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Oral history interview with Claudia DeMonte, 1991 February 13- April 24

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Claudia DeMonte on February 13 & 27 and April 24, 1991. The interview took place in College Park, Maryland, and was conducted by Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: This is Liza Kirwin interviewing Claudia DeMonte for the Archives of American Art, February l3, l99l -- Ash Wednesday --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes!

LIZA KIRWIN: -- a day to think about your immortality and maybe a good day to reflect on the past. I thought we'd just lead off with a question about your childhood. What were some of your early memories?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I grew up in a very ethnic neighborhood in Queens called Astoria, where my mother still lives, which I love and am very proud of, and I grew up thinking I was rich. If I took you to where I grew up, you'd be shocked that I ever thought that, but we lived in this little apartment building next to an empty lot, next to a huge school building. No one spoke the same language. My grandparents came from Europe and everybody's grandparents there came from Europe and everybody was kind of aiming to become middle class -- Queens is very middle class.

I think my earliest memories, besides thinking that I was rich, which was really interesting to me, my parents were good parents, I had all my needs filled so I didn't want for anything, I had no concept there was any difference between me and the things I saw on television -- which is even funnier, you have to go on tour to see this. I remember that our neighbor had a station wagon with little stickers on it from having driven to Florida that said "south of the border" and I thought when I grew up I wanted to go to so many places that you wouldn't be able to see out the window of my car. We moved away from there when I was eight, six blocks away, so I know I was under eight when I thought that.

But I had a very warm ethnic family, good parents. My father was an insurance broker and active in politics, so he had some community respect. He was honorary mayor of Astoria, he later became a city councilman, but at that point I remember being very proud of him.

LIZA KIRWIN: Your mother -- was she actually "Miss Hub"?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, from Baltimore. She went out on every package from the Hub department store, and she even ran for Miss Maryland, she came in third. They were both very goodlooking people, which means nothing, actually that's a picture of my father. He was at Fort Meade, she was Miss Hub, and they got married and moved to Astoria. I had a heavy-duty Catholic education -

LIZA KIRWIN: Did your mother work or was she a housewife?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: She worked before she was married, as an assistant buyer at The Hub. She also represented Lentheric perfume when she first
moved to New York, I don't know if that still exists; they made Tweed and some other scents. But she stopped working after she got married. It's interesting: my father didn't really want her to work, it's a very odd thing to me. We weren't wealthy but it was that ethnic thing -- "my wife doesn't need to work" -- so she volunteered at the local Catholic school, after I was eight and my sister was born, in the neighborhood we then lived in, as a kindergarten assistant for years. She virtually taught every kid in the neighborhood. If you walked down the street with her l8-year-old kids would scream, "You were my kindergarten teacher!"
After my father died l7 years ago, she became very active in local politics, on the community board as vice chairman.

LIZA KIRWIN: Was it a very Italian upbringing?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I thought it was a very Italian upbringing but my mother is actually German from Baltimore but moving to the neighborhood made it all Italian. It was an ethnically diverse neighborhood, all white ethnically -- Polish Catholic and Ukrainian; it's all Greek now, in the 60s the whole neighborhood turned Greek. Which is very funny -- everybody looks the same, you know, black dresses, black stockings, hairy legs, a language change. But it was very Catholic, we had all the processions. I grew up eating all this "ethnic food" I didn't even know was delicacies until I moved to Washington and went to an Embassy party -- it was just what

the lady next door made. It was very rich culturally, the neighborhood. As a matter of fact the high school I went to in Queens they speak 25 languages today. They didn't speak that many then, it's the new ethnic hub of America; get off the plane and move in.

I went to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, The Mary Louis Academy, the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, and graduate school of Catholic University. When I applied for a job once someone asked me if I'd been a nun! First grade through graduate school a Catholic education. And I admired the quality of education I got. I got very serious education and it was the poor person's alternative to private schools. The public schools where I grew up were fairly rough.

LIZA KIRWIN: How do you think Catholicism formed your identity?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Oh, I think it did a lot. I did two years of work at the Shrine of St. Claudia, I made St. Claudia a saint, she's not a saint, she was blessed, and the nuns used to reprimand me at school and make me stand up because I wasn't named after a saint -- as if I had named myself! I actually did a whole show in Canada about St. Claudia. I made a shrine to her based on the giglio, the Italian word for lily, shrines that they carry in Brooklyn and Queens that come from Naples -- this huge thing that the people carry, they're 40 stories high, you pay to carry it to honor to suffer. And I made a small one to St. Claudia that the Brooklyn Museum owns now. I made all these altarpieces for St. Claudia. Oh no... tons of my stuff comes about being Catholic and the ritual around being Catholic and the colors of the shrines and the lavishness of benedictions, all those reliquary things. I love all that stuff.

LIZA KIRWIN: I read an article once about the Watts Towers and the connection somebody made between them and the Italian religious giglio -- they're shaped the very same way. Simon Rodia was Italian, so they made the connection between --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: When I was little I was taken to these feasts all the time and I loved those things and on the first level of them there was a full band, so these people's shoulders would bleed and you'd have to pay and it was a family tradition to be able to carry it. I loved this giant thing, they'd dance with it to the oom-pah-pah band, but I was afraid of it because it was so big and it would sway so much. They still do this in Brooklyn. A man who's an expert on this just contacted me -- Joseph Sciorra, who's doing a book on them. I'd heard of him and wrote him about my shrine to St. Claudia, which is based on it. He's very interested in Italian-American artists influenced by folk art.

LIZA KIRWIN: He may have read this article about Watts Towers --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I don't know. It's been a huge thing for me. I went to all the processions. I was the always the last kid because I was the tallest, so the priests were always behind me with the incense, I can smell it if I close my eyes. And we got reed for flowers for different occasions, the dyed daisies and the dyed -- Were you raised as a Catholic?

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: -- and the dyed carnations for different saints days. I crowned the Blessed Mother when I was in the eighth grade. Someone said because I was the only person who could reach --

LIZA KIRWIN: My name is Elizabeth Anne Seton Kirwin.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Claudia Anne Theresa DeMonte.

LIZA KIRWIN: I was named after Elizabeth Anne Seton who wasn't canonized until l974. She was just a Blessed, though, so I really had to hang in there. But the nuns all loved her because she started parochial education in this country. So they all had pictures of Elizabeth Anne Seton and everybody was praying for her to get canonized.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, Claudia wasn't so bad, she was Pontius Pilate's wife and she tried to convince him not to kill Christ. Isn't that interesting? She was supposed to be the first pagan to be Christianized, which somehow I find hard to believe but anyway, that's her deal.

LIZA KIRWIN: I understand the feeling you must have had being separated in that way. Do you think that has made your feel unique or original from a very early age?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The Catholic thing, the name thing?

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I think the height, more. I grew up in this ethnic neighborhood where everybody, including

my cousins, were about 5'2" and I'm 5'll" and I was this big at l4; I was only 5'8" at l3. Literally when I crowned the Blessed Mother the teachers who manned the schoolyard it was like a mass of short people and me. I think that did it more --a couple of things did it more. My family because of my father's achievements had gotten some respect even though we had no money, so people looked up to them a little bit, on a very modest scale, but they did, community, that kind of thing.

I was a giant and my parents really believed in education. You know, Italian Americans have the lowest rate of higher education of any white ethnic group in America. You'd have to leave out Latinos and African Americans, but my parents really pushed education as being big, which I think also separated me.
My high school, which was a good girls private high school in Jamaica, is college prep and everybody went to college from there but from the grade school very few people went on to college. The girls I grew up with on my block didn't go to college.

LIZA KIRWIN: You had only one sister?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. She's 34 and getting married three weeks from Friday, for the first time.

LIZA KIRWIN: In Astoria?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, my mother's still there.

LIZA KIRWIN: Well, it sounds as though you had an ideal suburban -

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, you know Astoria is eight blocks from the river in Queens, it's not "suburban suburban" but it's not Manhattan, you know? It's attached houses with little yards. But I did have a very close knit warm family, I was very lucky, I don't think I realized until I was an adult that not everybody had two parents who loved them, who lived together, who loved each other. They worked very hard to get ahead. My father had been abandoned -- do you want this story? It's a horrible story.

My grandfather, Antonio DeMonte, came from Italy in l903. He married Pasqualina Amend, which is some name, they don't know how it got spelled the way it was; they came from Alsace-Lorraine and Salerno, that couple. They had three children who were three, four and five when my grandmother died in l9l7 at the beginning of the influenza epidemic that killed half the country. My grandfather didn't know what to do with his three kids in the loss of his 27-year-old wife, besides naming his new dog after her -- which I love. He brought his sisters over from the Abruzzi, Italy, to take care of the kids. He moved away and left his sisters taking care of the kids; he went to seek fame and fortune in Texas of all places. When the kids were seven, eight and nine the sisters got bored with taking care of them. The kids came home from school one day and there was a note on the door: "We've moved to Cleveland." The kids were out on the street. So I come from as little as you can come from.

It was a different time, it's not like being homeless today, there were a lot of very poor people there and relatives would take the children in from time to time. But they had a horrendous life. Sometimes when I tell the story it makes me teary-eyed. My father was homeless. He always used to come in and make sure I was covered every morning and I didn't know why. He'd never had a blanket. My aunt had never had a doll. I gave her a doll for her 60th birthday; she'd never had a doll. And that wedding picture on that calendar is her wedding picture at l6, though she looks much older, this huge woman. And they all moved in with her when she got married.

Then my grandfather who'd disappeared appeared when he was 87 and had outlived his third wife and moved in with us with no guilt at all.

LIZA KIRWIN: So you grew up with extended family.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, not until the end. I was actually already in college. My sister was still at home when he moved in. So it was a strange family. My father had to work very hard to get out of that; he didn't want that, he wanted a real family, a warm family, so he made a real effort. I always think if I had come as far as my father came from being abandoned to being city Councilman, I would be king, because I came with a graduate education paid for by my parents. I could never have made that leap. I don't know if people can, any more, it was a different time.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you have much attraction to art in Manhattan? Did you go in and look at museums and galleries?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: To the Italian people art is very important so they took us to museums but almost always to the Metropolitan and Guggenheim. They didn't really think about contemporary stuff as much but we went to the Metropolitan regularly. We always listened to opera. All these things for people who didn't have a lot. My father had actually had heard Caruso, had standing room for Caruso when he was a child and was dragged there. These were people with no money. Occasionally an uncle would do something nice.

Yes, the arts were very important. And we used to watch all the shows that had something on art, the sculpture, and my father would sit there and get teary-eyed that art could do that, it was so beautiful, and there was great respect for the arts. My grandfather was an ornamental iron worker, so he used his hands. So that was never a problem, when I wanted to be an artist there was great support for that. A lot of my friends, their parents wanted them to get a "real" degree so they could earn money. My father thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world.

