty Couch, “Notes for Common Ground Talk, January 13—Mitchell Community College—a slide talk on my work, 1986.”

<sup>88</sup> Florence Vaught, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>89</sup> Kitty Couch, “Notes for Common Ground Talk, January 13—Mitchell Community College—a slide talk on my work, 1986.”

a new way, as well as providing intellectual and emotional fodder for a new relationship with death based on contemplation and confrontation of the inevitability of aging and dying. Less than a year after Cooch's death, Kitty left Charlotte and moved to the isolated house in the North Carolina mountains that she and Cooch had built together as a vacation home in the 1970s. There she began the process of "recentering," as she would later refer to it in an unpublished piece. She wrote:

this period of my life [was] based on an intense time of reflection on what it means to be a widow, to be aging and to be a more fearless and open individual and artist. I realized that I did not have time to waste—I dedicated myself to follow the Energy in my life—to cut any extraneous experiences. Consequently, I moved to a remote place in the N.C. mts. and was a semi-recluse for about 5-8 years.<sup>90</sup>

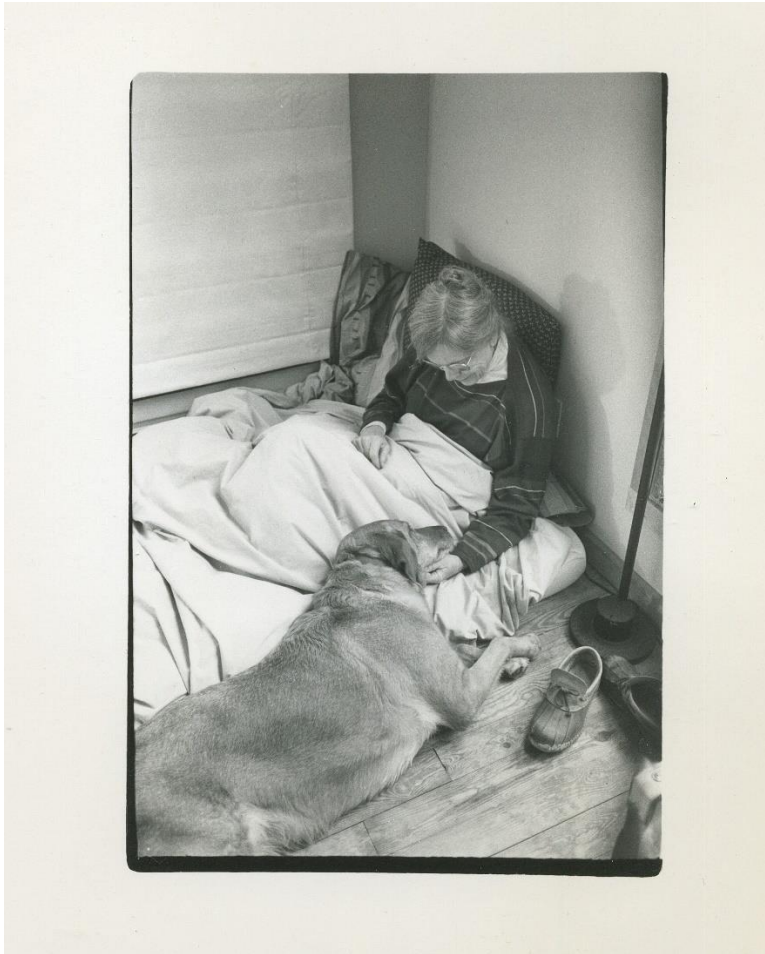
What Recentering meant in practice, apart from an intensive, solitary focus on her work, was creating a living environment that reflected her commitment to crafting a meaningful, focused, and simplified life. Before she moved to the mountains she catalogued almost all of the furniture, silver, and other household items in the Charlotte house and invited all of her daughters to divide and take her possessions, keeping only what she considered precious or necessary. Her mountain home at the end of a gravel road in Burnsville, North Carolina was large, with an open floor plan and gigantic windows, making it notoriously drafty in the chilly months and boasting a spectacular view: a green hill sloping down to a gigantic boulder— "the big rock" —a small pond where mud colored fish, black snakes, and ducks swam, a large garden and far beyond, sloping blue mountains. Trying live with rather than against nature—to let nature into the house, as her daughter Katie recalled<sup>91</sup>—meant ladybug nests hatching in the corner of the ceiling, birds carried out of the studio, purple aromatic butterfly bushes draped over the deck railing, bird seed in constant supply, and a thick rope hanging into the deep bathtub so that mice and crickets could

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<sup>90</sup> Kitty Couch, undated draft of catalogue for Recentering Show.

<sup>91</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

scramble out.<sup>92</sup> She slept on a mattress with no bed frame in the corner of her living room, arranged by the window so that she could see the stars.



*Figure 8: Kitty and Levi. Kitty slept on a mattress by the window. The beds in her house were only used by guests.*

<sup>92</sup> The most humorous moment in Jeff Goodman's short film about Kitty, "10 Bites of Enough," comes when she talks the clash between her wish to live in harmony with nature and the need to deal with a family of rats that have come to eat her birdfeed. She says: "And now I have got these rats that are comin' to my feeder—and they have got two babies, I'm sure there's a mama and a daddy and two young rats, and they are really posin' a problem for because I've got that natural feeling that 'rats are bad' and 'how am I gonna deal with these rats' and yet also I have this whole thing of wanting to be one with the universe! And how am I gonna make those things fit together? And I just keep thinking that if the rats would just keep in mind that they're not the only people living here then maybe I could allow them to stay, but I'm not sure that they are able to do that, because they've got babies now and that means we're gonna have more babies. So I'm wondering if I can live with those rats—you know whether they're gonna be—well they really are a problem for me in fact I find myself wakin' up at night and thinkin' about how I'm gonna deal with these rats. So it's a pretty big issue. And they've been here today eating at my bird feed and then they come and eat the duck food and they're here and now they're so at home that they do in front of me! So, what is that sayin'?! I don't know... I wish somebody'd come and take them away, you know? I really wish—take this from me!"

To the dismay of the many friends and family who visited her throughout the year, Kitty chose to forgo central heating, instead heating her home through the frigid Appalachian winters with a single wood-burning stove. My mother recalls waking up during one visit to find that my baby bottle had frozen overnight on the bedside table. Kitty used a small chainsaw to cut the firewood she needed herself from downed trees on her property.<sup>93</sup> Because of her desire to be in touch with the source of her water, she also refused to install a well, relying on a mountain stream which ran adjacent to her house to feed her pipes. When turning on the tap produced no flow, Kitty walked up the mountain to haul away the rogue rock or log that had blocked the streambed. Her insistence on being connected to the sources of her wood and water through her own labor spoke to two conflicting impulses within Kitty: first, to acknowledge and honor her dependence on natural sources; second, to forgo dependence on fellow human beings by doing everything herself to the extent possible. Though constantly working towards collaboration in the sense of having a reciprocal relationship to her surroundings, Kitty's fierce independence made this level of vulnerability with other people difficult. As her close friend Jeff Goodman pointed out in an interview in January 2016, Kitty was in constant collaboration with the land, and with her materials.<sup>94</sup> In many ways, this ability for give and take set the stage for the messier realities of collaboration with another person.

Years after she left Charlotte and had had time to incorporate her grief, Kitty characterized her husband's death as both a profound loss and a gift. Kitty's lifelong friend Flo observed that Kitty called Cooch, "her patron because it was only after he died that...she could give herself fully...to her art...That not only did she have the money to be free, she was not tied—all her kids were grown...he was gone, there was no one to keep her from [focusing on her

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<sup>93</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>94</sup> Jeffry Goodman, transcript 1 of 1.

work].”<sup>95</sup> This statement may seem contradictory—as I addressed in the previous chapter, Kitty’s circumstances in Charlotte made it possible for her to do art where other women would not have been able to. Nonetheless, in Charlotte Kitty’s roles as wife, mother, and friend had taken energies away from her work. This is the case for many women artists, indeed many women who choose to pursue something other than family care. Miriam Schapiro, a pioneer of the Feminist Art Movement, wrote in an essay in the anthology *Working It Out* about the difficulty of finding time and emotional energy for her painting with a young child and a husband, even when she was able to earn enough money to afford childcare. She describes being plagued by self-doubt as a woman artist in New York City when the entire art world was dominated by men. She writes: “Because of my loneliness and confusion in the social and art worlds...I felt increasing pressure alone in my studio. ... But I had less time for my art than ever. I had to accommodate myself to my husband, my mother, my mother-in-law, my son, and my maid, not to mention my father, my father-in-law, my students, and my dear friends. I was taking little bits out of my whole self and giving them out here and there all over.”<sup>96</sup> Along these lines, Flo said that “Kitty was such a generous person in her relationships that, you know, she would’ve still been trying to see what [Cooch] wanted to do.”<sup>97</sup>

In her landmark 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” feminist art historian Linda Nochlin asserts that circumstances have always mattered for women artists’ ability to create and improve, although the relevance of these circumstances to female artistic practice has historically been denied.<sup>98</sup> Kitty, a relatively wealthy, able-bodied white woman

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<sup>95</sup> Florence Vaught, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>96</sup> Miriam Schapiro, “Notes from a Conversation on Art, Feminism, and Work” in *Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work*, edited by Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 288.

<sup>97</sup> Florence Vaught, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>98</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists.”



with two beautiful houses, access to cultural resources and an artistic community, and most of all the time and space to create, had the perfect combination of qualities and circumstances in order to give herself over fully to her work. Just as her position in the 1960s as an upper-middle class white suburban housewife with access to childcare, a supportive husband, and artistic resources, allowed her to pursue art where many other women may have been unable to do so, the prominence and personal fulfillment she was able to access in later years must be understood in the new context in which she lived and worked. Here, I also recall Virginia Woolf's timeless interrogation of the circumstances necessary for women to write fiction. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf advises her audience: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."<sup>99</sup> Kitty's circumstances combined with her own innovative efforts created that room: a square studio, a pad on the floor, and a view of the mountains.



<sup>99</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Los Angeles: Indo-European Publishing, 2011), 2.



Figure 9: Two views of Kitty's studio with works in progress.

## 2.2: Kitty and Pinky Side by Side

*“[O]n some level almost immediately we...recognized [each other]”<sup>100</sup> —Pinky, describing meeting Kitty for the first time.*

If the mid-1980s were characterized for Kitty by loss and newfound freedom, the same was true for the woman who would soon become one of her closest friends: photographer “Pinky” Marion McCall Bass (also known as M.M. Bass). In 1986, Kitty was invited to be an artist in residence at a University of Georgia study abroad program in Cortona, Italy. The three-month course, held during the fall of that academic year, combined art history with studio art. Pinky Bass, fifteen years Kitty’s junior at age 50, was a Master of Fine Arts candidate at Georgia State and participated in the Cortona program as a student. After meeting in the Atlanta airport at the beginning of the trip, they immediately hit it off and developed a close friendship throughout

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<sup>100</sup> Pinky Bass, interview by Mary Talbot, August 24, 2015, transcript 1 of 2.

the program. They explored the area, swapped pieces of fennel for carrot sticks the communal dinners, and hosted a Bloody Mary party for their fellow students in the tiny apartment they shared.

Pinky, born in 1936 in Fairhope, Alabama, had recently divorced her husband of many years when she and Kitty met. When I interviewed her in August 2015, she told me that she and Kitty were both ready to “spread their wings,” as each was independent in a new way after becoming engaged during college and married shortly after. In addition to many small coincidences in their life stories, such as both having attended Agnes Scott College, Kitty and Pinky simply “recognized” each other, as Pinky recalls.<sup>101</sup> Many of the artistic themes they were interested in overlapped, such as a preoccupation with form and the human body, and later, a preoccupation with the body in nature and the idea of disintegration and regeneration—that all of life returns to the earth. Pinky recalled that something she liked upon first meeting Kitty was that Kitty allowed her to photograph the layered bags under her eyes, as each woman would increasingly be fascinated by the aging process.

