

BEN MALTZ GALLERY

REPORT
OF THE
WOMAN'S RIGHTS
CONVENTION.

THE MORAL MUSEUM

SELECTIONS FROM THE BICK ARCHIVE

JANUARY 20 – MARCH 31, 2007

OTIS Otis College of Art and Design

THE MORAL MUSEUM

SELECTIONS FROM THE BICK ARCHIVE

JANUARY 20 – MARCH 31, 2007

The Moral Museum: Selections from the Bick Archive, is a multi-media installation by Cindy Smith. This project, a fictive historical exhibition, began as a critical examination of Frank Capra's classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and ends as a compelling personal reflection on the history of the Women's Rights movement in America. Smith interpolated the picaresque adventures of "naughty girl" Violet Bick, a minor character in the film portrayed by Gloria Grahame, beyond the scope of the film and invented a life history for Violet as a prominent designer, feminist, and social reformer.

Smith's inspiration for the Bick Archive was the discovery that Capra's filmic town of Bedford Falls was modeled after Seneca Falls in New York, the birthplace of Women's Rights. Smith chose Violet because of her restless ambition to leave her hometown and see the world. After all, Violet is the only character, other than the protagonist George Bailey played by Jimmy Stewart, who talks about escaping the confines of Bedford Falls. Violet is the perfect vehicle for Smith to craft a strong feminist intervention into this beloved American tale.

Smith's extended alternate reality to Capra's celluloid Violet manifests itself as an "archive" filled with memorabilia, photographs, and relics from her Violet's adventuresome life. As you would expect in a display illustrating the life of an historical figure, the installation is riddled with mementos from a bygone era that Smith has painstakingly made, collected, or altered. Some objects, like the *Daredevil Cap*, make direct reference to *It's a Wonderful Life*. Smith re-created a version of the cap the kids wore in the scene where George saves his little brother Harry from drowning after breaking through the ice. Other items like the banners refer to Violet's participation in the Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice.

As we learn from the timeline presented in the Bick Archive, Violet's relatives and contemporaries are all radicals.





1963
 Violet visits Grace at the end of her junior year in College and joins her in a protest nearby at the Seneca Army Depot near Seneca Falls where she was born. Her daughter and others gathered to protest nuclear weapons and to critique the "patriarchal society" that created and used those weapons.
 Violet brings a hand-sewn banner. While there she is fascinated by the albino deer herd within the fenced depot and takes many photographs.
 64 women are arrested during this protest against the storing of nuclear weapons at the Seneca Army Depot in upstate New York. The protest was organized by the Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice in the Finger Lakes area.



1. Violet Bick entering office in Empire State Building, 1949, photographer unknown
2. New Home Sewing Machine, 1902, given to Violet Bick by her mother
3. Bick Archive Timeline: 1983 panel with photographs of the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment

4. Bick Archive display case contains: "4 Jills in a Jeep"; original Vi-Style Buttons circa 1950; two original drawings of interior designs for Macy's department store, 1966
5. Royal typewriter and case, 1946
6. Martie Novobatzky, Still from "A Conversation," 2007
7. Bick Archive display case contains memorabilia, including the cap worn by members of the "Secret Daredevil Club," 1935

Her lineage includes a filial relationship to Charlotte Woodward, a suffragette who attended the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848 at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, and who was the only attendee to live long enough to vote when the 19th Amendment became law in 1920. Violet was born on May 6, 1923 in Seneca Falls. At age 12 she instituted a secret daredevil club with her friends George and Harry Bailey. We follow Violet as she travels to Hollywood and is invited overseas to entertain the troops in 1942. This is the point in time, where Smith suggests Violet might have met Frank Capra, inspiring the director to "create" a character after her likeness for his upcoming movie with Jimmy Stewart.

In the 1950s Violet establishes her company Vi-Style and becomes a successful designer respected for her contributions to the fields of fashion and architecture. During this time, she befriends artists such as Meret Oppenheim and Marcel Duchamp. In 1962, she gives birth to her daughter Grace, who she raises as a single mother. Ten years later, she is arrested for protesting the Vietnam War and detained in New York City's Women's Detention Center. While incarcerated for this offense, she meets Angela Davis, Professor and former member of The Black Panthers, and Andrea Dworkin, author of