LIZA KIRWIN: How did you come to go to decide to go to Notre Dame in Baltimore?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: My parents had not been to college. I have cousins that actually have earned Ph.D.'s in Sanskrit and bizarre things but we weren't that close to them. In my immediate family nobody had been to college, so I didn't get much advice. I was at a Catholic high school -- and I wasn't a genius, by the way, I mean I did OK but I wasn't a star; also women weren't allowed -- it was a year after I graduated, I guess, that women could go to the better schools that weren't even open to women then. I'd heard of Notre Dame. My mother is from Baltimore so I had a grandmother and an aunt there. Some of my girl friends were going to go and I went.

I don't think I thought about the decision. I have very mixed feelings about the school, the school was very strange then; it's much, much better now but at the time it was very limited. But I had a great art teacher, whom I'm still in touch with who lives in Baltimore --

LIZA KIRWIN: Who was that?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Ruth Watkins. She's an art history teacher, an art historian. She never showed a slide of anything she hadn't seen and she taught Indian art, Chinese art, Western art. She would tell you about a shrine in India. She told me to stay at the Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur and it took me 20 years but I got there. I sent her a card and said, "I'm here, you told me to go." The same thing happened at Catholic University, Nell Sonnemann was my teacher, who was also the teacher of Martin Puryear and David Driskell and a bunch of people. I'm still in touch with her. They were influential women in my life. They were both tall, without children. It's very interesting to me when I look back on it. They were very independent women that had a huge impact on me. They'd both travelled extensively and my parents didn't travel at all. They did buy me National Geographic since the day I was born, though. My mother kept saying, "Why do you want to go to these places??" I said, "You bought the magazines!" But these women had actually been to the places, they'd been all over the world in most remote places. And I've been to some pretty remote places.

LIZA KIRWIN: How did your art develop early on? I don't know much about your early work. I've read about some of the more conceptual things that you did. Were those two teachers supportive of that avenue?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: They were very supportive early on. I think at Catholic U one woman got in trouble for supporting it because they really wanted me to make traditional paintings or sculpture, and I was, like, trading things --

LIZA KIRWIN: Why were you directed toward conceptual art early on, do you think?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I think it was probably timely. I remember one of the earliest books I thought was very important was "Art Povera" by Germano Celant who's now at the Guggenheim. I wrote him when I got the book and said, "Can I come study with you?" and I never heard back. Two years later the letter came back "unreturned, wrong address" but when I met him I told him. He thought I was crazy. Conceptual art was so big in the 70s, it was hard not to be influenced by it. And I did these trade pieces, where I traded T-shirts with my name -- the Delmonte label without the L -- at Max Protetch's gallery here. And then I did these photo trades where I took this model picture, which is kind of the dramatic picture in there, because I almost modeled. I did l00 and hand-decorated each one and you could take one if you left a photo of you in trade.

I did that all over the place. I did it at the Baltimore Museum, San Francisco, "80 Langton Street," which is the "alternative space" there. I've done it everywhere all over the place. Bulgaria wouldn't let me do it. I brought the photographs and they wouldn't let me trade. I did it in France. That was great.

I was doing all these things about me, with my image, dealing with being tall, having been a really ugly duckling as an early child -- you know, "the oldest living virgin in the world because no one asked"? I didn't have moral decisions to make, I was this awkward kid. And then coming to the point where people wanted me to model, in my early 20s. And it was very strange for me, because I was the same person who went from not looking right to looking right by somebody's standards. I became very interested with how you look affects how you're treated no matter who you are. It really bothered me because I had a rough adolescence. I mean, being this tall was horrible then. Today being tall is different. Then you were supposed to look like Marilyn Monroe and I didn't have a chance -- wrong body, wrong color, wrong everything.

LIZA KIRWIN: How did the modeling first come about?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Somebody in college said to me, "You should go to 'Glamour' magazine and be a model." And I said, "Oh no" and they said, "Oh just call and go." And I went and Glamour magazine went nuts and said, "You! You're the next Jean Shrimpton, [famous British model at the time] it's it, you're going to change the world." The catch was, "But not for us." (both laughing) And what's the downside? The downside is you don't look collegiate, you have to go to Vogue or something else because you're not for us. Vogue did not feel quite as enthusiastic as Glamour did. I should have known. Then I went to the top agency then, Ford, and got an appointment with Ford and went in. I remember this: an overweight woman with midriff bulge looked at me and said, "You're nose isn't chiseled, you're 20 pounds overweight, and you look too much like everybody else." And it was, like, I went in two weeks from glamourous to the next Jean Shrimpton, can you believe it, were they blind, to this woman with midriff bulge? Which broke my heart..

So there went the modeling career. Actually, some lesser agency said drop out of school and all this but it wasn't worth it. I was running into models that had had their back teeth removed to give them cheekbones who had no careers. I modeled a little for the Washington Post and there are some odd pictures of me floating around. But no, I really didn't. It was funny because I got to be friends with Peter Beard, who was a very famous fashion photographer a few years later, who said, "You could have done it, you could have done it" but he said, "Don't do it, it's not worth it." I must admit there's a little stupid part of me that wonders if it would have worked if I'd stuck with it. Because you always wonder -- the "road not taken," the money in it was great, but you know, one out of 800 people make it. And what do you do at 24 when it's over, unless you were Christie Brinkley or somebody. It doesn't work for most people.

LIZA KIRWIN: So the photograph was really a one a year --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It was a test shot for modeling that some photographer took, and it wasn't a real picture he was taking, it was much better than the rest.

LIZA KIRWIN: What did you do with the things that people traded?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I saved them for years until I had to clean out stuff and now I save very few of them. But I had thousands because I did it so many times. And it would vary -- in New Orleans I got a lot of odd Mardi Gras-type bazaar pictures, in Baltimore I got art student pictures -- you know, lamppost with shadow, in Paris I got family pictures. It was very interesting, where you did it kind of reflected what people did.

LIZA KIRWIN: How did you get interested in your trade pieces? Because you showed that a lot everywhere. How did you approach, say, the Baltimore Museum of Art?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I don't remember how I approached -- in general, either people would hear about it, or somebody would be looking and hear that I had done one or another. I knew Max Protetch a little bit in Washington, so the T-shirt trade happened that way, and at the Washington Project for the Arts and the Corcoran I did object trades where I put out objects I collected and people could take them. Jane Livingston left me an amethyst ring --

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes, I read that in the introduction to your calendar, I thought that was pretty nice.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I didn't get it, somebody else took it. (both laugh) Because you could keep trading.

LIZA KIRWIN: Probably the next person in line took it.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I bet! I was so mad about that. I said, "How could you DO that??" But I'm very organized, I don't remember how each one of them happened. I mean, I knew somebody at the American Cultural Center in Paris. Somebody had recommended, maybe Jane, on Langton Street in San Francisco. I think the Contemporary Art Center in New Orleans, Bill Fagaly, recommended me. But if anybody gave me an idea, I'm very good at follow-through and I'm very good at taking care of business and mailing things out, and if I was going somewhere I'd ask someone. I don't remember, for instance, how the Baltimore one happened.

LIZA KIRWIN: The show at the Corcoran must have been a pretty big boost.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It was a huge thing for me. It got a very mixed press, though, which is very funny.

LIZA KIRWIN: Can you talk a bit about that?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It was a great opportunity. That year Jane Livingston curated "Liberation: Fourteen American Women Artists." A big show that toured all over Europe. And that was a big break for me. It was the really first big exposure I had on that level, and it was all still these photos of me and things of mine, my hands were removed from the process still. And she did this "Five Plus One" show which was mostly painters and I was the Plus One. I did the calendar and it was really a huge event for me.

The best thing that came of it for me, besides having this museum show, was I got this calendar idea. I'd always kept calendars of what I was doing and I'd have one right in front of me, today's, and my mothers had kept calendars so I knew when I had measles. That was a limited edition book, it was done in I guess 500. That is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. It's been in book shows that have toured the world. Anina Nosei put it in a show at See Space [sp?] before she had her own gallery. It got tons of exposure and it was totally accidental. I was always involved in non-traditional ways of doing things, so the artisan-type book format fascinated me. But that worked. The printers for the Corcoran said it was the only thing they ever printed that they read.

LIZA KIRWIN: I read it! It is interesting. The one I have I found in the Museum's vertical files, the one you'd given to Adelyn Breeskin, because you have written on it --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: She took me to lunch once.

LIZA KIRWIN: In fact, it was this day, February l3th.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: That's so funny, I met her somewhere and she invited me to lunch and she took me to lunch and paid for it. And I was this kid and it just meant the world to me.

LIZA KIRWIN: She was wonderful.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Sometimes I wonder ... When I had that show, Gene Davis came up to me and said -- a lot of people didn't know what it was about, didn't get it -- and he came up to me and said, "What you're doing is very interesting, stick with it, I'm really interested." And Gene Davis said that to me! It was -- I wrote him, years later, and said you don't know what it means when you're starting. Louise Bourgeois came up to me when this thing was shown in New York at "C" Space, this thing that doesn't exist any more and Anina Nosei was the temporary curator, and said to me, "You're making interesting things." Those things, they just mean so much when you're starting.

I try to be very supportive of younger artists, it really matters. I think people should help each other and New York people don't help each other. As a matter of fact they would kill versus share information, because they think you may get something that they won't get. And yet I got from so much from people being supportive, a few words from somebody on that level means the world.

LIZA KIRWIN: I wanted to ask you about the photographer who documented a number of your (hesitating for the word) performances? --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Right.

LIZA KIRWIN: -- that were connected with this.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Right, Firooz Zahedi. He's now one of the photographers for Vanity Fair, he's become famous.

LIZA KIRWIN: Could you talk about your connection with working with him, the process of documenting those things.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. He was a good friend, and I needed a photographer who was free, whose ego wouldn't get in the way. I had a real problem with people trying to make it their art and all I needed was someone to document me, like standing on the street and people's reactions as I was waiting for a bus or something. And a lot of people couldn't do it, they wanted more than to document, they wanted to be artists. So we worked well together, we were friends, we palled around a lot together.

He was the cousin of the Iranian Ambassador to the United States at that time, so we had entre to the world. Actually it was very interesting for me, I got to go away for weekends with Elizabeth Taylor, to Warhol's summer house at Montauk --

LIZA KIRWIN: Did he introduce you around?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Zahedi introduced me to all these people because of this cousin being Ambassador. We got to have dinner with David Brinkley, Henry Kissinger, you name -- whoever was in Washington then, and I was the single woman. Between him and this woman Nina Straight, I don't know if you know her, was married to Michael Straight who was head of the Endowment a long ago, she an Auchincloss, her stepsisters are Jackie Onassis and Lee Radziwill.