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*





*Figure 10: Top left: Kitty and Pinky at Agnes Scott, fifteen years apart. My photograph of a page in Pinky's journal. Top right: Pinky's photographic of Kitty, taken in Cortona. Bottom: The Cortona Group.*

At the end of the three-month program, the two women were determined to maintain their friendship. Kitty lived in western North Carolina while Pinky was based in Atlanta, but they corresponded and saw each other not infrequently. In 1988 they took the first of many month-long trips, this time to Oaxaca, Mexico (Pinky and her husband had been missionaries in Mexico

City for five years in the 1960s). These trips, usually taken in the final months of the winter, would become a nearly annual tradition. Kitty and Pinky usually went to Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, driving across the country in Kitty's minivan, camping in state and national parks along the way and setting up their tents for four or six weeks. They also visited Big Bend national park, in Texas. These trips were a time when each woman focused on their own work—Kitty making pots and doing dung firings in the campfire, Pinky taking photographs of the natural landscape. However, they also worked together—Pinky playing around with clay, Kitty acting as model or taking photographs of Pinky when she needed an assistant. The overlapping themes in the women's work meant that their art began to influence each other's. As Pinky recalled: "constantly what was happening was, the images I was making she was getting interested in ... the forms in the images...And then she would begin to make forms [in clay] that...[were] derived from the images I made."<sup>102</sup> These words have been echoed elsewhere by Kitty. This exchange of thematic and aesthetic interests set the stage for more intentional collaborations.

In 1990, the two attended a joint residency at the Appalachian Environmental Art Center in Highlands, North Carolina, where Pinky took pin-hole double exposure photographs of Kitty with roots, branches, and other natural forms superimposed onto her body.

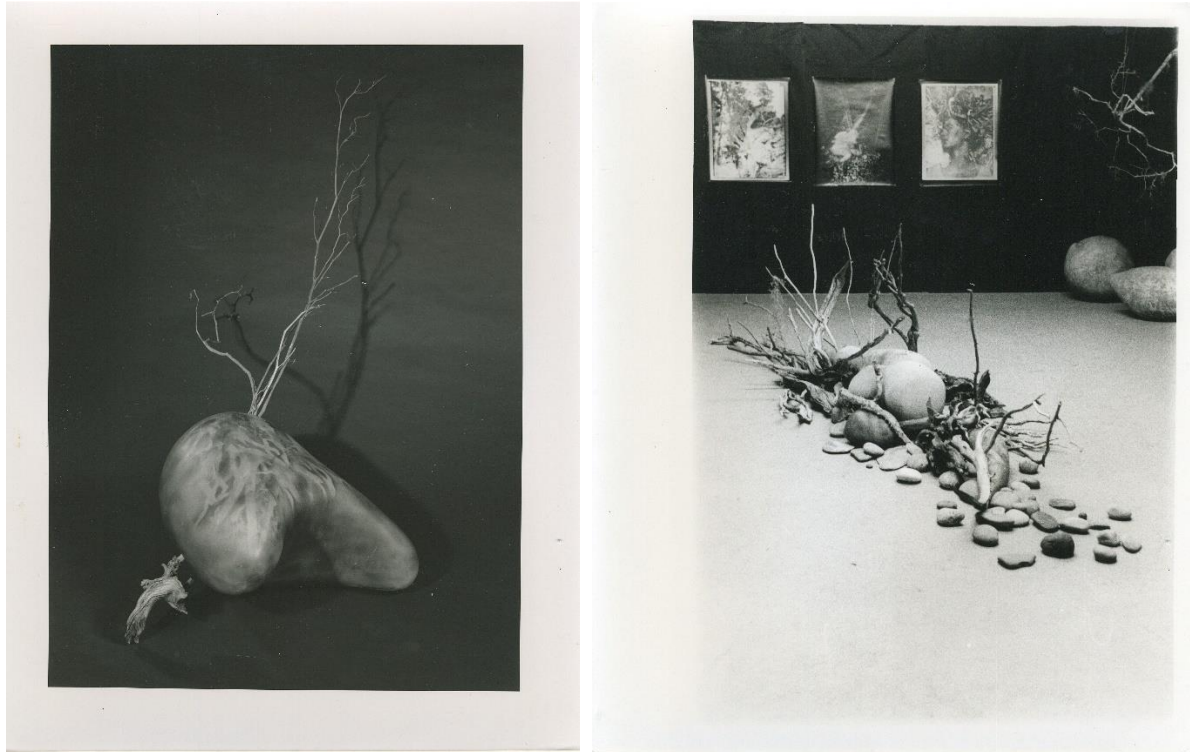
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<sup>102</sup> Pinky Bass, transcript 1 of 2.



*Figure 11: Pinhole double exposure photograph by Pinky, Kitty as model.*

This work became the basis for their first joint show in 1991, entitled ERDA: Birth of New Forms and held at The Light Factory in Charlotte, North Carolina. Erda, the earth goddess that appears in Wagner's *Das Rheingold* opera, which Pinky and Kitty frequently watched together, was the inspiration for the show's title. Kitty's works—large, softly round ceramic forms—were on the floor underneath Pinky's photographs, which hung on the wall. Pinky's photographic images, most of which were taken during the Highlands residency and in McClellenville, South Carolina during a trip with Kitty, had also been exposed on the surface of several of Kitty's ceramic pieces.



*Figure 12: Left: Kitty's ceramic form with Pinky's photography superimposed on the surface. Right: Pinky's photographs on walls, Kitty's ceramic forms on the ground. The show also incorporated branches and other forms from nature.*

The centerpiece of the show was a large Earth Mother form created by Kitty. The sculpture echoed a Madonna, placed in an altar with its clay arms encircling—not a baby, but a resurrection fern, a plant that will ‘come back to life’—turning from brown to green—with the addition of a little rainwater. Kitty maintained the piece throughout the show with the help of a watering can. She had first been introduced to the resurrection fern during a visit to Pinky’s hometown in Alabama, as Pinky told me in Fairhope August of 2015 as we walked together underneath trees dripping with its fronds. The Madonna also held round clay pieces, symbolizing the earth. This piece speaks to Kitty’s belief in the power of the natural world as being intertwined with the divine feminine and the power of motherhood. It also spoke to her understanding of birth and death as a cycle, with death as a natural phenomenon in which bodies



return to the earth. Similar themes would be reflected in “Big Mama”, one of the collaborative pieces described in the next section.



*Figure 13: Earth mother with resurrection fern; Pinky's photographs on walls.*

During and after working on “ERDA,” Pinky and Kitty discussed the nature of collaborative work. Both felt that while each had contributed work to “ERDA,” their work was



only “side by side”<sup>103</sup> or “clay here, and photography here”<sup>104</sup> as Kitty explained. The work was included in the same space and put in conversation—but it was not “collaboration” in the sense that the pieces had been created together. The years spent working and thinking together set the stage for the idea to pursue “true collaboration.” As Pinky wrote in a catalogue for her 2010 Retrospective at the University of Alabama at Birmingham:

...we would take these images, and Kitty would use them to create these incredible hand-built forms that were taken from body parts. We did a number of shows together that would include my photographs and her works that would reflect what she had been seeing in the photographs. For us it was a collaboration, but it was her work and my work, and we decided that we had to do what we viewed as “true collaboration.”<sup>105</sup>

As Pinky and Kitty continued to exchange ideas about the qualities of artistic collaboration, Pinky saw an advertisement for an artist in residence program hosted by Headlands Center for the Arts. Headlands, a former military barracks with a beautifully renovated campus on the Marin Headlands in Northern California, was and is dedicated to facilitating a variety of artistic programs. The notice Pinky came across explained that artists in particular states could apply for three-month residencies if they received a matching grant from their state. While Alabama was not listed as an eligible state, North Carolina was. Kitty and Pinky began to seriously discuss jointly applying for the grant, with Kitty as the official applicant, with the intention of exploring “true collaboration.”

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<sup>103</sup> Pinky Bass, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>104</sup> Kitty Couch, “10 Bites of Enough.”

<sup>105</sup> Pinky Bass, “11: Pinky/MM Bass A Retrospective” catalog, January 2010.



*Figure 14: Kitty setting up for ERDA: Birth of New Forms.*

### *Chapter 3: Reaching the “3<sup>rd</sup> Thing”: Project and Exchange*



Figure 15: Pinky and Kitty inside "Collaboration Emerging" collaborative sculpture at Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina. Photograph by Jeff Goodman, 1992.

#### 3.1: Anxiety and Anticipation

*“[T]he moment that passes between posing a question and receiving a reply is marked by both risk and possibility: the risk of doubt and uncertainty, and the possibility of opening out to the other. Collaborative and participatory art practices move along this same trajectory, from self-assurance to the vulnerability of intersubjective exchange”*<sup>106</sup> –Art historian Grant Kester.

Kitty and Pinky used the phrase “true collaboration” to refer to a more in-depth form of collaborative practice than they had undertaken in the past. In this framework, working together

<sup>106</sup> Grant Kester, “Collaborative Practices in Environmental Art,” in *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories, and Theories in Collaborative Art*, 60-63, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008), 60.

constituted “true collaboration” only when the resultant works could not have been produced without both artists.<sup>107</sup> To make this possible, steadfast dedication to one’s personal artistic style would have to be sacrificed in order to allow full creative interaction with the other participant in the collaboration. This meant, as my title references, reaching a “third” stage, something beyond each individual. As Kitty wrote looking back on the collaboration, “I see Pinky and Kitty and a 3rd thing—collaboration.”<sup>108</sup> The concept of the “third” stage has resurfaced again and again during my research, in scholarly materials, primary texts, and oral interviews. Explaining the intention of his book about collaborative art, *The Third Hand*, art historian Charles Green writes:

I wanted to point to the alternate model of artistic collaboration in which the parts of the relationship merge to form something else in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts, in which the parts are not removable or replaceable because they do not combine as much as change. The collaboration itself exists as a distinct and distinctive entity... a Third Hand.<sup>109</sup>

The model of collaboration Green describes puts Kitty and Pinky’s “true collaboration” into sharper relief—Green’s “Third Hand” aligns with Kitty’s “3<sup>rd</sup> thing.” Such collaborations do not simply combine “hands” or labor, but seek a deeper form of exchange during which the approach of each individual is literally transformed through combination. As authors Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz assert in their introduction to *The Art of Free Cooperation*, “The event of *true collaboration* takes you to a place where you have not been before.”<sup>110</sup> Kitty and Pinky hoped to reach this unseen place in order to grow, each recognizing that they would have to be radically open to each other and to the project and process for this to be possible. “True collaboration,”

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<sup>107</sup> Pinky Bass, journal entry, December 5, 1991.

<sup>108</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Thurs am”).

<sup>109</sup> Charles Green, “The Second Self,” in *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories, And Conversation in Collaborative Art Practices*, 92-97, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008).

<sup>110</sup> Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz, “Collaboration on the Fence,” 9-26, in *The Art of Free Cooperation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2007), 16. Emphasis mine.

then, is paradoxical: an enhancement of the self through self-effacement, a greater knowing of self and other by moving beyond both entities.