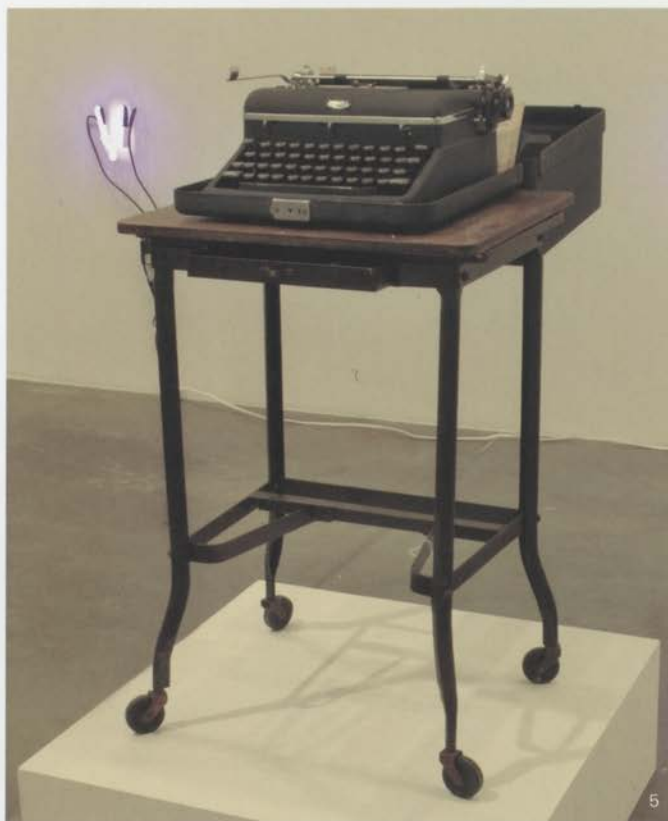
Woman Hating. She continues her activism by protesting nuclear proliferation and in the 1980s joins Act-Up to spread awareness of the AIDS pandemic. She dies in 1989 in New York at the age of 66.

Smith sees Violet as a female doppelganger to George Bailey. As an urban planner and manager of the Bailey Building and Loan, George provided micro loans to the poor and believed in affordable housing, a sense of community, and that people mattered more than money. In his own way, he shunned the establishment and was a grass roots reformer. In the hands of Smith, Violet Bick defies her odds and becomes a successful businesswoman in a time when it was nearly impossible for single women to receive credit from a bank or have their own checking accounts. As Capra molded his George into an "everyman" for his generation, Smith has shaped her "Violet" into the "modern everywoman" for hers.

Smith's historical and cinematic references operate on multiple layers of immediacy and subtlety. The capstone to *The Moral Museum* is her video, "A Conversation." This fictionalization is an accent to, not of, the Bick Archive and it offers an alternative entry into this multi-dimensional art project. This "contemporary documentary" styled film is an interview with director Martie Novobatzky, who has recently finished filming her remake of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Novobatzky recast the movie in present day Vermont with George as a woman. The director shares her struggles and decision making process, which in turn sheds light on how Smith made her decisions and historical associations while taking poetic license in producing the Bick Archive. Smith's interdisciplinary approach incorporates history, film, literature, art, philosophy, economics, politics, and cultural anthropology that spans generations, and gives us a critical and humorous interpretation of how one woman, whether fact or fiction, lived independently and touched so many lives.

—Meg Linton

Curator of the Exhibition and Director of the Ben Maltz Gallery



5



6



7

Cindy Smith has been making interdisciplinary, project-based work since the 1990s that explores the role of gender in American history and popular culture. She received her MA in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester in 1993 and completed The Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program in 1987. She has shown at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Wexner Center, White Columns, PS 1 Center for Contemporary Art, and The Irish Museum of Modern Art. She lives in Brooklyn, NY and South Windham, VT.



THANK YOU

Sarah Bernier, Grace Bick, Fran Caraccilo,
Brendan Carney, Cathy Clarke, Heather Craig,
Jennifa Crowell, Margaret Curtis, Liz Dalton,
DCTV, Victoria Fu, Maia Garrison, GNAT-TV,
Manchester, VT, Jules Heffner, Joseph Kosuth,
Elliot Long, Manhattan Neon, Steve McAdam,
Marc Meredith, Brett Milspaw, Sean O'Hagan and
the High Llamas, Otis Academic
Computing, Michael Pelias,
Lorie Dewhirst Porter,
Michael Pelias, Pam Quiggie,
Lucy Smith, Patricia Thornley,
Ashley Vellano, George Wichelns,
The Windham Hill Inn, West
Townshend, VT, Alex Tappas,
Haileluel Tekle



OTIS

Otis College of Art and Design

Ben Maltz Gallery

9045 Lincoln Boulevard

Los Angeles, CA 90045

310 665 6905, gallerinfo@otis.edu

www.otis.edu/benmaltzgallery

Meg Linton, Director of the Gallery and Public Programs

Jinger Heffner, Exhibitions Coordinator and Registrar

Kathy MacPherson, Gallery Manager and Outreach Coordinator

Trinidad Ruiz, Public Programs Coordinator

Diego Garza, Preparator

Caroline Walsh, Volunteer

Gallery Assistants: Chorroth Chhuon, Vince Harkiewicz, Robert Lepiz,

Ashley Montgomery, Evelyn Salmeron, Corey Thering, John Weston

Designer: Anne Swett

Printer: Ventura Printing

Photographer: Chris Warner