She met me in l974 and decided for whatever reason she would take me under her wing. She introduced me to everybody else! So I was the single woman who was "educated" at all these dinners. I was the one you could sit

between somebody and you'd know they wouldn't do anything wrong, I can ask a lot of questions? So, those two people opened the world to me. Actually I'm living with Nina now while I'm teaching here, because Katie Jones with whom I used to live died last year, a friend of mine who had a gallery, Jones Troyer Fitzpatrick, I lived with her the last nine years. She was a very close friend, it was a big loss.

So that was a very glitzy life-style for a moment and Elizabeth Taylor and I were very good friends for one year. She called me to tell me when she was getting engaged to John Warner, she gave me one of her trophies, an award from the City of Hope or something, and I've never seen or heard from her again. But she's lovely, it was great fun for me. It was very funny. Firooz, who was the Washington correspondent for Interview magazine, so we went off to Warhol's house on Long Island once and they called and said, "Everybody has to change rooms" because all the kids were out there that worked for him "because Elizabeth Taylor wants a tub or a shower" I can't remember which one. And I said, "Elizabeth Taylor!" I was there, like, in a shirt and jeans and here comes Elizabeth Taylor.

And we ran into Paul Simon and Halston. It was make-believe. I'm glad I got to see all that. At the time I was in awe of it and if I had never done it I would have been curious. Now, it's just what it is, you know. It was a fun time, though. But anyhow, Firooz is now a photographer. Herb Ritz, Annie Leibowitz, . He's really hit it big and it's funny because his parents --

LIZA KIRWIN: You're still friends?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, he married my girl friend, he lives in L.A., they have a kid. We don't see each other a lot but we're in touch.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you go to Catholic University with the idea that you would teach with through an MFA?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. As a matter of fact I applied to Catholic U, in Studio at NYU in art history and had 48 credits in art history. Although it's hard to see in my work, because it's thick and gooey and funny, I'm greatly influenced by art history and these Catholic kind of altar pieces that's all about Simone Martini and Cimabue, although it looks like -- (tape breaks off, resumes after a blank space)

LIZA KIRWIN: I'm trying to think of ways to do this, because there are lots of questions that I want to ask you about. For instance, audience response. Your trade pieces seem to be very participatory and --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Totally dependent on them.

LIZA KIRWIN: -- and your work now also seems very conscious of your spectators.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The trade pieces were totally dependent on the public. I never knew what would happen. They could have been huge failures. They always work. In fact, I think for a one-day event the Baltimore Museum broke attendance records at the time. People were waiting outside in line to get in.

LIZA KIRWIN: How big were these trade pieces? I'm trying to visualize what you were --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Eight by ten inches and there would be a hundred. They would be in whatever configuration the room allowed. At the Baltimore Museum they put up temporary partitions and there were four or five of them. In the American Cultural Center in Paris I put a long line of a hundred around the room. In the Cultural Center in New Orleans there were, like, four rows of 25. So it would matter what kind of space was available. But I never knew what would happen but they always worked. At the T-shirt trade, one woman didn't have a T-shirt to trade so she took off her bra, which was a big hit, and left it. And I got a Ku Klux Klan T-shirt as a trade.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you know who left it?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. And I couldn't believe the Klan had shirts. (both laugh)

LIZA KIRWIN: You wouldn't think they would! We were talking about the Five Plus One show, and the calendar.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, that gave me a lot of exposure. And that really helped, I was just in the process of moving to New York.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you meet your husband before you went to New York?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. We met here. Ramon Osuna fixed us up. He bought the first piece of work Ed ever showed, at the Henri Gallery, which was before I lived here. Ramon had a dinner because he thought that Ed and I belonged together even though Ed was living with someone and I had been dating someone for two years. And it worked -- it didn't work fast, for we had four very up-and-down years of dating, but we will have been married l4 years in May. The first four years of dating were insane, I mean, he moved to Paris in the middle of it, I got

involved with other people, he got involved with other people.

That was interesting ... It's very interesting being married to an artist. When I met Ed he was famous here. It was Krebs/Gilliam/McGowin, you know. The first show I ever was taken to see when I moved here to go to graduate school was Krebs/Gilliam/McGowin and I liked Ed's show the least. I always think it's so funny, I mean, I was taken to see the show by my graduate teacher, Nell Sonnemann, whom I'm still close with, and it was Ed's show. It was, like l969, and I ended up marrying this man in l977? It's very funny to me.

LIZA KIRWIN: That's when he was doing those big color plastics?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, and hanging plastics with all those dots and stuff. I didn't know what he was doing. Actually I didn't understand what I was supposed to do, so I was, like, walking through things you were supposed to look at from a distance and doing very odd things, but anyway -- so, we met here. I was then teaching at Bowie State College.

LIZA KIRWIN: Your first teaching job?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. It's amazing. I got that job because my aunt sells men's clothes at Bonwit Teller.

LIZA KIRWIN: (laughing) I didn't know there could be a connection between Bonwit Teller and Bowie State.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It's the way everything in my life seems to happen. I had this graduate degree from Catholic U and no job and my aunt who sells clothes at Bonwit Teller's is talking to one of her regular clients who comes in from Maryland, Richard Klank, who then was head of the studio department here. He's on sabbatical now, still teaches. She said, "My niece -- what do you do? I never asked you what you do." And he said, "I'm an artist and I run the studio department at Maryland." And she said, "My niece -- "He said, "Have her call me."

He had studied with Nell Sonneman at Catholic U, and he heard that Bowie State had over-enrollment, and a week before courses started they needed somebody else. So I got this part-time job, but that did it, once I got that, and I got a part-time job at Prince George's County, and the next year there was the job open here. But I would never have had the contact with my aunt selling men's clothes. I tell my students, "You never know where it'll come from." The secretary at Ramon Osuna's gallery ended up being the curator at the Fort Worth Museum and gave me a one-person show, many years later. I met a woman, a student, on an airplane when I was having my show at the Corcoran and she thought maybe she wanted to be in the art world. We talked and I never saw or heard from her again. About three years ago she called, it was Helaine Posner. from the National Museum of Women in the Arts; she was a student. It's interesting to me what happens, who ends up where, and when.

LIZA KIRWIN: That could open up a whole new social circle in your life. Some very interesting people. I was wondering if you did any other artist's books, other than the calendar.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Only one-of-a-kind ones. I did some other one-of-a-kind ones that were shown at the Contemporary Arts Center at Houston, and Peter Frank, who was a big curator in New York, who moved to L.A., did a big artist's book show that travelled around the world, to Australia, New Zealand, everywhere, and I was in that with a one-of-a-kind book. I don't do that much any more but a printer just approached me about doing a book, he'd like to fund me doing a book, so I may do one again.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did they have a title? Any other museum besides the Museum of Modern Art --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No, only this one is. I had all my students do line drawings of me, 50 students drawing. Another one was things I'd saved from my childhood, like a picture of Tony Bennett that he gave me because he grew up in Astoria, and the key to my first apartment. They were very personal things with stories. Everything about my work is always autobiographical. It just changed a lot about '76 or '77 when I missed using my hands and I started making that doll figure. Everything is intimate and personal; very personal, but mostly stories about my family and my childhood. I also made a few videotapes telling outrageous family stories of bizarre, funny incidents.

LIZA KIRWIN: You never found autobiographical work to be limiting in any way?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I haven't. It's changed though, I think, in the last five years into being autobiographical but universal. Like I commemorated my trip around the world by making these columns that hang on the wall that have globes on top of them and I literally "went around the world" and I wanted to commemorate it but in art history I could never think of a woman on top of a column, only men. I mean, it's Cleopatra's Needle but there's column.

LIZA KIRWIN: I wanted to talk about why and when you moved to New York.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: We moved back to New York in l976. The reason was -- for me, anyway -- (l) I always

missed New York, because I was a native New Yorker, unlike today where I've kind of "had it" with New York, but in '76 I really missed New York. All the things I loved doing were in Washington when I was young -- the Embassy parties, and meeting all these people that were "names", you know, Washington is very small -- and a couple of people took me under their wings here and really changed my life and I met a lot of very interesting people that I would never have met or have access to. And it all seemed wonderful, but then I realized that that's just what it was -- you go to one Embassy party and it's wonderful, three are wonderful, and ten are boring. It doesn't mean anything to meet these people if they don't know you.

Careerwise, I realized I'd had a one-person show at the Corcoran, and Ed had three one-person shows there. I kind of thought, what are we going to end up with? Four and two, if we're lucky? And it was before Washington got real active again. WPA had just reopened, there weren't as many galleries as now; it's a little hard from today's standpoint to realize there was not much happening here. A lot of shows weren't being put together. Also, I think, for Ed. He'd spent a year in Paris, and until he moved to Washington, Washington was the big place but when he went to Paris he had a different view. He was from Hattiesburg, Mississippi and Chapman, Alabama, half and half, first Alabama and then Mississippi.

I guess we both wanted to compete in the big-time, you know? So we moved up and Ed found a loft. It seemed like a fortune -- the rent was $300 a month. He had to renovate it. And it was very exciting. And instantly our careers got much bigger. Even though Ed had been kind of very well-known here -- the Krebs/Gilliam/ McGowin thing and I had had the show at the Corcoran I wasn't well-known on that level, I mean Ed had been in Whitney shows. When we got there, it's just different there, it's where the seminal ideas are coming from and group shows are put together from, and our careers really changed when we moved there. We got much broader exposure on a much different level.

I also liked the excitement of New York, being in the middle of it; that probably has to do with age, too, none of this (laughing) seems quite as important right now but then it did. Washington started to seem very claustrophobic to me. I really like anonymity and privacy. Us getting married was written up in the gossip column then, called The Ear, and I thought, "God, if they're writing up our wedding, I mean (she makes an emetic sound). It just seemed, I don't know, I got tired of it. Yet I have very close feelings to Washington. I had some of the best years of my life here, I still come here every week, but it had started to seem very small to me.

David Bourdon did an article in Art in America about why artists leave Washington, Ed said he felt Washington was like a big Birmingham, and I said that being in art in Washington is like being in politics in Iowa -- it's there but it doesn't really matter. It just seemed so secondary here. I would go to parties here and nobody talked about anything but politics and international government. Art was such a secondary thing, or you'd be the token artist at a fancy party because it was OK to have an artist. It seemed very strange to me.

LIZA KIRWIN: Where did you begin showing in New York, or how did you begin to get into the New York art scene when you first moved there?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It was very interesting to me but it wasn't easy at all. I mean, we got up there and I had some connections because I'd just had the show at the Corcoran, and Ronald Feldman had expressed some interest in my stuff. I had an appointment with him and with different people who'd seen the work. Doug Davis got my video into some show. Anyway, the Corcoran show helped me have some connections, but nothing fell into place easily and I was shocked when I went around to some of the galleries on appointments -- I wasn't so naive as just to show up -- somebody said to me, "Where have you been showing?" And of course I had had a show at the Corcoran, I had had a museum show. And the response someone gave me was, "Where is that?? Is that the museum in Wisconsin or the one in --" and they knew it was a museum somewhere else.