The idea of collaborating in order to reach an unknown point was both enticing and frightening to the pair. As plans to pursue a “true collaboration” began to come to fruition, Kitty and Pinky shared differing levels of enthusiasm and anxiety about undertaking the project. Pinky felt acute indecision over whether to pursue it, while Kitty felt much more confident. The idea of going to Headlands, Pinky recalled, “pushed a panic button in me...I was so afraid I would lose my identity in that process...Kitty was much more like, ‘Yeah, let’s do this thing!’ and I was like, ‘I don’t know Kitty.’”<sup>111</sup> As already mentioned, Kitty had a strong, dominant personality. Pinky, on the other hand, described herself as being both less definitive than Kitty, and fiercely protective of her own voice after decades in a marriage where she felt her “self” was not valued. Pinky deliberated until finally “I think I was going up the hallway...goin’ to the studio space [at Kitty’s house in Burnsville]. And it was like, all of the sudden I thought: ‘I can do this. I can do it.’”<sup>112</sup>

When I visited her in Fairhope, Pinky showed me many of the journals she has kept throughout the years. The entry written after finding out that the pair had been awarded the grant from the North Carolina Arts Council illuminates her mixed feelings about the project:

Call from Kitty—We’re going to HEADLANDS!!! Knew all along—the energy was there. And receiving the grant is actually a confirmation of the concept of collaboration—Like I would never have been able to do this without Kitty (part of which is that I don’t live in NC—the other part is purely psychic or something) ‘Couldn’t have done “it” without the other person’ is top on my list of confirming that it’s a true collaboration—and the grant process itself has given me that affirmation. And adds to my discomfort! I’m finally getting around to admitting that some of the ideas and thoughts that have come from Kitty (or seem to represent her point of view) are becoming important to

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<sup>111</sup> Pinky Bass, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

me—it's like saying...that someone or something outside myself is designing my thoughts—GOD that makes me uncomfortable.<sup>113</sup>

Even as Pinky asserts that she “knew all along” that the project would move forward, her “discomfort” about the mechanics of collaborating is also evident. The very exchange of ideas and artistic influences between the pair that first inspired them to work together made Pinky uneasy, a perceived threat to what Irit Rogoff calls “the sovereignty of individual creation.”<sup>114</sup> Rogoff’s “sovereignty” illustrates the secure, contained core of energy that each woman’s artistic practice represented to her. Kitty’s daughter Kate noted that while Kitty ultimately struggled with the process she may have had less initial trepidation about the project simply because she did not fully think through the possible challenges: “I do think there was probably a bit of naiveté on mother’s part—the idea of it was beautiful, but traversing the minefields—the reality of it never entered her mind.”<sup>115</sup>

In spite and perhaps because of these anxieties, Kitty and Pinky wanted to proceed with collaboration because each saw working together as an avenue towards personal and artistic growth, a “next step” in their paths. In the big black filing cabinet still at Kitty’s house, I found five different versions of a Fellowship Narrative in which Kitty worked through the proposal for the project at Penland<sup>116</sup>—trying to broadly explain why she wanted to pursue collaboration. The drafts simultaneously demonstrate Kitty’s gut-level feeling about the relevance of collaboration to her own practice, and her own struggle to articulate why, precisely, she felt this way. Written in pencil on yellow lined paper, most of the sheets also include comments from Pinky written in black pen in the margins. Presumably penned during the pair’s stay at Headlands, the drafts are

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<sup>113</sup> Pinky Bass, journal entry, December 5, 1991. Emphases in original.

<sup>114</sup> Irit Rogoff, “Production Lines,” accessed on ten by ten blog, post published on February 2, 2012. <http://tenbyten2011.blogspot.com/2012/02/production-lines.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Katherine Breckheimer, transcript 1 of 1.

<sup>116</sup> The pair spent three months at Headlands in California immediately followed by three months in North Carolina, working at the Penland School of Crafts to execute a project conceived during their time on the West Coast.

conversational, like so many of my sources. In the margins of one page, Pinky demands something I wish I was able to ask of Kitty myself: “Convince me—what does collab. do for you & your art?”<sup>117</sup>

Based on these and other writings, it is clear that what Kitty did understand about why she wanted to collaborate was that it represented the unknown. In one version Kitty describes how her artistic work has “been involved in exploring the nature of first principles and the problems of ultimate reality”—when Pinky asks Kitty to “give ex.”, Kitty writes, “i.e. why are we here” “i.e. how and where are we going?”. Kitty notes that “the work must experience the unknown,” and that “it is imperative for my evolving development as artist to be able to work creatively with other people, situations, and the natural world.”<sup>118</sup> For Kitty, collaborative practice was linked with the questions about the meaning of life. She linked working collaboratively with other artists to working with life’s circumstances, her materials, and the environment, and felt compelled to move into a place of vulnerability and uncertainty.

### 3.2: Processes and Products

*“We do not get up, have coffee, and then collaborate. We have to acquire a set of tools, learn the art of collaboration that we can then apply whenever needed”*<sup>119</sup> —Gert Lovink and Trebor Scholz, editors of *The Art of Free Cooperation*.

*“Given a decision to collaborate, how do artists actually go about collaborating?”* —Art historian Holly Crawford.<sup>120</sup>

While the conversations before and after the physical work of the collaboration all centered on the anticipated or experienced process of collaborating, I have little source material

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<sup>117</sup> Pinky Bass comment on Kitty Couch’s undated Fellowship Narrative, draft 1 of 2.

<sup>118</sup> Kitty Couch, undated Fellowship Narrative, draft 1 of 2.

<sup>119</sup> Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz, “Collaboration on the Fence,” 24.

<sup>120</sup> Holly Crawford, “Introduction,” in *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories, And Conversations in Collaborative Art Practices*, ix-xii (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008), xii.

from the time of the collaboration itself. Of course, this is partly because Kitty and Pinky were together, so their conversations are not physically recorded as letter exchanges. However, it also seems that the immersive intensity of working together meant that processing the experience while in the midst of it proved difficult. Debriefing the project seems to have taken place largely before and after the central six months of working together. Therefore, by necessity this section is largely descriptive, examining what projects the pair experimented with and which merging of mediums and ideas ultimately felt like true collaboration.<sup>121</sup>

Three products came of Pinky and Kitty's six months of working together in the summer and fall of 1992. The first series of pieces, entitled *Clay Bodies*, represented the most explicit 'mixture' of the mediums of clay and photography. Kitty describes the process the pair developed, in a draft for a show catalogue:

The nine long panels... were created by mixing fired clay particles with liquid photographic emulsion which was then applied to a spun fabric [tobacco cloth]. The surface was then exposed using a modified slide projector and processing was done in large buckets. The clay photographs were then washed and stretched to dry. By projecting slides from nature on the panels, once again one is reminded of the figure in landscape.<sup>122</sup>

The images are incredible: soft body forms emerge as you look at the pieces, which are at once caked, mud-like, and as delicate as silk. In our interview, Pinky told me that she ultimately felt that this project was more 'hers' (Pinky's). In other words, it did not feel like true collaboration. Indeed, the image is recognizable as one of Pinky's—her style is clearly discernible. In this case, a remarkably effective merging of medium did not mean a merging of artistic style or vision.

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<sup>121</sup> It is also largely written from Pinky's perspective, as her oral testimony makes up the bulk of the information I have access to from this period.

<sup>122</sup> Kitty Couch, undated "Clay Bodies—Vulnerable Wills" show catalogue draft.





*Figure 16: Clay bodies, number 4.*

According to Pinky, the next project the pair undertook was the only one that felt like a “true collaboration”: a series of photographs that would come to be entitled “Foreshadowed Faces.” As Pinky explains:

I had taken a photograph of Kitty’s face...it was a black and white photograph—and put it up on the wall and then we began projecting images of things in the Headlands area that we’d taken photographs of...dead and dying flowers...marine life...natural forms, and things. And then, re-photographing that completely so that we were making a color photograph.<sup>123</sup>

These photographs ultimately felt like true collaboration, because “the images are not anything I would have ever done. And I don’t think she would’ve ever done ‘em. ...and we liked [the images].”<sup>124</sup> The photographs, while including themes that both of the women were interested in, such as the aging body form and cycles of death and regeneration, are completely distinct than either of their usual styles.

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<sup>123</sup> Pinky Bass, transcript 1 of 1.

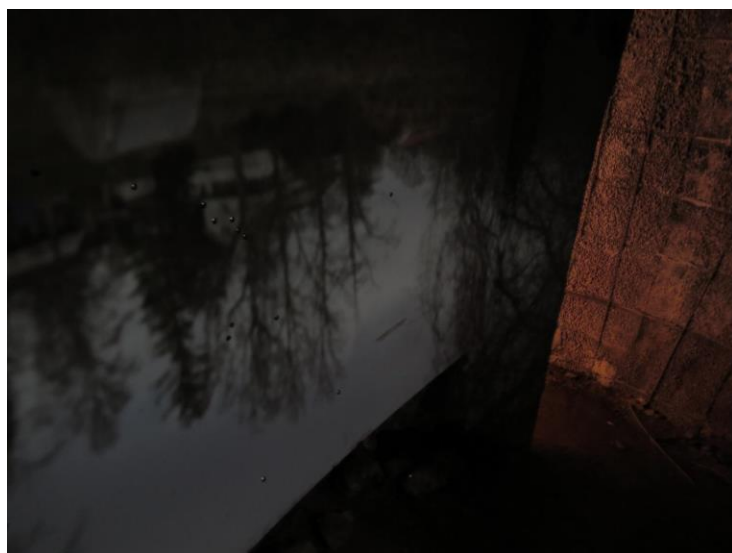
<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 17: One of Kitty and Pinky's Foreshadowed Faces.*

The final piece that came from the collaboration was a huge sculptural form, largely planned at Headlands but built in North Carolina, at the Penland School of Crafts, over the course of three months after they returned from the West Coast. The women stayed at Kitty's house and drove the fifteen minutes to Penland each day. Kitty had a preexisting relationship with the School, where she had both taught and attended workshops. The fact that the pair was working from and on Kitty's 'home base' heightened Pinky's sense that the project, executed mostly in Kitty's preferred medium, was being driven primarily by Kitty (and therefore not a "true collaboration"). Officially entitled "Collaboration Emerging," it was also known as "Big Mama." Set on a hillside on Penland's beautiful campus, the sculpture is an enormous belly, two breasts, and a thigh, each of these a discrete form emerging from the ground. The belly or womb looks like one of Kitty's round forms blown up, and has a "navel" set into it that acts as a pinhole

camera, reflecting the outside landscape upside down on the inner wall. The visitor walks inside in a spiral, and there are casts of Kitty's body tacked on the walls.



*Figure 18: Inside of Collaboration Emerging: a white board has been installed to reflect the pinhole images more clearly. The natural landscape is projected upside down and moves like a television image. Emily Talbot, November 2015.*



*Figure 19: Inside of Collaboration Emerging: plaster casts of Kitty's body attached to the walls. Emily Talbot, November 2015.*



Building Big Mama was incredibly labor intensive, as the two women readied the ground, moved stones, bent the wire frame, applied stucco and lath, and many other physically demanding tasks. By the end of construction, Pinky felt that the process had completely gotten away from her. The opening of the piece was a ceremony that seemed to exemplify this. As Pinky recalls:

[Kitty] had ...[a dancer] dancing all around, and she had flags lining the field so that people could see the wind blowing 'em, and she had to make...four different natural teas that she served to people that came to this event...And drummers who sat inside and played drums while people came in—I mean it was just—and I was exhausted because of like carrying all these stones and building! I mean, we had to plant things—I mean it really just was so out of control.<sup>125</sup>



Figure 20: My image of some of Pinky's journal pages from this period. Big Mama in progress. Invitation to the opening.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

I recently visited Big Mama for the first time, in November 2015. As with many of Kitty's pieces, this was not intended necessarily to be maintained or to last beyond a certain point in time—both women imagined that it would gradually disintegrate and fall back into the earth. However, as a testament to the incredible amount of work poured into the project, it is still in nearly perfect condition. It has become more incorporated into the natural landscape, grasses and shrubs encircling and entangling it.