It really was insulting to me. It was also narrow, extremely condescending and stupid. They were just going like, "Well, it's not New York, so it doesn't matter." They were being snobs. But at the time it really put me in my place. I thought I had this museum show and I found out that a museum show outside New York didn't have a lot of clout, unless you were famous there and then they wanted you. But to have a show in some local place --! And that was a surprise.

So I just was working and I guess I applied for a studio at P.S. 1. So the Winter/Spring of '77 I had a studio there and that gave me some connections. Peter Frank saw my work and put me in some artist's book shows that travelled. Pam Adler showed my work some, never took me on, then she went out of business. It's amazing to me. I think my first big exposure in a newspaper was when I had a reproduction for a group show in the Summer of l980. It took years to get even that and it was in the SoHo News, which also has since gone out of business.

So it wasn't easy. I'm very organized and I take care of business, so if somebody expressed interest I would send them the slides they asked for, so I did some group shows, a lot of alternative-space things. And Nina Nosei, who now has a big gallery, put me in a show at "C" Space, an alternative space she was then running. So those little things kept adding up but it was very hard, much harder than I thought it would be. Not that my work then, that

Corcoran stuff, was not object-sellable necessarily but it still was harder than I realized.

LIZA KIRWIN: Was your husband having an equally difficult time?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. He went with a gallery there, Iolas, a big European gallery that kind of founded surrealism, Alexander Iolas. Ed was already showing with them so that was very easy; also with Max Hutchinson who had the big Sculpture Now Gallery. Both those galleries are now closed. It's amazing to me -- five more galleries closed last week in New York. Then, Iolas died, Max Hutchinson moved to upstate New York to have a sculpture park. It's funny how many of these places don't exist. Ed was more established. He's only nine years older but he had a lot more behind him. He'd won major grants and shown at the Whitney a few times, they bought his work; so he had better access, was better connected.

LIZA KIRWIN: What was P.S. 1 like?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Oh, it was great. It was only six months after it opened, so it was really wonderful. There were all kinds of people, everybody got these classrooms. It was so new into the thing that my classroom hadn't been renovated yet, I had to take the slate chalkboards out and put up sheetrock. It was cold. The funniest part about P.S. 1 to me is that it's about a mile from where I grew up. When I left growing up in Astoria I said, "I'm leaving Queens and not coming back" and my mother thought it was a riot. On the first open studio, my mother and every Italian neighbor in Queens came to my studio. My mother brought food. I was the only one that had food. (both laughing)

I remember that Nam June Paik was doing a performance in a classroom down the hall from me, and Gracie Esposito, my mother's 5-foot-tall 200-pound neighbor, went and looked in the room and here was this strange man staring at a little chair with sawed-off legs and she went and took the chair to my room because she wanted to sit down. She said, "There's this very odd man -- are you safe here??" And he came after her and he realized what had happened -- he got her another chair before he took his chair back. But if you had seen this woman sitting in a chair with legs six inches high --!

It was very cross-cultural. All these people came through P.S. 1 saying, "This was our math classroom!" It was a real thing to them, you know. But it was nice, and I remember that on that day Robert Scull, Christo, Ileana Sonnabend all came to my studio. It didn't amount to anything but it was great exposure. And you were working with a large group of artists. And people would come through even not on the open days. If a curator was in New York and had a lot of time, they would go see 30 artists at once because it was easier than trying to go to 30 studios. It's really a pretty wonderful place.

LIZA KIRWIN: Who were some of the other people who were there at that time that you became friends with, or was it that kind of community?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. We became friends vaguely. Richard Nonas was working in the basement and even though we didn't socialize, just recently some Polish curator set up a show for me in Poland this year said to me that Richard Nonas had mentioned my work. So it was really funny that all these years later -- and I really don't remember. Frances Hines, who shows at Dintenfass was next door to me. None of us were doing anything much then. I really didn't become close enough with anyone. I'm sure some of them went on to fame and fortune ... There are a few Queens women artists whom I'm still in touch with. It was required that two people from Queens had to be given studios there. someone in Queens was footing the bill for a lot of it. I'm sure some of them are actually very well-known.

LIZA KIRWIN: What was the arrangement there to have a studio? Did you pay for the space?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It's subsidized, so I think it cost about $80 a month, which about one-tenth of what it would be if you had to pay for it; but it's not free, and you can't live in it. There was always a problem with people who would try to move in to live. And it was new, so it was in very bad shape. There was only one toilet that worked, there was never enough heat, and if you wanted to fix up your space -- it cost me money just to put up sheet rock. I needed walls. But it was exciting.

LIZA KIRWIN: How long were you there?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I had it for a year. At the time we were renovating a loft but Ed and I found out that we don't "share" well. The loft was one of those typical rectangular, long narrow lofts and we made a bad decision when we renovated it. We both wanted that big open space; it was kind of like we saw a movie of the future of what would be "a loft"; but it didn't work. When the light was on -- the loft bed hung from the ceiling -- we both wanted the big wall. So after that we used opposite walls from each other and we'd get annoyed with each other on who had the most space all the time. So when we moved to the loft we've occupied for ll years, we made separate spaces, which removed the problem.

LIZA KIRWIN: Speaking of working in the studio, do you have a conflict with what times you and your husband do work?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. We both get up early, which is wonderful. The biggest conflict I would say is that we listen to different music sometimes. Earphones have been a big help! Lately we're into that new opera tape, Domingo/Carreras/Pavarotti, so that's OK, but sometimes it gets hard. The one thing that's hard for me": I'm very people oriented, so some of these artists' colonies wouldn't be for me -- where they drop off food in the afternoon and leave you totally alone -- because I'm very people oriented; when I work I need to be alone. Ed works with assistants a lot and you have to go through my space to get into our loft or into his studio. I find that phenomenally disruptive. I also find overnight company phenomenally disruptive.

END OF THIS SIDE, A of Tape 1
BEGINNING SIDE B, Tape 1

LIZA KIRWIN: When one works during the night and the other during the day, you have to be very careful about --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. We work basically at the same times but we do get up early to work because there aren't enough hours -- I'm gone two days a week, he teaches two days a week. He's the chairman right now of the department at SUNY Old Westbury, one of the state universities, a rotating chairmanship.

LIZA KIRWIN: I interrupted you, you were talking about overnight guests.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I can't work with people around. It's like they're breathing my air, even if they're not in front of me. One time a friend said to me, "I'll just sit here and watch you and be quiet" and I work very spontaneously, I just kind of sit down and plop stuff in and it kind of appears, I don't make little drawings and sketches, and I have no color sense if somebody is looking at me. It's like trying to type if someone is staring at your hands. Very funny to me, it's really intrusive. And it's a problem because in New York everybody needs a place to stay. The first two months we were there we had 27 houseguests. We had to put a stop to it because we were saving them money and ruining our lives. And everybody has obligations beside that with family and stuff, so it got to be too crazy.

Ed and I use the same assistant we've had for years now on and off as we need someone, and he's like our family and even at times I have to say to him "you can't talk to me" or "you have to turn down the music." Rob Callahan, and he's a wonderful kid, from Queens actually. He saw Ed's slides at the artists' registry and called up and said, "If you ever need anybody, I'd like to work with you." And Ed's trained him how to make his frames and do all this stuff, he made the pedestals for my show, he's really an all-around carpenter, a great, hardworking kid, a sweetheart.

LIZA KIRWIN: I don't want to jump ahead too much but I want to talk to you about the Gracie Mansion Gallery. What happened between the early years in the 80s -- did you begin showing there in group shows?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, it's funny. These people named Jim and Danielle Sotet, [pronounced as a French name] who did a show of their collection here, were youngish people who'd been collecting art spontaneously out of love for years and have amassed a huge collection, kind of like the younger Vogels.

LIZA KIRWIN: I feel like I know them because the Archives has Herb and Dorothy Vogel's papers.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: They told me they would give you my stuff, they have a file of me, they own a lot of my work.

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes, they have a fabulous collection, judging from the papers it's wonderful. I ran into them in John Weber's gallery one day when I was in New York and I knew exactly who they were because I'd seen them in magazines. I went up and introduced myself, that I'd been all through their papers.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: He called me once. He saw my work somewhere and called me up and said, "Can I come look at your work?" And it was very early on when nothing was happening for me. They're good at that, they have great eyes, they buy what they love and they pay -- better than any rich person I've ever dealt with. One time they left our house with a load of stuff and Ed said, "Aren't you going to take a cab?" and Herb said, "If I took a cab every time I had a load of stuff, I couldn't have this collection." They're really pretty endearing. And they bought my stuff when no one was looking at it and they bought a lot of it. They own a lot of my work.

LIZA KIRWIN: How did they know about you?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: They saw it at, I think, Pam Adler's gallery and called me up and asked if they could come over.

LIZA KIRWIN: Were you making small things then? Because I know they like small things.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Always. But they have big things too. It's funny, people think that they only have small things but Ed was always making tons of small things, kind of like this, these things, they're all about that big. Anyway, so they were showing my stuff and Jim and Danielle Sotet were a couple who'd bought my stuff in Chicago from Marian Desson's gallery, and they moved to New York and they called me one day and said, "There's this woman, Joanne Mayhew-Young, who is very interested as a private dealer in handling your work." And I said, "I don't want a private dealer. All these years I'm struggling with these group shows at different galleries, I really want exposure." And she said, "Well, she's really nice." And I said, "Nyaah, that's nice but it's not what I want. I want a gallery space."

And Danielle Sotet called me up about six months later and said, "This woman has changed her name to Gracie Mansion and she's opening a gallery on East Tenth Street next Monday. You should go over, they're renovating the space." So I went over to this hole -- I don't know if you've ever been to the first space? (Liza Kirwin says she hadn't been to the first space) it's little, little, little, as wide as this office but longer, really small. And I went in and said, "I'm the person the Sotets own." I had said no before but now that you're having space I'd like to show a few of my things. Would you take me on?" And she said, "Great! Bring over slides, I'm opening Monday so you can't be in the first group show but from then on you'll be with the gallery."

It was funny to me, because she opened the next week and became famous, overnight. So if I'd gone a week later I probably couldn't have got in the door to see her. So, except for that first show where she had everyone do lunchboxes, I think, I showed with her since then.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you go to the first show?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. Actually, you had to bid on the things, that's how you got them. We bid on Rhonda Zwillinger's and Rodney Alan Greenblat's, but we didn't get either.

LIZA KIRWIN: What were the prices of those things?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Oh, cheap; I don't think anything went much over $350. I remember at Rodney greenblat's first show he had things for $5. It worked. It was a time when everything had gotten out of hand in SoHo, I mean people were making $30 for paintings and selling it for $8 million. I'm making that up, I exaggerate when I talk but you know what I mean. Things got very expensive and very big and they certainly weren't for the average person to own, space-wise or money-wise.

And I think that in the East Village, Gracie, who had an eye, really hit on what people could afford to buy, that they could really put in their home and live with. And it worked. There was a year there when Gracie was written up in People, US, Life, and it was a very exciting time, a very real time. And then it seemed to get overshadowed eventually by the craziness in the art world again, where prices got astronomical; the depressing part of the art world, where it became too big a business, crazy business.

LIZA KIRWIN: This wasn't when she was showing in her bathroom. Was that before --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: That was before; the bathroom and the limo. The loo (she laughs) and the limo shows were before that. I wasn't in on those. But it worked, she had, like, thousands of people show up for the show in her bathroom.

LIZA KIRWIN: I want to ask you more about that gallery. In l983 you were in "The Hot Show" at Gracie Mansion?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, that was a summer show. I wonder if that was the first show I was in there... I don't remember. That's the one where I mailed all the invitations and no one got them, so at the opening no one I knew was there. I kept thinking, where are my friends? They'd never gotten them. So I went to the post office and said, "I mailed 300 invitations in the mailbox at Grand and Green Streets and no one got them." They said, "We're not responsible for mail mailed from mailboxes." The post office said this?? I went nuts and wrote a letter to the Postmaster General and of course the invitations got delivered six months later, which was of no use. But that was a good show. I don't remember now what I put in that show. I remember the sofa-size painting show more.

LIZA KIRWIN: What was that like?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: She asked all of us to make sofas and paintings to go over the sofa, a play on that thing, and I was the only one that made a flat one. Actually, the editor of the Style Section in Washington Post bought that painting. That show got tons of attention in one of the art magazines here, Art News, or Arts, one of the art magazines but also it got written up in some magazine in Europe, so I got tons of attention from that. I think the press was dying for something to write about. Gracie would get tired of doing interviews, so many people would

come. You'd be sitting in the gallery and people would come in and be writing articles and you'd accidentally get your picture taken by some magazine in Europe because they were there that day doing it.

I made the kind of work I was making for years. I didn't live in the East Village, I wasn't one of those who grew up as an artist there, so I was kind of making this work before then and I fit into what Gracie was doing, some a little different than some of the people like Rhonda Zwillinger, probably, whose work came from that time more. The other thing was that although I'm not that much older than all the artists, I kept thinking I was because Rodney Greenblat is particularly young, I'd be surprised if he's 30 now. But actually most of the artists were more or less my age, like 40 years, maybe.

A lot of us were older than one thought, including me, but I also had a much more adult life. I was married, we owned a loft, we lived a little differently. I didn't hang out at Gracie's gallery every day. A lot of the artists hung out there every day, and because they were there all the time they got a lot more in the press because they were always there when anybody walked in. It was just an interesting phenomenon. Hope Sandrow, who's a photographer with Gracie, and I used to talk about that because she lived with someone and had a loft, that we basically got eliminated from some of the stuff just because our life style -- we had these other lives besides the East Village, we didn't just have the galleries. So it was kind of a breakdown for these people, that became all-encompassing to them.

It was a very exciting time. All the clubs opened, Danceteria and all these clubs and they'd borrow our art for the clubs. Your art was everywhere. There were, like, 40 group shows in one year or something because there were all these group shows of East Village people. It was amazing how much was happening at once.

LIZA KIRWIN: You also showed at a number of other galleries in the East Village. Was that through Gracie Mansion, that things were borrowed from her?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. "New Math," "Civilian Warfare," those were all shows that were borrowed through her. I had galleries before Gracie, I had Jones Troyer here and Xochipilli in Michigan and some galleries that I still show with, but Gracie did a lot for me. I think in '85, I'm not sure, I had shows everywhere -- Belgium, the Stamford Museum in Connecticut, Canada, I mean it was just amazing the kind of stuff that started to happen. Mostly because of her. Occasionally something would come through me. Ed and I know a lot of people and sometimes a lot of things would happen, but Gracie really did an enormous amount.

LIZA KIRWIN: So if you compare her to the dealers you had before, was it just the knack for hitting the right idea at the right time, or being able to control the media, or to interest the media?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I think a lot of things. I think timing had a lot to do with it, as it does with everything, but I also think -- well, she's a very sweet person, I mean she's a very real person. She was an artist and I think it made her attitude very different about what she was doing because she was herself an artist. I hate it that she stopped making her own work, she'd made some wonderful things, and I think that made her different. I think she had an intuitive eye, and when she trusted her eye, it was always right. It was this odd time. The critic for The Village Voice was Gary Indiana, she was Gracie Mansion, there were artists named Penny Arcade. Gracie's choices for her name were Andrea Doria, Gracie Mansion, and my personal favorite was Selma Alabama, which I love!

So I think that all that kind of fit and the East Village had been dead and dangerous and everything. It's still not very safe, actually, but it's certainly gentrified now. So I think it was a combination of lots of stuff. And also having things affordable and fun. East Village art was fun, you know. When the Fun Gallery went out of business -- was it Pat Hearn who had it? I don't remember --

LIZA KIRWIN: It was Patti Astor.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: -- Patti Astor was asked, "Why did you close your gallery?" And she said, "Because it wasn't fun any more." I think that's what happened. Tenth Street came and went again. Irving Sandler's article in that [Philadelphia] ICA catalog was very interesting, about the two Tenth Streets.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you think there was such a thing as a "downtown style," that was talked about as the East Village art?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I guess in a way there was. I always feel like an outsider to that because I was making this work beforehand. Even though my work so much fit into it, people very rarely realized that but the stuff I showed at Pam Adler's was virtually just the earlier stage of the same stuff. Yes, I think there was. The "Bronx renaissance," as Grace Glick called Rhonda Zwillinger's work, I think is very funny. Yes, the playful and social comment, taking our daily stuff and kind of junk stuff.... Yes, I think there was a look that was very East Village. It developed into cartoony type stuff, a lot of the graffiti stuff fit in. So I think that there was, although it wasn't one thing to me, yet if you saw it you could say it's vaguely East Village. But you know, the difference between

Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring and Rhonda is different visually, but there were a lot of people attaching thick and gooey things to --

LIZA KIRWIN: You say your work fits in. Who are the artists that you think were closest to what you were doing?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I guess Rhonda and Rodney in a way, in Gracie's Gallery. I think our work overlapped in stuff. My work was thick and gooey, I didn't attach beads to things like Rhonda did, and Rodney's had, like, a storytelling side to it which my thing did, but basically they were bright, garish colors from the East Village, but I think my work has a lot of relationships to Ree Morton's work, whom I didn't know. One of the first times I was reviewed someone said that they thought I was very indebted to Ree Morton, and I didn't know who Ree Morton was, which was interesting to me. But when I look at her work I see a real connection. I don't know... At different times I connect my work to different people. It's funny.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you think there was a real sense of an artistic community in the East Village, or was --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I really do, it was wonderful. Everybody ate at the same restaurants, went to the same clubs, did the same stuff.

LIZA KIRWIN: So even though you didn't live there, do you feel that you participated?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I really do, because we were there a lot. We didn't live there, we didn't go there, sit there every day, but it was kind of like a family. Gracie's assistant, Sur, whom actually she was married to for a while, Sur Rodney Sur, he ran the gallery and had great style and did all the busywork in the gallery -- did all the stuff that had to get done, the shipping and the registration and all that stuff -- it was like a family in a way. I really liked it, and I guess because Gracie was getting so much attention we'd have all these things where we all had to get together and have our picture taken.

It was very nice. It was very different than any other part of the art world has been for years and will be. It was very casual and fun and everybody tried to help one another. It was a very nice time. I'm sorry it's over, I mean I'm really sorry for a lot of reasons. It was much more real. It wasn't as much a business as making stuff that people loved to buy versus making stuff that was a commodity to buy, you know?

LIZA KIRWIN: When you say you hung out there, I'm just curious, where did you eat? (laughs) These kinds of things are getting important, you're always interested in bars and restaurants.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: God, I don't remember the names, I don't remember the name of the place that was on the corner of Gracie's, it was on the corner of Tenth and B, a restaurant that everybody ate in all the time and I can't remember what it was called. It was down the block from Gracie's first gallery, which was on Tenth between A and B. Then everybody went to The Pharmacy, which is on Ninth and A, which was actually the building Gracie lives in. And everybody would go to, is it Lesco's -- all these ethnic Polish delicatessens -- and Venerio's for pastry on First Avenue. It was a little routine, you know. There's a bread store on I think Ninth Street that makes homemade Polish bread, poppyseed this and that, and babkas and all these things with odd foreign names -- a crossover between the local community and the indigenous foreign community. We had blintzes all the time.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you get to know the locals there who ran these I guess Ukrainian restaurants and bakeries and --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Just to say hello to, not really. They were friendly, though. The sight at the crossover with everybody eating in the morning was amazing -- everybody in black with studs and earrings and safety pins in their ears and two fat ladies in babushkas -- was a riot. And no one seemed to care, it was just the next wave. Probably maybe because we didn't live there, you know, so even though we went a lot we weren't -- But I don't know, I bet they didn't know people well. The Pharmacy Restaurant actually started to show all of our work and put up shows of artists that they liked. I've shown there, I would never show at a restaurant but everybody did show at the Pharmacy.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you think -- it seems to me that the East Village at least began with a real sense of democracy, making art available to a broader part of the population, selling affordable art, selling smaller works. Do you think that it gave women a greater shot to show?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I think for sure it did. Gracie shows tons of women -- minority women. And I think there was a younger group of people running it, so it was not the old-boy establishment. And there were a lot of women -- Deborah Scharf, Patti Astor, Pat Hearn, Gracie -- there were a lot of women running the galleries. Although that doesn't always mean that they'll show more women, they did. And there were a lot of them in the gallery -- Marilyn Minter, Rhonda and me, Hope; now she's showing Alison Saar. Now, it's not even an issue, which is wonderful. I don't know who the Guerilla Girls are exactly but I have some good ideas. But they called Gracie up once to get the listing and they gave up, she had so many women they didn't need to make a point

any more, you know.