*Figure 21: Collaboration Emerging, 23 years later. The breasts and thigh form are hidden in the brambles, but all four elements of the structure are still intact. Photograph by Emily Talbot, November 2015*

Reflecting on these three collaborative art pieces, I realized with interest that the Foreshadowed Faces are the least compelling to me as a viewer. It is not that I do not find the images beautiful, but rather that after becoming familiar with both Pinky and Kitty's large body

of work, these color photographs feel untethered, almost “random.” The success of the collaboration—that neither woman’s style is readable—undermines my ability to fully enjoy these art pieces. I miss the warm, earthy physicality of Kitty’s work, and the bright colors feel jarring after Pinky’s soft black and white images. As discussed in the previous section, each woman felt her work to be representative of her internal self. Pinky has said that her work has been described as “intensely personal,”<sup>126</sup> and Kitty asserted that her work was about “the soul part of me.”<sup>127</sup> If not driven by either woman’s ‘self,’ what does a piece of work created jointly even mean? How is readable? Can this “third thing,” a piece set apart from either’s usual styles, stand alone as a single piece? Need an entirely new artistic language be devised in order to allow a viewer to read and enjoy the pieces in context?

In later writings and in our interviews, Pinky stated that she left the project feeling “devastated.”<sup>128</sup> As she had feared, she felt that she had lost her artistic voice in the process. This apparently ‘unhappy ending’ to the pair’s collaboration was what most struck me in first discussing the project with Pinky. However, as Kitty and Pinky’s exchanges after the project will demonstrate, their experiences were far from being exclusively negative. Overall, while working on these pieces together was at times profoundly unsettling and even frightening, both felt that the effort had also been productive and educational. Their complex and contradictory emotional responses interrupt a dichotomous understanding of collaboration as being necessarily ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful,’ and challenge any notion of collaboration as coming naturally or easily.

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<sup>126</sup> Pinky Bass, “11: Pinky/MM Bass A Retrospective” catalog.

<sup>127</sup> Kitty Couch, “Ten Bites of Enough.”

<sup>128</sup> Pinky Bass, “11: Pinky/MM Bass A Retrospective” catalog.

### 3.3: Exchange

*“[Being] in your skin—we did it and I am glad, but it takes its toll”*<sup>129</sup> –Kitty, letter to Pinky following collaboration.

Kitty and Pinky corresponded at length following the project, as a way of both processing their personal experiences and working through issues that had arisen in their relationship. Each woman had different weak spots: Pinky was concerned about losing her sense of identity, and Kitty’s fear of dependence and vulnerability meant that honest exchange about such an intimate experience conjured an uncomfortable sense of rejection. Their letters mark a shift in who feels more in control of the situation—while Pinky is clear about what she struggled with during the project, Kitty is tentative and anxious in response to Pinky’s dissatisfaction. As Kitty writes, “naturally I enjoy hearing about how you saw our experience—I do not think the same old problem was evident in our crossing letters—you seem to see yourself from a strong ego stance and I seem to see myself from a weak ego stance.”<sup>130</sup> Pinky gave me the bulk the letters that she and Kitty had exchanged in the months following their collaboration, written during late 1992 and early 1993.<sup>131</sup> I have chosen to include these letters—honest and challenging but at all times loving and sincere—in its near entirety. I have commented on them little here, with the bulk of my analysis in the next section, and have arranged them by conversational thread rather than strict chronological order for the sake of clarity.

Several weeks after returning to Georgia from North Carolina,<sup>132</sup> Pinky wrote a letter to Kitty, reflecting on the emotional aftermath of her experience collaborating. She linked the

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<sup>129</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Thurs am”).

<sup>130</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Mon am”).

<sup>131</sup> Unfortunately, the letters themselves are not dated, but I have been able to establish a sense of chronology based on the content.

<sup>132</sup> Again, unfortunately none of the letters I received are dated. Some have a day of the week listed, usually in abbreviated form (i.e. “Mon. A.M. letter”), which is how I distinguish them in my citations (these days are not intended to necessarily indicate days in the same week or weeks, but are merely included as “titles” from the documents that I have).



feeling that she had lost her ‘self’ to her experiences of her first marriage, in which she had felt unable to maintain a sense of autonomous identity.<sup>133</sup> She wrote:

Kitty dear heart—I need to try to write out some of the ‘stuff’ that I’ve been processing since we completed our project in Penland, particularly since we’re talking future collaboration projects—what has become increasingly clear to me is that I feel like I’m back where I was before I learned some things in relation to [my ex-husband], i.e. I’m having to relearn what I thought I’d already gotten straight in my psyche—somehow in the whole collaborative process ‘I’ got lost. At this point I’m not exactly sure what that means or how I could have kept it from happening but the reality is that words like ‘dependency,’ ‘feeling trapped,’ ‘fear’ (of causing pain? Of being hurt? Of loss of independence? Of loss of ‘integrity’?), ‘withdrawal’ and ‘protection’ keep coming up for me—as I’m sure you remember my sense of being a non-person was ‘right there’ on our first day in California.<sup>134</sup>

Although unclear on what specifically caused Pinky’s “‘I’” to “[get] lost,” the intimate intensity of the collaboration undermined her sense of who she was as an individual, leaving her unsure of how to approach future collaborative projects.

In Kitty’s response to this letter, she described her initial reaction as being a sense of hurt, rejection, and “a feeling of failure on my part not to have made it better for you.” Kitty attributed this sense of “failure” to the “little girl in me,” or the most vulnerable, instinctive, and immature part of her emotional self. She wrote:

dear friend Pink—I have read your letter about collaboration and loss of self over several times now, and the parts of me seem to be falling into a verbal place so I can respond

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<sup>133</sup> The comparison of collaboration to marriage or romance came up throughout my research. Jeff Goodman, a media professor at Appalachian State University and close friend of both Kitty and Pinky’s, observed:

I mean I keep coming back to this idea of romantic love... you give up something of yourself and... your union is informed by who you are as an individual but it’s like a different organism... I mean [my wife] Margo and I talk about this all the time about how... there’s... Jeff and there’s Margo and then there’s... the organism of marriage and you—ideally, if you can get there—you try to do what’s healthy for the organism. But the organism’s like a separate thing... and... sometimes what’s healthy for the organism kind of pisses off the individual. (Jeff Goodman, interview by Mary Talbot, January 20, 2016, transcript 1 of 1).

Jeff’s explanation of collaborative projects existing as a “different organism” circles back to Kitty and Pinky’s “3<sup>rd</sup> thing,” and his description of responding to the needs of the organism before oneself concretely illustrates the mechanisms of an attempted “true collaboration.” Comparing collaboration to marriage also illuminates why Pinky and Kitty may have both struggled so much with it. After only a few years of having full, independent autonomy, working intimately with another person in many ways acted as a return to the demanding nature of a relationship they had not engaged in for several years.

<sup>134</sup> Pinky Bass, undated letter to Kitty Couch, (“Sun am”).

which I wish to do even tho it was not a must for you—my overwhelming reaction to it is sadness and compassion for you—the little girl in me was having a feeling of failure on my part not to have made it better for you, yet i know where that is coming from and tho it is a part of me i cannot allow and do not allow that a big place in the scheme of things—I do understand the feelings you expressed, for being a human being and having lived as long as i have i recognize old friends—fear, inadequacy, being too dependent and all the dark places. They are very real and important to me so I can in some measure appreciate the result of a feeling of loss of connection to your ‘self’ and I agree one does need to be aware of these places and make choices accordingly. ...I can honestly say I did not know how unhappy you were—I knew something was not zinging, but I did not know how deep and painful—i guess you did not know yourself—I was shocked when you said you were homesick, not meaning place but for yourself. I now know—one thing that I can say I learned from my experience in Cortona—that when I walk thru those mysterious doors that open up, it is deeply painful yet deeply energizing and exciting and that is where i place our collaboration—I would rather have loved and lost than not to have loved at all—but i did not have your experience—I do hope the future is easier and that you are beginning to pull your own skin back on—for I care deeply—I love you for sharing—K.C.<sup>135</sup>

In the above letter, Kitty explained her feeling of failure as being a misplaced or reactive insecurity in herself, and characterized her experience collaborating as being largely positive. In later letters, she would bring a more critical eye to her own role in the collaboration, examining what specifically she may have done to make it a difficult experience for Pinky.

Kitty wrote to Pinky again, describing how an experience in which she realized that none of her children would make it home for Christmas helped shed light on her emotional state during the collaboration. She wrote:

“the ‘little girl’ in me experienced deep rejection at that moment [when I realized my children could not make it home for the holidays,] but i did not act on the reaction but wept internally—by the next a.m. i was able to look at it, honor their space and mine also and decide to deal with directly—but then i had to look at the intense feeling about where dependence and independence came from—somehow, I saw myself as a ‘little girl’ using my relationship with my mother to get what i wanted—I played on her own guilt and compassion and need to please her ‘little girl’ to manipulate [her]. If i unconsciously did that to you this summer, I am truly sorry—the extreme independence in me wishes to take care of myself and to not admit i need people. ... I was very grateful to recognize where all the energy came from so i can make a more reasonable choice about my position. I do not know if this makes sense to you, but it surely does to me—it is always

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<sup>135</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Sat am”).

painful [for] me to make such discoveries yet the rewards outweigh the pain—Hope all is well there ...”<sup>136</sup>

In the above passage, Kitty attempts to make sense of her role in the emotional life of the collaboration, asserting that her own anxieties and insecurities may have caused her to “[manipulate]” Pinky throughout the project. This letter and several others lead me to the interpretation that Kitty, unable to “admit” to herself through the project how much she was relying on Pinky’s support and acceptance, heavily leaned on Pinky to maintain enthusiastic engagement without realizing she was doing so. In a third letter, Kitty wrote: “Woke last week thinking ‘I have lost my playmate’ and then next came ‘I killed her’—my feeling, judgmental self was too much for her gentle nature—I don’t know what this means really yet it was strong and stayed with me.”<sup>137</sup> This graphic, alarming, and cryptic sensation further illuminates Kitty’s guilt and insecurity about her role in the collaborative process.

In response to Kitty’s letters, Pinky further clarified her feelings and the role she took on during the collaboration:

Some of your words do not ring true for me— ‘unhappy’ was not how I would describe the experience, the feelings I was having—it was more of being unplugged from my energy source, hungry for getting back to myself, in a place of grief over loss (all of which you may have meant by the word—it’s just one of ‘those words’ for me)—Also when you were identifying with my feelings (fear, dependency, etc.) You mentioned inadequacy. Not sure where that came from but that was not a part of my experience—in fact if anything it was the frustration of not being recognized or acknowledged for what I consider to be my ‘above-average-adequacy’—I’ve come to the conclusion that a lot of what set up the dynamic for my loss was the set of circumstances and then my added projection onto them. In reality I spent six months as your ‘dependent’—living off ‘your’ grant, in ‘your’ territory (NC), in your house—Being committed to our collaboration and its successful completion I took on the job of protecting your ‘little girl,’ trying to see things from your point of view, trying to think your thoughts before you or plug in to where I thought you were, etc., etc., etc. To keep from rocking the boat, having it all ‘blow.’

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<sup>136</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Mon am”).

<sup>137</sup> Kitty, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Saturday am”).