LIZA KIRWIN: It must have been a really wonderful time, that you felt maybe a lot of these boundaries were breaking down.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. And, again, it wasn't just the stiff neo-Nazi thing where you walk in galleries and blond young men in black suits stare at you and intimidate you, I always felt like my shoes make too much noise on the floor in those galleries. I really don't like that, you know. And I think "fun art" is OK -- you know, that distinction between high art and low art, not advertising the show that's up, is really broken down. I was just thinking, there was this wonderful restaurant on Avenue A called Hawaii Five-O, which had their chairs on wheels, and all these rich collectors would get in there in their mink coats in this horrible neighborhood and slide all over the room in their chairs. Just ridiculous! And the food was cheaper over there, too.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you go around to see a lot of the other shows that were up in the East Village art?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, the bigger galleries, not the littler art galleries. There were so many, at one point I think there were hundreds of galleries. It went from something like eight to a million or something. Some of the galleries were smaller than this room, that had three paintings? You'd have some 22-year-old kid saying, "my one-person show sold out" and you'd find out they sold three paintings for $400 each.

LIZA KIRWIN: I was very impressed once when I went into a gallery there and somebody actually tried to sell me some art. It never happened before, and I'd been in hundreds and hundreds of galleries, but it was just the situation and circumstance. The paintings were $40, so they could make a sales pitch to me.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I also think that they took everybody seriously. Gracie was the same to the richest collector in New York as she was to anybody that came in the gallery. She's a pretty decent person, but it was a special thing. The Sotets, for instance, would go in 57th Street galleries and nobody would get out of their chairs, because he's in the music business and she's, like, an art type, and they don't look right. You wouldn't try to sell them anything, they look like two strange, odd people. Gracie would talk to them, she'd talk to them for half an hour about the work, she'd talk to anybody for half an hour about the work if they were serious about it.

Looks pretty wonderful. Even the local minority kids would come in the gallery and look sometimes. At the opening you'd have people come in from the neighborhood who didn't know what it was but were willing to look. But eventually, over the last ten years, it all got out of hand again. The real estate which was cheap got expensive, the rents in SoHo got higher than Broadway. And when that happened people started to move. We really didn't want Gracie to move, we liked her being on the ground floor. I hate these new buildings with 82 galleries on a floor. Gracie always said she felt like she should put in a cash register because it's like you could see the business happening, hear the sound of money clicking. It's a very different thing. The real estate did it. People paying $l,000 a month to live in a tenement with a tub in the kitchen? A joke. So I think that the real estate did it. And also, it got overdone, there were too many galleries. It's a shame. Maybe you can't maintain that forever, I don't know. Maybe it's cyclical.

LIZA KIRWIN: You have kind of a built-in life.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: And then some of the people began to hit it big, like Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring. Tony Shafrazi took them over, their prices became another thing.

LIZA KIRWIN: Who was collecting your work when you were in East Village?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I'm trying to think now... A lot of people, I've sold hundreds of pieces, because I make a lot of work fast. Prudential owns maybe 40 pieces of mine, the Vogels own how many tons, Penny and David McCall who have a foundation that actually Ed and I are on the board of -- we met through the art world -- they bought a lot of my work. Agnes Gordon, Vera List, a lot of bigger collectors, but then just a lot of people that bought my work. Sue and Steve Gerson who are printers, have a print business, we've become friends with them. We've become friends with a lot of people that bought our work. It was that kind of thing. You'd get to the opening and you'd meet the people that were buying your work, they weren't just abstract names. Penny Edelman owns tons of my work; she's Asher Edelman's ex-wife.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you think that was part of the appeal of collectors buying in the East Village, that they also felt the artist was more accessible to them?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, definitely. And a lot of people had us over --

LIZA KIRWIN: When you're buying folk art --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I think it was the same thing. When Ed and I went to buy some folk art, Ed made us

rent a Cadillac and I was very embarrassed but he said, "It will make them feel better if we come in a Cadillac." We got invited to the big houses uptown. It was very funny. And we're still friends with these people. Since then, David McCall gave his wife a million-dollar foundation and we're on its board. East Village has come and gone. That was nice. It was very social.

See, I don't know how the big artists live. Maybe Rosenquist and Lichtenstein do this all the time, but we had never done that. We're fairly social people but this was really -- yes, it was part of it, it was knowing the person, talking openly, and everybody being a little more equal. It was pre-Saatchi & Saatchi, you know?

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you go to see any performance art in the East Village?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. It's not my thing. Isn't that terrible? Very rarely. I'm going to say this and I'll regret it but for a long time going to the performances was like going to watch six people in burlap bags roll around the floor. It got a lot better, and some of the people, like Anne Magnusson whom I've never seen, I wish I had.

LIZA KIRWIN: You can see her on television!

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, right. Talk about the East Village --

LIZA KIRWIN: Crossover!

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: We did see "Einstein on the Beach" and all that stuff but that's certainly not East Village at all.

LIZA KIRWIN: I was just curious because it seemed to be such a part of the night life there, too.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It was, but we didn't go to the night things, we're not night people. This is where I think the age thing may be has it, it's 52 and 43, although maybe we were ten years younger then. But we didn't hang out all night, we had real jobs, we had to get up in the morning and teach, and I think that was a distinction for us, where I think ten years before we could have done it. I remember I had to wait to call Gracie because she didn't get up till noon and I would have been up six hours already. She would be eating breakfast when I was eating lunch. It was like being with a musician, the time thing became so different.

When she moved to SoHo that was over. The gallery opened at ten. The galleries didn't open till one in the East Village, it was such a late-night society. So we missed a lot of that stuff. I don't know if we "missed" anything but we didn't do that.

LIZA KIRWIN: How has her gallery space changed from the East Village to the new gallery?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The first little one was the bathroom and then the little gallery on Tenth Street, and then when she moved to Avenue A between whatever it is, llth and l2th or l0th and llth, that space was fairly big -- l500 square feet, which was a huge difference from, like, 500 square feet, say. When she moved to SoHo the back room was as big as that space. I don't know how big it is, maybe it's 3,000 or 4,000 square feet. It's a big SoHo gallery, it's a whole real-deal thing, beautiful, with Fax machines. We should have used a typewriter when she opened in the East Village, but she still has the desk Rodney made for her.

It's just like another SoHo gallery now. Very elegant but it's not the same. And the overhead isn't the same. I think her rent in East Village was maybe a maximum of $l500 a month. I don't know what this one is but I gather you can count it on one hand in thousands. It's really another ballgame in SoHo. People stopped going to the East Village, though. Gracie, I think, would have stayed if people had kept going there. But people stopped going there. Some galleries were folding, the bigger ones. You wouldn't move with rent like that in a good place if people were still coming, but they stopped, it was over. Maybe a year or two before it was over, somebody I know had offered Gracie space in a building for almost nothing on Broadway and said, "If you get in that building I can get other people in it." And we all convinced her not to do it. Like, why move upstairs in a building when you can be on a first floor? And she missed basically getting almost free rent if she'd moved earlier. Although some galleries that moved to Broadway very early didn't make it, because they were there too soon. Now, last week I think five more galleries in New York closed, so who knows what's happening now.

LIZA KIRWIN: You think real estate was the first catalyst for the end of that time?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. I think it got too big, too many galleries opened, and the real estate prices started to go nuts. And one real estate prices equaled SoHo, there was no sense being in a not good neighborhood. I grew up in New York and I'm not afraid, but it's still not a good neighborhood. The homeless have taken over Tomkins Square Park -- not that they're necessarily dangerous, but Gracie lived on the other side of the park, the Avenue B side; substantially different from the Avenue A side. I dropped her off one night and there were three thugs standing outside her front door, and I said, "I'm not going to let you off, I'll drive around the corner." We had

Connecticut tags on our car, we have a cottage there. She said, "You have out-of-state tags, you can't drive around the block in the East Village, they'll think you have cash and came to buy drugs, you'll be killed." It was there I thought,
I grew up in the city and this is street smarts I don't know because I didn't grow up in this part of the city? But that's really rough.

I remember Madeleine Deschamps, a curator who ran the American Center in Paris, came and she had me taking her around to Kenkalaba and all these galleries that were, like, on Third and C, not good neighborhoods at all, signs were up "Don't gentrify our block or we'll kill you." We stopped once and she was looking for something in her bag and we were surrounded in two seconds by drug dealers who thought we had money trying to buy drugs. And of course, the collectors would come in mink coats and fancy cars; it was very peculiar. They thought it was cute and interesting. I never find poverty cute and interesting. I wasn't comfortable over there at night. I still wouldn't be comfortable at B and C places at night.

LIZA KIRWIN: But they probably thought it had cachet.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Oh yes, and it was the new thing to do. You know, New York is very fickle. It's like restaurants in New York, it's "the restaurant of the year" this week? It would be interesting for you to talk to Gracie about this, but a lot of people had to be there at the moment. When it wasn't the moment any more, they didn't want anything to do with it, they wanted whatever was next.

LIZA KIRWIN: I guess it was '84 and '85 there were so many exhibitions related to the East Village that, in looking through your resume, there were so many all over the country and in Europe.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: And there were so many I wasn't in. And there were millions of them.

LIZA KIRWIN: What did you think about taking part in that?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, I thought it was great, I love exposure, I think it's fun, I like to go to the places, I went to some of the things, I thought it was very exciting. Something was happening all the time, and everybody was very upbeat about it. You hoped things would sell, if they didn't it was fine. It was like so much was going on you couldn't keep up with it. It was amazing. It was hard when it started to slow down because you got into this pattern of not being able to keep track of where work was, so much was happening. And it really slowed down when the East Village started to die.

LIZA KIRWIN: When did it slow down for you?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I'm trying to think... Well, it just wasn't the same. Well, right now a lot's happening for me but even those two or three years it was much slower. Like, in the last two years I wasn't in as many group shows, they weren't doing East Village shows, you weren't in the new thing to be part of. Right now, even though the economy is extremely bad, and I can't even imagine -- something like 30 galleries have closed in the last month or so? -- how bad it is. I'm going to appear [prepare?] for what's happening for me, which is very nice, but I could see the breakdown, I could see it on my resume. There were years when I had this many, I mean, eight inches of group shows; and then the next year very little, because that phenomenon was over. When the ICA, Janet Kardon did that show at Philadelphia, that was just like thousands of buses from New York, it was amazing --

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you go to that opening?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. It was wonderful. And I remember, of course because we're old, and early risers --

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you feel old??

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I really felt old, and I was shocked when I found out that Stephen Lack was older than me, and Rhonda was only a year younger, and Gracie is a year older -

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you know of any artists who lied about their age?
Because I did hear from one artist who felt that he had to fudge his age, he wasn't as well-known. He really thought it was a very young scene and that you almost had to -- it looks like he did fudge his age.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I didn't know anybody that fudged their age but maybe I don't know. It was just interesting to me because I kept feeling old. I just think it's that I was more settled. Most of those people were single, and partying, and I was married and -- I felt much older and I was shocked when I looked at the resumes of the people in Gracie's Gallery. Buster Cleveland is 50. Gracie is older than I am but she looks younger. It was just a funny thing to me. I mean, Rodney Greenblat was very young, Keith Haring was very unknown, he wasn't at the gallery, but they weren't as young as people thought they were. It felt young because of the spirit of it, it was

something new, people presumed it was young.