Anyway, the whole experience conspired to punch all of my buttons—not sure I’ll ever be able to de-brief it all (don’t ever want to, really) nor will I be able to figure out what could have been done differently to avoid my experience (given who we are, what we were exploring, etc.) Having shared what we have and, given my need to keep pushing edges, I would hope we might find new directions, new parameters, new levels for collaboration. I’m afraid my both/and violitale (SP?) nature will always be a part of the mix (a valued part for me) but the process will need new forms to work for me.<sup>138</sup>

In the above letter, Pinky asserts that far from feeling “inadequate” during the collaboration—a feeling that Kitty may have been feeling herself and projecting onto Pinky—she felt that she was being taken for granted, “not... recognized or acknowledged for what I consider my ‘above-average-adequacy.’” She also describes taking on a caretaker role, mediating the experience with Kitty so that things would proceed smoothly even when she, Pinky, did not feel happy with the way their partnership was going.

Kitty’s next letter included a strongly negative response against Pinky’s description of taking on a caretaker stance, perhaps because this undermined Kitty’s own perception of her role in their collaboration. Rather than a dynamic of equal partnership, the pattern both women described was one in which Pinky increasingly accommodated Kitty’s desires in the collaboration, especially once they began working from Kitty’s “territory.” Kitty wrote:

... what i do not want in the collaboration and cannot agree to is... you with a ‘taking care of stance’ to do that deprives me of the very thing I covet the most—a peer relationship and if that is the only way you can view me in collaboration than I cannot do it. that attitude towards me is demeaning and sets up a dishonest atmosphere—how can one work in a space where honesty is not the first priority—I do appreciate your being able to finally know it and share what you know. I do not want anyone other than myself taking care of me, but I do covet a sharing of responsibilities as i feel you must believe in also. Maybe your propensity for taking care of and my propensity of wishing to be mothered is more than we both can handle. I wish my life to be in better balance—not embracing my known weakness so totally—not such an either-or place. ... Keeping a jump ahead of my thoughts and needs you can see why this is an uncomfortable spot for me—I took what you did in all honesty and at face value honoring it as the way you need to operate. and at times it was a terrible strain to give up so much of my autonomy, but we did it. I too looked for a return to myself as you must realize—I

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<sup>138</sup> Pinky Bass, undated and untitled letter to Kitty Couch, (begins “multi-thanks for your good long letter”).

think this is a part of the fallout and the price paid for the excitement and relearning of relationship.”<sup>139</sup>

This exchange illuminates how, for both women, collaboration pulled at their weakest spots: for Pinky, a tendency to acquiesce at the expense of herself, for Kitty, a neediness that went unacknowledged and took too much out of her partner.

This remarkably honest, self-critical, and open dialogue also addressed positive outcomes of the project, both women ultimately describing it a difficult but meaningful experience. As Kitty’s first letter noted, “when I walk thru those mysterious doors that open up, it is deeply painful yet deeply energizing and exciting and that is where i place our collaboration.”<sup>140</sup> Pinky considers her experience in a similar light, describing her complex relationship to vulnerability and openness as something she both “fear[s]” and “value[s]”. She wrote:

Dear Kitty, Multi-thanks for your good long letter—I find it interesting that my urge is not to write in my journal through all this but to write (talk) to you—one of the things I’ve always valued about our relationship is that that kind of dialogue opens new doors, new ways for me to move into the ‘mystery’—which is exactly what the whole collaboration (exploration) was about for me. It was (still is) a place of fear for me because of my past patterns which result in my loss of self (or whatever)—I’ve spent a lot of ‘thinking time’ wondering what could have been done to keep that loss from happening (and maybe there is a solution to that although I haven’t ‘seen’ it yet)—but I’m not sure that’s the issue—The point is that, given my ‘problem,’ my point of brokenness & non-integration, I chose & will continue to choose to move into spaces where the potential for that exists, not to ‘cure myself’ or fix anything but so that I can see it for itself, call its name on the spot, be more in touch, ‘honest,’ with myself in owning the whole business within myself. My tendency to lose myself in collaboration is actually something I value as it is what makes it possible for me to collaborate in the sense that I’ve talked about all along, not just on the surface ala ‘separate but equal’ stance. It’s part & parcel of the ‘both/and’ me—To eliminate the potential for ‘loss of self’ within myself would be destructive to true collaboration as I see it.<sup>141</sup>

Pinky describes the collaboration as an opportunity to deepen her understanding of her tendency to lose herself through an intense willingness to be vulnerable. Loss of this openness, she asserts,

<sup>139</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Weds am”).

<sup>140</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Sat am”).

<sup>141</sup> Pinky Bass, undated and letter to Kitty Couch, (begins “multi-thanks for your good long letter”).

“would be destructive to true collaboration as I see it,” evoking the tenuous balance between self and other that emerges in profoundly intimate relationships. In the same letter, Pinky elaborates on the ““successful”” elements of the collaboration. She wrote that she considered the

Headlands experience to be highly ‘successful’ on many levels—our project was to explore collaboration and take it beyond our previous experience (of collaborating primarily on the installation rather than on the work itself)—(#1) we truly explored collaboration and pushed it beyond where we had been before—between us (#2) We succeeded in producing Collaboration Emerging which was truly a step beyond Erda (for me ‘Emerging’ is the key on lots of levels since it moved beyond where we’d been and had not yet arrived at that ‘purity’ of ‘true collaboration’ –which in fact may be no more than a philosophical ideal that I can only see clearly at this point as coming about when we die and are re-united with the ‘whatever’) (#3) the Flower Faces (wish we had a better group title for these—Any ideas?) for me they moved into an experience unlike anything we’ve done before—where we struggled with a ‘new’ aesthetic rather than making sure to hold on to something of ourselves, when we were Making sure our individual ‘stuff’ got included—(#4) and for me the personal experience of moving in that unknown space, being able to trust that my loss of self is neither permanent nor fundamental and that I can (and will) reclaim that part of myself when—well, when I ‘can’—I think we did something GREAT!<sup>142</sup>

These letters do not neatly resolve every issue the pair faced, but form one stage of an ongoing conversation surrounding collaborative work and intimate relationships. Kitty and Pinky continued to speak about their project over the phone, in person, and through letters. They remained close friends and artistic partners, if never attempting quite such an intimate collaboration again. An extension of the collaborative process, these letters act as one avenue to work through many of the issues which made the experience so challenging for both of them, airing and clarifying certain disagreements and misunderstandings, and illuminating many of the complexities of their experiences.

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

## ***Chapter 4: Implications and Analysis of “True Collaboration”***

### 4.1: Collaboration, Female Bonding, and the Self

*“[B]y truly collaborating, and here I do not mean just the resultant works, but the energy, thoughts, anguish, hardship you struggle through in the planning and execution processes, you not only are able to retain yourself but expand whatever your self is beyond what it would ever have the potential of being on its own”<sup>143</sup> –Kitty’s friend Barbara Bloemink in a letter to Kitty.*

Although Kitty and Pinky struggled with anxiety over “loss of self” throughout the course of their collaboration, each also expressed that the project strengthened and fed both of their “selves.” During my work on this thesis, I have been struck by the concreteness with which both women characterized the “self”—as something contained, whole, or “sovereign.”<sup>144</sup> Their identity was something that had to be “found”—through art and through the freedom and privilege to pursue their own interests and wants—and therefore it was also something they felt could be “lost.” To an extent, their role as wives and mothers precluded full realization of who they were, while at the same time their whiteness, middle-class status, and heterosexuality made it easier for them to access the resources and space necessary to explore their identities. Their conceptualization of “self” sometimes seemed to rely on an unworkable binary: the self as either present or absent, a snugly whole or entirely unreachable. However, Kitty and Pinky’s letters ultimately offer a more fluid definition of the “self” in relation to the “other” (the friend, the partner, the intimate). Scholarship on female bonding from Radical Feminists Mary Daly, Janice Raymond, and Adrienne Rich articulated this concept for me. These authors emphasize that strong woman-to-woman relationships<sup>145</sup> can be both a move outwards, towards fellow women,

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<sup>143</sup> Barbara Bloemink, letter to Kitty about collaboration, September 30, 1992.

<sup>144</sup> The term Professor Collins used in our discussion of this understanding of the self, which I think of in relation to Rogoff’s “sovereignty of individual creation”—the idea being that self and art both exist as something permeable but discrete.

<sup>145</sup> Often, this refers explicitly to lesbian sexual relationships, but the work of each author also deliberately expands the category of strong female relationships to include all forms of female bonding. These authors, in keeping with their broader philosophies of radically separating from the patriarchy and envisioning new forms of existence for

can move towards a profound recognition of internal self. Of course, many examples from our own lives and from Kitty and Pinky's project make clear that intense friendships and partnerships are never easy, never *automatically* healthy, helpful, or positive. However, when I consider Kitty and Pinky's experiment, and Kitty's life as a whole, in relation to the work of Rich, Raymond, and Daly, what emerges is *potential*: the potential for female intimacy and collaborative work to be understood as a radical alternative to "self-sacrifice"—representing instead a simultaneously connective and self-expansive dialogue.

Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich both assert that stimulating, dynamic, and supportive female relationships foster creativity and intellectual growth. In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich emphasizes the importance of women orienting themselves towards other women. She expands the construct of lesbianism to a "lesbian continuum," a phrase indented "to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman."<sup>146</sup> Rich links "compulsory heterosexuality"—broadly, the deliberate disruption of meaningful female-to-female relationships through patriarchal control of women<sup>147</sup>—to "the social and economic disruption of women's creative aspirations."<sup>148</sup> In her 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly also addresses the generative power of relationships between women. She writes: "Furies spark new ideas, new

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women, saw woman/woman relationships as a path to autonomy, an intentional separation from emotional and financial dependence on men.

<sup>146</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence," in *Feminism and Sexuality*, 130-41, Jackson and Scott, 1996, 135-6.

Indeed, Kitty's children initially wondered whether Pinky and Kitty were having a romantic relationship. While this was not the case, it speaks to the emotional intensity of their friendship—so intensive, it seemed out of the ordinary, and was therefore presumed to be sexual.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* 131.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* 132.



words, new images, new feelings, new life, New Be-ing. This is the Fire of biophilic Self-finding.”<sup>149</sup> In Daly’s formation, it is the very offering of exchange—creative, emotional, intellectual—between oneself and another that leads to “Self-finding.” In Kitty and Pinky’s project, the intensity of the collaborative back-and-forth inspired remarkable self-reflection, a greater knowing of their internal lives through the sharing of these discoveries with each other.

Raymond and Daly both describe female partnerships as potential acts of *self* affirmation, understanding, and growth. In her 1986 book *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection*, Raymond asserts that in a “woman-hating” society stratified by brutal patriarchal divisions,<sup>150</sup> turning towards other women with affection also represents an act of self-love.<sup>151</sup> She terms her concept of woman-for-woman caring “Gyn/affection,” which “connotes the passion that women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement toward other women.”<sup>152</sup> Significantly, in Raymond’s formation, movement inwards, towards the self, and outwards, towards one’s female friends, is simultaneous and cyclical. Utilizing the work of American philosopher Jesse Glenn Gray, Mary Daly observes that the most salient distinction between female friendship and male comradeship is that one affirms the self while the other attempts to assimilate it. Daly quotes Gray: “While comradeship wants to break down the walls of self, friendship *seeks to expand*

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<sup>149</sup> For our purposes “Furies” are women—although Daly uses this and terms like “Crones” and “Hags” specifically to women she considers empowered. Interestingly, Kitty had a group of older lady friends in the mountains that called themselves the “Crones”—a delightful celebration of their age, womanhood, and friendship.

Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 370.

<sup>150</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Raymond draws on Daly in the use of the term “dismembering.”

<sup>152</sup> Raymond writes: “The dismembering of female friendship is initially the dismembering of the woman-identified Self. ...women who do not love their Selves cannot love others like their Selves.” (*Ibid.*, 7-8.). Not only does a patriarchal society limit one’s ability to love one’s self, but it limits one’s ability to have a sense of oneself at all—as we have seen, self-protective impulses often form obstacles to intimacy.

*these walls and keep them intact.*”<sup>153</sup> Gray’s description allows that friendship can foster growth (“expand” the self) without undermining selfhood (preserving the “walls of self”). In Kitty and Pinky’s project, although Pinky felt she had lost a connection to herself, she and Kitty both also expressed a deepened self-knowledge. In their letter exchange, the women wrote to each other and while also writing to themselves: the act of writing, like the act of creating art, was an externalization of their internal life which both illuminated and shifted that life.

Of course, in some senses the suggestion that intimacy can act as an inherent affirmation of self is far too simple. Daly, Raymond, and Rich all acknowledge the difficulty of female friendships in a world that undervalues women. Differences in power, temperament, circumstance, and history makes intimate friendships and collaborations challenging, and certainly not always productive or healthy for either self or other. For people marginalized to any degree, claiming a sense of personal identity is a tenuous achievement which can make opening up feel like a threat. As Kitty wrote of her experience collaboration, “It is as tho the uniqueness that one sees as themselves is in danger of being gobbled up.”<sup>154</sup> However, at its best “female friendship...is radically Self-affirming” (369), an opening out in order to find oneself which I consider a hallmark of Kitty’s life.

#### 4.2: Political and Historical Context

*“If art is understood as an expression of autonomy and unity (the unity of authorial intention and of the work itself as a semantic construct), then any concession to contingency and multiplicity will be perceived as a transgression”*<sup>155</sup> –Art historian Grant Kester.

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<sup>153</sup> J. Glenn Gray, quoted in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 380. Emphasis mine.

<sup>154</sup> Kitty Couch, “Script for slideshow exploring aging and death,” undated.

<sup>155</sup> Grant Kester, “Introduction” in *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 1-18, (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

In this section I provide a brief contextualization of artistic collaboration's history in order to consider Kitty and Pinky's project in relation to other collaborative works. As already mentioned, Kitty and Pinky understood their collaboration in relation to themselves as individual artists, viewing it as an opportunity to foster personal and artistic growth. However, their work, through its acknowledgement of interdependence as opposed to individualism, its emphasis on circumstance and process as opposed to inherent ability and product, and its implicit links to the Feminist Art Movement and other socially engaged art movements, situates them in political dialogue with a long history of artists and activists.

In some ways, the history of art cannot be divorced from that of collaboration: endless iterations of guilds, assistantships, architectural teams and the like have existed since artistic production itself.<sup>156</sup> However, many art historians assert that collaboration as a deliberate strategy of artistic process, or a "form of conscious partnership,"<sup>157</sup> is relatively recent, emerging first in the 1960s with the shift from modernism to postmodernism and the Feminist Art movement,<sup>158</sup> reemerging in the 1990s,<sup>159</sup> and firmly established as a core practice in contemporary art.<sup>160</sup> Prior to the 1960s, collaboration in art was usually anomalous, born out of

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<sup>156</sup> Crawford, "Introduction," ix.

Maria Lind, "Complications; On Collaboration, Agency and Contemporary Art," accessed online, 53-73. <http://public.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/public/article/viewFile/30385/27912>. 53.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>158</sup> See *Ibid.*, 53 and:

Rogoff, "Production Lines."

Kester, *The One and the Many*, 4.

Charles Green, "Introduction: Collaboration as Symptom," in *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*, ix-xvii (Sydney: A UNS Press Book, 2001), x.

Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, 10-29, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 10.

<sup>159</sup> Lind, "Complications; On Collaboration, Agency and Contemporary Art," 54.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Kester, *The One and the Many*.

Crawford, "Introduction" ix-x.

extreme conditions, like the traumatic, isolating forces of war,<sup>161</sup> or through the explicitly political intention of challenging artistic identity itself, seeking to “critique notions of the individual subject,”<sup>162</sup> and “[dismantle]... the artistic personality.”<sup>163</sup> The work of artistic collectives has also often overtly addressed social themes.<sup>164</sup>

The Feminist Art movement adopted collaboration as a central tenet, embracing it as an anti-individualistic way to produce highly visible social justice pieces. In her 1988 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” feminist art historian and critic Linda Nochlin challenges the notion of the singular artistic genius which she identifies as a founding myth of Western art historical practice. As she writes:

Behind the most sophisticated investigations of great artists—more specifically, the art-historical monograph, which accepts the notion of the great artist as primary, and the social and institutional structures within which he lived and worked as mere secondary ‘influences’ or ‘background’—lurks the golden-nugget theory of genius and the free-enterprise conception of individual achievement. On this basis, women’s lack of major achievement in art may be formulated as a syllogism: If women had the golden nugget of artistic genius then it would reveal itself. But it has never revealed itself. O.E.D. Women do not have the golden nugget theory of artistic genius (Nochlin).

In other words, the genius framework does not allow space for the notion that historical and cultural sexist oppression, rather than an imagined lack of ability, have impacted women artists’ achievements. Within the genius model, collaboration is a dilution or taint. Within the feminist art movement, collaborative work mirrored the collective experience of consciousness raising groups. Taking the personal as political, collaborative art work benefitted from the inclusion of

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<sup>161</sup> See: Horace Brockington, “Creative Occupation: Collaborative Artistic Practices in Europe 1937-1943,” in *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories, and Conversations in Collaborative Art Practices*, 27-59, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008).

<sup>162</sup> Nina Zimmer, “Concepts of Collaborative Art in the Divided Germany of the 1960s,” in *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories, and Conversations in Collaborative Art Practices*, 64-75, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008).

<sup>163</sup> Kester, “Collaborative Practices in Environmental Art,” 60-61.

<sup>164</sup> For example, the Feminist Art Movement takes collaboration as a central tenet. Grant Kester describes the role of collective work in environmental activist art. Kester, “Collaborative Practices in Environmental Art.”

many women's voices and experiences.<sup>165</sup> Feminist collaborations ranged from works such as Miriam Schapiro's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), created with a large team of assistants,<sup>166</sup> to massive public demonstrations such as the 1978 *Take Back the Night* rallies,<sup>167</sup> to collectives such as the Guerilla Girls, a group of women who created posters to protest racism and sexism.<sup>168</sup>

The collaborative model also presents a challenge to the competition, egoism, and individualism that characterizes a capitalist and meritocratic societal model, offering a new understanding of the creative process. In *The Art of Free Cooperation*, authors Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz assert that collaboration acts as a force actively working against competition:

We hereby declare Darwin dead. History, human interaction, and communication does not only get done through the survival of the fittest! We don't buy that for a second. The topic of collaboration is also related to Adam Smith and the strange historical trajectory that suspects that things get done through competition. ... We suggest a radical criticism of competitiveness! And despite all the suspect corporate interest in the topic, we ask if we don't progress more richly through free cooperation.<sup>169</sup>

Lind notes that artistic collaboration can act as "an alternative to the individualism that dominates the art world."<sup>170</sup> In her own writing, Kitty disparaged the idea of competition having a place in artistic practice—which she saw as a "sacred" space of personal growth. As she wrote in notes for a 1988 talk, "Children in our world—every subject introduced uses competition to motivate—I challenge you in this most scared area [of creating art] to allow—not to teach—self-

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<sup>165</sup> Judith E. Stein, "Collaboration," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 226-245, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 226.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 229-230.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 233.

Many political collectives have created pieces that rely on mass participation—a large number of bodies coming together to form a temporary, unpredictable, and impossible-to-ignore demonstration.

<sup>168</sup> Phelan, "Survey," 42.

<sup>169</sup> Lovink and Scholz, "Collaboration on the Fence," 24.

<sup>170</sup> Lind, "Complications; On Collaboration, Agency and Contemporary Art," 53.

esteem and self reliance are born here”<sup>171</sup> For Kitty, then, a rejection of competition acts as an avenue to foster creativity and imagine a richer form of artistic practice. As Rogoff observes,

within the history and theory of visual culture, we have traditionally developed only the most limited theories of artistic production while allowing market values to construct an extensive series of legitimating narratives that masquerade as a set of canonical masterworks and the superior aesthetic values they represent.<sup>172</sup>

This passage illuminates how market forces have driven the standards that determine good art from bad, undermining many viable forms of artistic production. Collaborative practice interrupts and contests this framework as it validates forms of artistic production that do not rely exclusively on individualistic competition.

Kitty and Pinky’s collaboration is an imperfect case study—or simply an incomplete one, as all case studies inherently are to describe a large phenomenon—because they were two women working together that came from similar societal categories. While issues of personality and circumstance did play into the power dynamic of the collaboration itself, both women were white, Southern, middle to upper-middle class, heterosexual, and highly educated. Questions of input, manipulation, and intimacy become more complex in collaborations and partnerships that seek to work across power differentials—something which I do not address here. As Rogoff writes, the conventional understanding of collaboration is “exceedingly limited. It assumes a coming together of talents and skills which cross-fertilize one another through simple processes, neither challenged by issues of difference nor by issues of resistance.”<sup>173</sup>

At the end of a collaboratively written essay in *The Power of Feminist Art* entitled “Social Protest: Racism and Sexism,” authors Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth address their

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<sup>171</sup> Kitty Couch, “notes on talk to N.C. Arts Alliance, 5/10/88.”

<sup>172</sup> Rogoff, “Production Lines.”

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences working together to write a piece which interrupts white-washed, male-dominated histories of art. They write:

Neither one of us alone could have written this essay. Separately, our backgrounds, training, networks, and knowledge would have led us on different paths. As we pooled information, skills, and contacts, something more happened. During the process of our intense three-month collaboration as we researched and talked endlessly, we developed a *third voice* and we feel that we have written in this voice. Partly as a result of our own fruitful experiences, we would advocate collaboration between women of different ethnic backgrounds as one suitable mode for addressing the urgent task of studying this history of women artists afresh without prioritizing Euro-American artists and theoretical frameworks. Issues of sexual orientation and class must be equally prioritized in this much-needed revisionist history. Then, and only then, will we be able to make more productive coalitions, alliances, and collaborations among women of different backgrounds so that we can protest even more effectively on all necessary fronts (my emphasis; *Power of Feminist Art* 157).

López and Roth assert that by combining their style, knowledge, and experiences, a more complete essay emerged than either would have been able to write on her own, and advocate for collaboration as a means to enhance collective struggle for justice. As with questions of self and other discussed in section 4.1, I believe that while there is nothing *inherently* productive about collaborations across race, gender, and class lines, such partnerships have potential: in this case for fostering empathy, understanding, and an enriched body of art work.

#### 4.3: Impacts of Collaboration on Kitty's Life and Work

*"I think it had to do with death, all of it, I really do"*<sup>174</sup>—*Jessie, one of Kitty's daughters, on the big questions that most preoccupied Kitty.*

Following the pair's project, Pinky spent six months in Oaxaca, Mexico, hosting various artist friends—including Kitty—for several weeks at a time. Intended as a less intensive form of collaboration, the Oaxaca project allowed each artist to focus on their own work while still

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<sup>174</sup> Jessie Brinkley, transcript 1 of 1.

benefitting from the stimulating company of fellow artists. For Pinky, it was an act of self-repair. As she said in an article for *Agnes Scott Alumnae Magazine* about the project, “I came here to discover—rediscover—my voice.”<sup>175</sup> She told me in our interview that during the trip she created works in which she stitched photographic “pieces” of her body back together—a way of recreating and re-gluing herself.<sup>176</sup> Embroidery on photography is a technique Pinky still uses.