But when we went to the opening, we intended to leave, we'd drive down rather than come on the bus. See, that's another thing: I don't want to be in a bus with 80 artists singing and drinking and stuff. Just terrible, you know what I mean?

LIZA KIRWIN: Who organized the bus?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: ICA did. They put more than one bus of artists down, people and collectors and all. And it was at some big art collector restaurant. Ed and I were going to leave at, like, ll, you know you have to drive back to New York, and they came and got us and said, "Irving and Lucy Sandler would like to go back to New York too." That's how we became friends with Irving and Lucy, as we were the four "old people" leaving; along with their daughter, who has finished college now, she was in high school then. We were the people that didn't want to wait for the first bus to leave at l:30 a.m. We'd had it. And it was fun, it wasn't that it wasn't fun, it was just that all of us had to get up the next morning at seven and those people didn't.

I think the age thing was a misconception, although you can name -- Keith Haring is dead, John Shaboski [phon.sp.], these people were very young.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you know any of the critics who wrote about the East Village?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I knew Carlo McCormick. His girl friend worked part time at the Gallery, the one I think he married, I'm not sure. Walter Robinson, who's one of the editors of Art in America, he was married to Tony Smith's daughter that died, Bebe. He showed at Metro Pictures. He also started to make art. They wrote the definitive article on the East Village, in which I wasn't mentioned, by the way.

LIZA KIRWIN: I know the article; I can't remember his name [Walter Robinson].

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: He's been to our house. Carlo was crazy. He started to tell Ed once about -- Carlo now is maybe 3l -- he was telling Ed what art was like and what it was like now and stuff, and about art in the 60s. And Ed said, "I was THERE, Carlo." (both laugh heartily) "You can't tell me what it was like." So they were very young, with a very different sense of history. Steve Ellis was later... he wasn't writing about the East Village. They were really the big ones, wrote a lot of the essays and stuff.

LIZA KIRWIN: I encountered that in reading a lot of the reviews the East Village had a lot of their own critics, it seemed. They were younger writers, who were writing the younger scene.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Right. Carlo was really young. He was part of it, he hung out there, took drugs there.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you know people who covered the art shows that wrote about them in the art magazines?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. I didn't know them at all. As a matter of fact when Gerrit Henry -- was it Gerrit? whoever it was -- a review in Art in America of my "At Home with my Religion" show, I was in the back at Gracie's in her little teeny office and he came in and she came back and said, "Somebody's here from Art in America." I said, "I'm afraid to go out." And he put in the article that the artist was "so shy." I wasn't really shy, I just didn't know what you were supposed to do. Like, wouldn't it be awful to be looking at someone's show and having the artist next to you staring at you, saying "What do you think?? Say something nice." I'm not shy with people at all, but that was funny. I don't know lots of people.

LIZA KIRWIN: So you think the East Village made "fun art" more acceptable.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I really do.

LIZA KIRWIN: The spirit of the times?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. The spirit of the times, and the breakdown between high art and low art. It was no longer that Greenberg kind of thing, it was over with, totally. It was like total craziness. It got very crazy at times, I think. It was wild. It was like the distinction between the clubs and drawing on walls and graffiti and graffiti became art? How much wilder can it get? I always found it interesting that the graffiti artists were really trained people, except for a few people. They were not really ghetto kids. I remember seeing Keith Haring drawing in the subways for years and thinking, "Who is this person? What wonderful drawings!" Not having any idea he'd been to art school. That was a kind of myth. I think it's bad for students sometimes here not to realize these were trained people. I knew a few that were really ghetto kids but most of them weren't. Very spirited.

It's not like that at all now. Although I think there have always been about ten different art worlds going on at once. It was interesting to me that Warhol got so involved with Basquiat, he felt the spirit of what was happening. But I think there's the older, very famous established artists who probably don't mix at all with

everybody else. And then there are these fringe groups. I don't know Julian Schnabel at all. Fringe group, major group now, were the fringe group. But there are all these different things and they very rarely cross over. The Marxist artists won't even talk to the -- you know.

LIZA KIRWIN: Were you very conscious of being a fringe considered -

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. Because it was so encompassing, it seemed very normal, it seemed like a big thing to me, but it really wasn't. It wasn't selling paintings for $200,000 at the Pace Gallery to Baron Whoever.

LIZA KIRWIN: What were the prices like in the galleries for your work in the 80s?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Then they were probably -- oh, nothing. I think the most expensive thing I ever sold was $2,200, and that was really expensive. It was, like (she makes gasping sound). Little things I sold for, I don't know, I think I had stuff for $l00. Most things sold for $300 to $500, though; I would say $500 was probably my average, but my masterpiece was $2,200, the shrine I made to St. Claudia. There were some little things.

Gracie opened the Gracie Mansion Museum Store. It was draped in gold originally to look like something out of a whorehouse in Louisiana, all red velvet and gold. We all made little objects for her to sell in the store that were lower-priced versions of our art -- pins and stuff. The shop was a few doors down from the gallery, on Tenth Street, and then it moved to Avenue A when she moved there but a little bit lower on Avenue A, and then it was very high-tech, with shelves displaying everything, very elegant, and it became a whole other thing. But still with cheaper versions of all of our art. I think it was before its time, I think it didn't do as well as it would have had it been on Madison Avenue. There just wasn't the street traffic there for people buying $80 or $l00 things.

LIZA KIRWIN: You consciously, then, made things for another price group.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Right. I made little pins out of clay, and T-shirts. One of the big T-shirt stores had all the artists making T-shirts once, on Broadway and lower Broadway. We did everything, there was no limit to what you would do if you were willing to do it, and we were all willing to do almost anything like that. It was fun, you know. We didn't separate that as being "too commercial." Keith Haring is the ultimate example.

LIZA KIRWIN: With the Pop Shop.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. He was being so exploited that he almost had to do it to defend himself. I mean, people were using that little man on everything. I never met him, I only saw him drawing. I'm sorry I didn't know him, I have a lot of respect for him. All over the city there are these things like "Crack is Wack." He did good stuff with kids. His heart must have been in the right place. I actually love his work but his heart was in the right place. He did all this stuff with poor kids to make them think. It's so tragic to me that he died. The impact of AIDS on the art world is a two-hour discussion but --

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you think that had something to do with the end of the East Village art scene?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, it certainly made a dent in the East Village social life! I was married so I wasn't going to get a hold of a thing here, but I'm sure a lot of the craziness was affected by that. Sur nursed two of his lovers, this guy who died of AIDS. One of the guys who worked part time at the Gallery has AIDS now. It was just all we talk about, still. Even at Iolas Gallery where Ed was showing, I think five people there died of AIDS. Not an East Village Gallery but it really -- Paul Teck, Scott Burton. It's just un-believable.

So I think that that changed some of the crazy party stuff. It didn't affect me as much but certainly affects you losing everybody so young. You live under a little cloud of mourning. It's very hard, very hard. People here don't understand, it hasn't hit here yet like this at all but we're talking hundreds of artists. Luis Frangella, Gracie did a show for in the Fall, he's dead. And, young people... It's very scary. I think it have ended the partying, I don't think it ended the East Village.

I think drugs had an impact, too. Basquiat; Carlo had a severe drug problem, went into rehab. A lot of people went crazy with drugs that I was surprised at. The man who's name I couldn't remember a while back, that wrote the article with Carlo McCormick, his wife was an IV drug user and died of AIDS from it. That was bizarre to me. I guess I grew up in the 60s when people experimented with drugs so much but in my mind -- well, they didn't inject drugs, I'm a very middle-class kid, that was a huge leap to me -- injecting drugs was something that nobody I know did, that was what other people did. All of a sudden there were people making money who were injecting drugs -- I mean, the risk in that. And there was this thing: you would share needles because it was bad vibes, bad karma not to? Like even though you were middleclass and knew better, these people were sharing needles. It became, like, part of the ritual of drugs. Very scary stuff.

We were pretty removed from that, I mean, I didn't know those people. You couldn't, they lived in another world, the big-monied. I think they only wanted to be with other people who were doing the same thing. I can't imagine

sitting in a room with people injecting drugs. I'm a very middle-class girl from Queens. (she laughs) Don't do that.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did your husband start showing at Gracie Mansion too?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. Iolas closed, and Max was showing Ed's sculpture. And Gracie offered to do a show for Ed and he said, "Why not?" So he did this kind of installation show and it did very well. James Speyer on the board of MOMA bought a piece. It went very well, so he's done two other shows with her. The last one did phenomenally well. I think it was the most successful show she had that year.

But his work doesn't fit at all, basically, in the East Village. But he was later, so that look didn't matter as much, because his work doesn't fit with that at all of fun, bright colors, any of that stuff. But it's gone well. And his paintings are selling for $l5,000 so it's on the very high end of her price range. That's been interesting, because a lot of people she sold to can't buy in that price range.

LIZA KIRWIN: So she's losing a lot of her steady people?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: That's right. Buying for $500 and buying for $l5,000 is a very different thing, and she's in a different location, so she gets different people coming through. But it's another ballgame, and it's not easy right now. It's not easy for any of the galleries now. If they say it is they're lying. Did you read the article on SoHo in the Sunday New York Times magazine about three weeks ago? About all these galleries folding. I don't know what it was called but I think it was the cover story. They talked about Maxwell Dolan from Philadelphia, in business for years, opened in New York, showed Bob Stackhouse, couldn't make it. And Bess Cutler said she went to all these galleries and said, "Listen, I'm not doing well, none of us are doing well. I mean, maybe Pace and Castelli are doing well but let's get together and work."

And no one would admit they weren't doing well. It was like they were embarrassed to say it. But, I mean, here's a recession. They're going to close. And they're all closing, I mean, as fast as you can name them they're closing. Scott Hanson, Petersburg Press, Becker. Pennine Hart closed with a show on the walls, couldn't even make it to the end of the month. But you're talking galleries that had no overhead, or very little, that have $30,000 or $40,000 overhead. You're talking a whole new level of selling. That's where I think some people were naive. You can't have a $500 work on the wall and be able to keep your gallery going. Oh, all of our prices went up some. At my last show the prices were $3,000 but that's still nothing when you're talking a $40,000 overhead. I mean, I'm making that figure up, it's just changed that dramatically.

LIZA KIRWIN: How often do you have a show at Gracie Mansion?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, between every year and a half to two years. So I should have a show next season. I had one in December l989, about l4 months ago. It kind of matters what you're doing, you know.