*Figure 22: Pinky in Oaxaca, sifting through prints, looking at an image of Kitty taken in Cortona. Photograph by Paul Obregon for Agnes Scott Alumnae Magazine, Fall 1994. Page 21.*

<sup>175</sup> Pinky Bass, in “A Cultural Immersion” by Celeste Pennington, *Agnes Scott Alumnae Magazine*, 18-25, Fall 1994, 22.

<sup>176</sup> Pinky Bass, transcript 1 of 1.



Kitty moved forward from the Headlands-Penland collaboration with an increased interest in themes of aging and death, incorporating these concepts into her artwork as a way of working through the fear and fascination they held for her. Of the work on *Foreshadowed Faces*, Kitty observed that:

In doing all that photographing of my body, I started to notice that my body was—was getting older. And it's not noticing it—it's noticing with my attention, that I'm talking about. I had a choice here of whether to let it—to kind of keep that back here, or whether to bring it up and here and look at it. And I saw these flapping arms and the varicose veins which I've really got a lot of 'em...and then I also saw the bags under my eyes—I've got multiple layers, which I've had for years, but I hadn't let myself think about it. Well all of this had a lot of energy for me, to look at my body this way and to be present to my body.<sup>177</sup>

For Kitty, a recognition of her aging body meant that “Once again, there was a confrontation with questions of mortality and fear of death. It was at that time that I made a commitment to honesty and truth, welcoming into my house the quest of aging and my fear of death.”<sup>178</sup>

Kitty's “commitment to honesty and truth” was born of her deeply held belief in the creative potential of engaging with the unknown and her increasing dedication to facing her anxieties. Kitty applied for and was awarded a grant from the Readers Digest/Lila B. Wallace Foundation to explore cultural attitudes surrounding aging in death both in the United States—where she traveled up and down the East Coast “observing cultural markers relating to death”<sup>179</sup> in graveyards and other burial sites—and in Ecuador, where she traveled in 1994 to interview Ecuadorian villagers of over 100 years of age. During this period she decided to make and “place my own coil built grave marker in the family graveyard in South Carolina.”<sup>180</sup> Kitty made the grave marker for both herself and Cooch, and also created the urn for the ashes of both Flo's

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<sup>177</sup> Kitty Couch, “10 Bites of Enough.”

<sup>178</sup> Kitty Couch, “Script for slideshow exploring aging and death,” undated.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

mother and her first husband Tommy. For Kitty, death was something to be worked through physically, in her work.



*Figure 23: Kitty made the grave markers for both herself and her husband.*

Kitty believed that people did not spend enough time thinking through death. As she said: “We are in a fear space in our culture and the reason I think that is because we are rushing around doing things to keep ourselves from thinking about the big issues and the biggest issue that man confronts is his mortality.”<sup>181</sup> For Kitty, facing the inevitability of death and aging represented a larger goal:

For me my path is about learning to be more and more honest with myself, and I think this was such a biggie for me because of the fear of death—in fact I think this what keeps us—that big question of, eternal question of death and what happens is what keeps us being—started the whole process of being dishonest with ourselves, you see? Because we’re scared and we don’t wanna—we’re kinda keeping ourselves busy. And I think it all comes about because we don’t know the mystery we’re all headin’ for.<sup>182</sup>

Incorporating deeply held fears into her work was an act of honesty—Kitty’s work was a place where the trivialities of daily life were quieted and bigger questions came to the surface.

<sup>181</sup> Kitty Couch, “10 Bites of Enough.”

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

Feminist artist Miriam Schapiro came to a similar conclusion about her artistic work in relationship to death. She wrote:

We arrange our days to avoid thinking about death. Each day is a space we must fill, to avoid the empty hour, the experience of being alone with difficult thoughts. When I go into the studio, that white-walled room, I am alone. I have made the decision that I will confront my devil's thoughts. I must listen to the voices within, stop confusing life with mere activity.<sup>183</sup>

The last ten years of Kitty's life can be understood along these lines: she actively faced her "devil's thoughts," and "the voices within." Collaboration and intimacy with those around her also fell into this category. It was during the last ten years of her life that she became increasingly interested in Buddhism, even joining a Sangah meditation and discussion group which was eventually hosted at her house. Despite her deeply independent spirit, she joined a group that welcomed in the discomfort of disagreements and discussion and opened her spiritual practice, something which had always been an intensely personal pursuit, to allow interchanges with others. Kitty's struggle with dependency on others is fundamentally connected to her anxiety surrounding aging and death. Aging would mean sacrificing the lifestyle which relied almost wholly on her own efforts, would mean moving into a place of forced dependence on those around her. Kitty described her own efforts in this respect well:

I had given [the members of a] class [at Penland] an assignment to do their greatest fear, and after about four days of this, I realized that my greatest fear was loving people. Now—I've done a lot of thinking about that and I'm trying different ways of bringing that, and I think I have to realize that that is about not only outward things—which I am doing, I'm giving myself more chances in the community, but also that's about an inward thing too—of being more—don't be afraid to be vulnerable, on an even deeper level than I've been before. So I'm thinking that I'm acting it out—this commitment to... being connected to my world—and then someone else not long ago gave me another idea which was it's not only about people, it's about being open to nature—to whatever happens... and it's not about being alone! It's about opening yourself up, or out, to whatever happens. I think that's really what I'm talking about."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Schapiro, "Notes from a Conversation on Art, Feminism, and Work," 303.

<sup>184</sup> Kitty Couch, "10 Bites of Enough."

## *Conclusion*

C.1: “Re-united with the ‘whatever’”<sup>185</sup>

*“Who could know our mother and not think—not be tempted to believe—that she would simply live forever—not because we loved her more than the others in our lives...but, rather, the puzzle—how does that much life end?”*<sup>186</sup> —My mother, Adeline Couch Talbot, notes for Kitty’s memorial service, January 2004.

On Kitty’s eighty-second birthday, December 27, 2004, she boarded a plane in Charlotte with a close friend from the Buddhist Sangah, Janey Zietlow of Celo, North Carolina. The pair had planned a trip to China by way of northern Vietnam after an old friend of Janey’s had invited her to visit him in the Hunnan Province in China, where he then lived. They intended their adventure as part sightseeing trip, part spiritual journey—the friends meditated each day and were thrilled to explore Buddhist temples and culture. In response to my questions, Janey wrote a beautiful piece about the days that she and Kitty spent together on the trip. I include almost all of Janey’s statement in this section, as I consider her willingness to share these memories in such vivid detail a true gift to my family.

After three flights, Janey and Kitty arrived in Hanoi. Janey writes that they

had booked a room in an old colonial hotel in the artisan’s quarter of Hanoi. Our room was very spacious with high ceilings and louvered French door that led out to a balcony. Each morning we went to the dining room where we had breakfast which consisted of a huge table of fruits, vegetables, seafood, breads and of course rice congee.<sup>187</sup>

They meditated in their room in the mornings, and

During the days, we walked and walked, ate delicious Vietnamese food, and explored the city... Our favorite street, the street of the Buddhas was lined with shops filled with every kind of Buddha you could imagine, including an extra fat red plastic reclining Buddha wound up in colored Xmas tree lights. We visited Buddhist temples and sat in meditation with little old Vietnamese ladies whose teeth were red from chewing betel nuts. In one

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<sup>185</sup> An expression used by Pinky in the pair’s letter exchange following collaboration.

Pinky Bass, undated and letter to Kitty Couch, (begins “multi-thanks for your good long letter”).

<sup>186</sup> Adeline Talbot, unpublished notes for Kitty’s memorial service, January 2004.

<sup>187</sup> Janey Zietlow, emailed statement to Mary Talbot, February 29, 2016. I have edited all of Janey’s text for typos only. As she wrote in her email to me, “This is a rough draft. Once I got started, all kinds of thoughts and memories opened up for me.”

temple, we burned joss sticks, given to us by a young Vietnamese man who was part of the weekly prison meditation group that Kitty and I attended back home.

...

On New Year's Eve, we lay in our beds, French doors open to the balcony where the celebratory sounds of the New Year wafted in on the evening breeze. We had had a wonderful dinner earlier, and although we were both tired, we stayed up late, sharing stories of our lives, our husbands and children and the spiritual path which had emerged between us as a deep bond a few years before when she joined the weekly meditation group which I led" (Janey).

The following day, they set off for the next part of their trip, a "three-day journey, two half days of driving [with a hired driver and interpreter/guide], and two nights and days [in the Halong Bay] on a small junk...a strange Asian boat that looked like something out of a fairy tale." The Halong Bay, a World Heritage Site, is stunning and otherworldly: enormous, columnar islands of rock jut from deep green water. As Janey wrote,

We disembarked at an area of vast caves where US POW's had been imprisoned during the war. That night we had the most amazing 7 course seafood dinner that I had ever had. We sat with our guide and the guide from another group and talked politics into the night.

Kitty didn't feel well the next morning and thought maybe she was coming down with something, but she rallied and came to the last lunch before we disembarked.

We were met at the dock by our driver with whom we had been very friendly during the four-hour drive from Hanoi to Halong Bay. We both thought he had been drinking, but it didn't occur to either of us to postpone the drive back to Hanoi. We were to leave for China the next day. We were both a bit nervous as we started the... [drive]. The rutted three lane dirt road was swarming with cars, trucks, bicycles, motor bikes and wooden carts pulled by donkeys. There seemed to be no traffic rules and our driver was going fast, passing and changing lanes as he moved in and out of the traffic. Kitty and I laughed about how we had less anxiety when we didn't look, although something did move me to look up just as we were aiming head on for a large van. We were in the farthest lane to the right, moving against the traffic. We were both in the back seat with our seatbelts on, I was behind the driver. I remember how quiet it was after the impact. I remember it seemed like time stopped as I looked around the car and saw the other three, slumped over, unconscious. I couldn't breathe—it turned out I had a punctured lung. ... I managed to get out of the car and throw myself onto the ground where I was surrounded by an excited crowd of people looking down at me as they jabbered in Vietnamese. We were moved into a station wagon, Kitty in the backseat and I on the corrugated metal floor in the back with the bleeding driver thrown in beside me. We drove 45 minutes on a bumpy road to a clinic where we were moved on stretchers into the waiting room. Talking was difficult because I couldn't get my breath. At some point, I managed to gasp out, "Kitty, How are you? She replied that she thought her leg was broken. I thought I

was dying. I couldn't move without terrible pain and I was gasping for air. At some point, I experienced what seemed like the most terrible pain I had ever felt. I imagined that boiling oil was being poured into my stomach cavity. Later I would learn that my intestines were punctured, in several places. That moment must have been the leakage of the highly acidic bile into the hypersensitive peritoneal cavity. I think I cried out, and Kitty spoke my name in a voice so calm and full of love that it seemed the voice of an angel. I am still blessed with the audible memory of Kitty saying my name with so much love and tenderness. It was the last time I ever heard her voice.

I remember as I lay there, thinking that death would be a relief, the faces of my granddaughters filled my mind and a knowing that it wasn't my time. At the same time it came to me that Kitty might be dying. I did the only thing I knew to do, a practice I had learned from a Tibetan Dzochon teacher. I breathed her to the light. What does that mean? I simply did the breathing exercise and visualization as I had been taught. It was as if there was no question of believing or not, it was what to do and I did it—or it did me. "I" wasn't there. Kitty's voice sounded so calm and quiet. I don't think she was afraid, and tend to think she wasn't suffering, as I heard no moans from her.

I had no idea it was goodbye when I was moved into another room where I was intubated. The US embassy in Hanoi was contacted and two German doctors flew by helicopter to the clinic where they performed surgery on my punctured intestines opening me up from breast to pubic bone. I also had five broken ribs and a broken collar bone.

Two days later when I was told at the clinic that they were moving me to a hospital in Hanoi, they said that Kitty would be coming with me. They told me that Kitty had said we shouldn't be separated. I remember thinking in my drugged post-operative stupor that I was so glad that Kitty was taking care of things because I didn't seem to be able to think. I felt like my mind was being controlled like a TV remote, with the channels being continuously changed. Later, I realized that according to the records, Kitty died soon after we arrived at the clinic which was what I thought even though she was silent.

I didn't learn that Kitty had died until I woke up in a hospital in Hanoi three days later. I was still so drugged with morphine that I could barely take in the information.

After two days in Hanoi, I was moved to a hospital in Bangkok where I stayed for a month. Kitty's daughters elected to not have an autopsy, so we never knew exactly what had killed her. She was cremated in Hanoi and her ashes sent home to her family (Janey email).

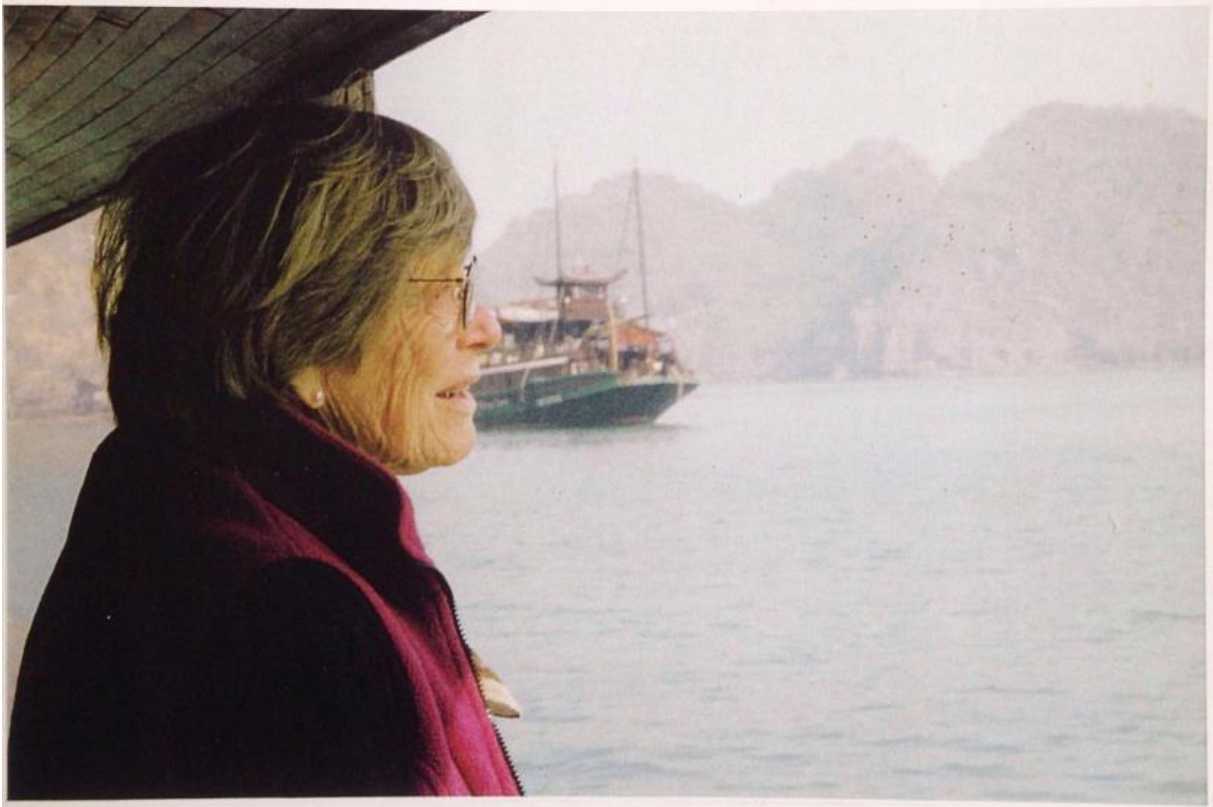


Figure 24: Kitty in the Halong Bay on the morning of her death.

## C.2: “When I Walk Thru Those Mysterious Doors”<sup>188</sup>

*“This being human is a guest house. / Every morning a new arrival. / A joy, a depression, a meanness, / some momentary awareness comes / As an unexpected visitor. / ... Be grateful for whoever comes, / because each has been sent / as a guide from beyond.” –Excerpt from Rumi’s poem “The Guest House.” According to her friend Paulus, this was Kitty’s favorite poem.*

During a visit to Santa Fe, New Mexico in January, 2016, my cousin Emily and I decided to drive an hour and a half north to Ghost Ranch, a former dude ranch now owned by the Presbyterian Church, and famously depicted by the painter Georgia O’Keeffe. I wanted to visit the place where my Grandmother and Pinky had spent cumulative months camping in the summers, Kitty pinching pots from clay out of the back of her van and Pinky photographing Kitty’s body against the rosy canyon walls, the natural forms of twisted roots, creek rocks. On

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<sup>188</sup> Kitty Couch, undated letter to Pinky Bass, (“Sat am”).

our way out the door, my mom called to tell me that our dog, Bodhi, named for the Bodhisattva and inherited from Kitty twelve years earlier, had to be put down that day. My parents had to put the dog down because he wasn't smiling anymore, he couldn't stand up without a hoist to his skeletal frame, and—the ultimate indignity to everyone involved—he was going to the bathroom on himself—poignantly—without even seeming to notice.

Em and I stopped at Abiquiu Lake, an enormous mineral green reservoir off of highway 84. The wind off the water was so raw it chapped our faces—we wrapped our scarves around our heads like *abuelitas*, Em said, to keep out the excess air that wormed inside our collars and under our hats. My eyes were also stinging from my tears over my sweet old dog. We skipped flat crumbly rocks on the water freezing hands. Then we drove on, to Ghost Ranch.

As we wound through the beautiful high desert landscape, craggy hills covered in snow, cacti, low scrub, and red rock formations, I realized that the day we had chosen to visit—January 30<sup>th</sup>—fell exactly between Kitty's birth date, December 27<sup>th</sup>, and her death date, January 3<sup>rd</sup>. This year would have marked Kitty's 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. We turned in at Ghost Ranch, a vista stretching towards stunning white mountains behind us, red rock walls in front of us. I relished imagining Kitty behind the wheel of her eggplant colored minivan, Pinky in the passenger seat as they drove this same driveway, the lift that would have occurred inside them as they made this familiar passage after weeks on the road, both probably whooping with laughter. In my orange backpack was a new notebook with Kitty's favorite poem copied out and a sheet of computer paper with a grainy printout of Kitty at Cottonwood Campground in Big Bend in Texas, pinching a pot.

As we walked into the welcome center I caught a glimpse of the gift shop, cotton T-shirts with Ghost Ranch's white cow skull logo—a flash to Kitty wearing one, oversized, a bandana



tied around her neck like a girl guide, pearl necklace on as ever. I bought one at the end of the visit. I wanted to wear her clothes, trace her steps. We looked at the map of Ghost Ranch's facilities—little cabins and a campground, a dining hall and family center, all part of the Presbyterian retreat center it is today—each trailhead marked on the map with a number and a corresponding description. Em and I had planned to leave the picture I had brought on the property somewhere, and read the poem I had transcribed. Looking at the sheet I saw a listing for a *Camposanto*—a wall of remembrance for people who had loved Ghost Ranch. We walked down a snow-packed path towards a curving red canyon wall, smoothly scooped out in places, shaped by eons of water and wind. At the base of this incredible formation was the *Camposanto*, a semicircular adobe wall with plaques facing outwards toward the distant Northern New Mexico mountains.

I placed my picture of Kitty on the wall, weighting the top edge with a large stone. My sheet of paper would be spotted by water and disintegrate within days, but I knew Kitty would have preferred this to a metal plaque secured with screws—the tombstones she had made for herself and Cooch were formed from clay, and for Kitty clay meant impermanence, an inevitable return to the earth from whence it came. I read a poem—Rumi's *The Guest House*, and Em and I left for a walk down Box Canyon Trail. It was snowing lightly as we crisscrossed the small creek that ran through the slot canyon, partially frozen and covered in snow.

Later, I sobbed in the late afternoon light walking back to the car, my hiking boots heavy with melted snow and rich red sandy muddy clay, my cousin's hand pinching the back of my neck reassuringly. Bodhi dog was in heaven, and even if my grandmother was still alive she wouldn't live forever—we were here to celebrate her would-be birthday, her would-be 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. The fact that Kitty would have eventually died without the intervention of a freak

accident has always felt unbelievable to me. Myself and many people I spoke with imagine Kitty as she was when she died—a remarkably spry, sharp, and strong 82-year-old woman. This year, watched the dog that had been a puppy when she died approach the end of his life, I thought of Kitty, who would have been aging, too.

I have many uncertainties associated with Kitty’s would-be relationship to this project—my language, my exposure of her, and the narrative I have used to characterize her life. In the midst of all of these doubts, I feel certain that Kitty would not be offended if she knew I was comparing her to our aged family dog. In fact, the recognition that her own body would have aged, and the acknowledgment of her as a physical being like any other on earth, seems to be one of the most open responses I have been able to muster to the work that she was trying to do—one of the comparisons that most speaks to her style and intellectual framework.

Many people have expressed to me that Kitty’s early death may have been a blessing for her. It cut short an aging process that would have been deeply frustrating for a woman with Kitty’s lifestyle, someone who had expressed deep anxiety about losing her faculties, losing her mind. I too felt this way for a long time. However, I now wonder if we do Kitty a disservice to entertain the idea that she would not have met this challenge with grace. Her goal in the last decade of her life was to make peace with vulnerability, invite in uncertainty, and engage honestly and openly with the aging process. The opportunity for this final stage of growth was denied her by the abruptness of her early death. I, too was denied an opportunity for growth, denied the complicated nature of an adult relationship with Kitty. My heart aches thinking about the fun that we would have had together, but I also sometimes think uncomfortably of the turns our grown-up relationship may have taken. The woman who was my perfect grandmother when I was nine years old would have become someone else, someone flawed—as she has been through

the years since her death, and through the writing of this thesis. However, I think working through a real relationship with her is a challenge I would have been ready for.

This was the year of Kitty. Pictures of her work covered the wall to the left of my desk, photographs of her on a board that I faced while I worked. I carried a rock from Ghost Ranch to her house in North Carolina, just as she drove dung for firings from Texas to the Appalachians. I bought a pencil cactus after Paulus told me that the enormous plant on his porch was a clipping of Kitty's—was Kitty, to him. I lived this project out, I walked it out, I talked it out, I told people on planes about it (twice). It was a physical pilgrimage. In many ways, I have had to live this project through to its conclusion to believe that Kitty wouldn't return at the end of it. For the bittersweet truth is that despite feeling closer to her, the physical, emotional connection that I crave most of all feels even more distant than when I began. That type of closeness is a place I will never reach. I cannot hug her or smell her perfume, we still cannot sit at the wooden table and talk.

I began this piece writing about my dreams of Kitty. It is unlike me to think about dreams—I do not typically remember them, or grant them much significance. But it seems appropriate that she would come to me in dreams, since her own were of crucial importance to her. Whenever she appears, my awareness that the reunion is temporary is acute, but the urgency with which my dream self always greets Kitty is never met with a similar sense of urgency on her part—she is always serene, aware of the brevity of her visit but undisturbed by it. I find myself dwelling on a dream I had last night. Kitty appeared in the midst of an unrelated scene, middle aged and cheerful, and I clung to her arm and asked her not to go. She smiled calmly, and eventually moved on. This coolness speaks to the relationship to death Kitty increasingly cultivated. While not immune to fear, for Kitty it was all one big exploration.

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