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BEGINNING SIDE A, Tape 2

LIZA KIRWIN: I want to ask you more about the new space for Gracie Mansion. You had said it was in Women Artists News that the East Village was sort of made for your work that was so small and the galleries were too. How do you feel now that Gracie Mansion is in another building and another maybe more conventional base? Is it less accommodating for you?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No, I guess that my work was changing. Last time, I don't know, it seemed to fit. It's curious, I haven't thought of it this way, I wonder if the space alters what you do. I mean, at my last show I did the shrine that were on free-standing pedestals. If they'd been in the other gallery, I couldn't have had free-standing pedestals, they would have had to be against the wall or you couldn't get through the space.

I don't think it did happen that way, but it may have. Actually, I like the very elegant space, it made me feel like a grownup, like I was in a real light, clean gallery versus a place with crooked boards, you know? I felt the East Village was really made for my work, though, as far as what the work is about -- the colorful, bright, that kind of stuff. And Gracie has three spaces: A huge space, a medium space which is the size of the old gallery, and a little space. You could actually pick a space that you wanted. I wanted the big space last time, though, isn't that funny? I wanted this big room with these things you could walk through.

LIZA KIRWIN: So your work has really changed.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, it has and it hasn't. It's so autobiographical and narrative and all about me, but I guess -- every series I do is like, about every two years I work on another series, so they change anyway.

LIZA KIRWIN: In one of these articles that I read about you, you mentioned that men bought columns but fewer

bought domestic scenes.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I know. The columns, men loved the columns. God knows what a shrink would say, men loved the columns, and a lot of people bought two of them. You make everything and you think it's wonderful, stuff you pick to show you think is wonderful, and you think everybody is going to want it. And very few men bought the domestic scenes, but the columns -- they're the most successful things I've ever made in regard to sales. I think we sold all of them and maybe 20 more. People wanted to own the columns. It's accidental, of course, I mean, you know, "Why??" The columns are very narrow and they fit in spaces that most people couldn't put art in. They fit between windows, between doorways and windows, people put them on either side of beds and couches to make a border. I never thought of any of that when I was making them but it made them very sellable, that they were narrow and fit in odd spaces. I bet half the people that bought them bought two. It was the strangest thing.

LIZA KIRWIN: Have you seen a lot of them installed in people's houses?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No, a small percent. When things started to go well, I started to know less and less of the people who bought the work. It was very interesting. The work started to go out on its own.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you miss that?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. In a way it's fine, I just hope the people like the stuff. Yes, it's just strange. It's kind of a surprise sometimes, you meet someone and they own a piece of yours, and you forget. I remember one time, I got one line in a French book on American contemporary art and I was thrilled to death. I was looking through it and Nick Krushenick had a reproduction and I went to his office and said, "You have a reproduction in this book and didn't tell me!" He said, "Oh, I don't need to know, I don't keep up with that." I thought, some day I want to be where I don't know! (she laughs) It's starting to be that way with collectors, that you don't know who has the stuff. Gracie will give me a list but you forget, you know.

So no, I don't see a lot of it. One person ran them up a staircase. I may have told you this -- this Penny Edelman woman lined her hallways in turquoise ultrasuede and hung her giant Frank Stella in the middle, and then all the way to the end of the hall on either side put my work. I'm flanking Frank Stella, which gives me great pleasure and would probably kill Frank Stella but makes me happy.

LIZA KIRWIN: I wanted to ask a bit about the dolls. I was thinking about the process of making the doll or working with a doll. It just makes me think how completely absorbing it is to play dolls when you were younger. When I was young, the idea of playing pretend with dolls was completely absorbing activity. I was wondering if you ever relate that to the absorbing activity of making art itself.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Only in retrospect, but it is. I mean, I didn't start to make the dolls thinking "I wish I was playing with dolls" but definitely: that whole thing where you lose track of time, it's all make-believe and your fantasies and it's just wonderful. I played with dolls a lot as kid. I also never wanted children, even as a child I never really wanted kids, and when everybody was l3 saying "I'm going to have real kids," I never wanted kids. I still don't really want kids but I made this doll that's all-encompassing (she laughs). It's very funny, I don't know what that's about, but I loved making the doll, and it was made to represent me. I wanted to stop being in my art myself, with my photographs, like in a calendar, and that was the easy way to make something that represented me. Although I hope it's -- it's evolved to being very universal to me, it has other implications, even though it's me, it's always me but it could be more general now too. Yes, it's very all-encompassing, I just lose track of everything when I'm working, it's a wonderful feeling.

LIZA KIRWIN: It seems to me identical to the whole process of being absorbed in making art and being absorbed in playing with dolls -

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: And I dress them, I make the clothes, you know what I mean? When you say that, I can remember playing with my girl friend with my dolls like it was yesterday. But I didn't know that at the time. I also didn't know all the dolls face the same way, did I tell you that?

LIZA KIRWIN: I read that, why don't you talk about that. They all go one way --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: When I first made them, I made one and I didn't know what to do and it said "make a hundred" and I lined them all up against the floor of the room. Somebody came in once and said to me, "Why do they all face one way??" And I said, "I don't know, they don't, do they?" And I looked and they did. I thought, "Well, that's stupid, I don't know why they're doing that." So I tried to make one going the other way and it was really hard for me to make one going the other way. It's like trying to write with the left hand, it's that hard. So they all go that way. In this new series I'm making cutout wooden ones that are about this big, that lean against the wall, and they all go the same way too.

LIZA KIRWIN: They all seem to me to be active figures --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, they're all walking, in these flowing dresses. Years and years ago when there were a lot of flowing, long skirts in the "hippy" days. I haven't worn a skirt in a long time, I don't know what that's about. And those were all made one at a time of pulp paper and I thought I was making them all the same size. Which I think is wonderful (she laughs) I should have made a little measuring thing. But they're all over the place.

And then I got involved with Brazilian folk art and the dresses being huge when the people dance for those things, and the skirts started to have all kinds of implications. They grew into all other things -- the skirts became snakes, the snakes became -- these got very abstract where you could hardly see this little doll figure at all in them any more. In the show at Adler's they were almost totally lost.

LIZA KIRWIN: I was wondering if you make any connection between the feminine processes of making things. You use pastry tubes and it shares some characteristics with making cakes and decorating cakes. I guess the women's work aspect of it --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I love that, I think that's really important. I love that I can make art with pastry tubes. Pratt had a cook make a copy of one of my pieces at a benefit, an exact copy, you couldn't tell the difference between my piece and his, because he used real pastry stuff. I also made things particularly that art wasn't made about, that stuff at home -- making the bed, changing the towels, vacuuming. I love that, that's what we spend most of our time doing. I have a piece now of me, a life-size cutout, washing the dishes, drying the dishes. That's what we do more than we do anything else, that kind of stuff. You're not supposed to make art about it. Now I don't think people would say you're not supposed to make art about it but years ago that wasn't done.

No, that feminist aspect of my work, it's like the art historical references of the feminist stuff, the woman on a pedestal, the columns in art history, the gold backgrounds from early Renaissance art, all that stuff is really part of the work for me, although it's not probably obvious to the average person. It looks that you just see this bright, colorful stuff, but to me there are all kinds of other connections and the feminist one is a big one.

I wouldn't be where I was, I wouldn't be in this job if it wasn't for the women's movement. I came along at the time when we were in college and this whole thing hit and it was a huge help to me, a huge help to me. I think also my parents were a huge help to me. My father always said I could be the first woman President if I wanted to be. It makes you think you can do anything.

LIZA KIRWIN: Has anybody misinterpreted or interpreted your work in a different way, in almost an anti-feminist way to say that this is "woman as a doll"?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. Actually no one has. That would be a good one, but no one has. But they have misinterpreted what I'm trying to say. They don't like the colors or they think it's -- I've had some bad reviews. The worst one was someone said it looked like molded human excrement.

LIZA KIRWIN: Really?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: You never like bad press, right? But I thought they could have said "brightly painted molded human excrement." It's not exactly like you look at it and see brown. It was somebody in Washington, I think it may have been Shirley True, an artist there who wrote a review of my work once and I think she said it. It was pretty vicious, I thought. I don't mind getting a bad press if it makes sense. I didn't get a good review when I was mentioned in the Precious show ["Precious: An American Cottage Industry of the Eighties," Grey Art Gallery, NYU] in Art in America,... Somebody said something but I don't remember what they said, maybe said "not as successful" or something, but that's OK, not everybody can love what you do. But "molded human excrement" is really a bizarre comment.

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes. It's strange to get that from your work.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I think there was something else going on there I didn't know about. You never know what people think of you or don't think of you. I can't imagine someone arriving at that conclusion.

LIZA KIRWIN: What do you think about your work being interpreted as a universal woman and some of the feminist overtones?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I like that, I like that. So many things I've hooked into, like I love to travel but there are all these early women travelers -- Mary Kingsley and Beryl Markham, all these intrepid women who went all over the place. You know about Mary Kingsley? Went to Africa in these black Victorian wool dresses, went all over Africa when nobody went there. I think there's something about the woman traveler that I like, the independence and -- now of course I'm doing it by airplane in air-conditioned hotel rooms, I myself with these people, but I like that. I felt great accomplishment when we took a trip around the world and the plane landed

back in the United States and I thought, "circumnavigated the globe" as if it meant something. But it meant something to me somehow, a very romantic thing.

Yes... but I like the universal woman thing, particularly with the columns. In art history I couldn't think of a column that had a woman on top of it. Is there one, do you know?

LIZA KIRWIN: There probably are, mythological women rather than--

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I know the Erectheum, women as columns, and I know Cleopatra's Needle but there's no woman on it.

[Transcriber's note: Look up the l9th century Lady Hester Stanhope, an intrepid English woman who fell in love with the Near East, especially Syria-Lebanon, who travelled widely there and flummoxed the Arabs with her charisma; she staged her spectacular entrance into the ruins of ancient Palmyra, in the Syrian desert east of Beirut, by hoisting dancing girls onto the tops of columns that still line an ancient ceremonial way. She was only one of a number of remarkable women travellers in the last century whose journeys are classics in great travel literature. Another was Isabelle Burton, wife of the great British scholar of Arabian life. Another was Isabel Bird, an English woman who toured the Rocky Mountains on horseback, surmounting dangers and obstacles with great sang froid, describing them and the characters she encountered in vivid letters to her sister back home. (Virago Press has them now in a paperback.)]

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Anyhow, I like the idea of making a woman be on top of a column for an accomplishment. And I think the work's getting more and more like that, even though the connections are always there for me beyond the flowing ponytail.

LIZA KIRWIN: You mentioned that the dresses were something that you may have borrowed the idea of the colors from Brazilian folk art. Could you talk about the connection of both your travel and discovering folk art incorporating parts of that in your work?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. I had always had a fantasy about Brazil for some reason. I used to say that I would be happy if I died leaving Rio. Until I was leaving Rio and then I said, "Only kidding, God." I had this whole fantasy and I listened to tons of Brazilian music -- Jorge Ben and all these Brazilian people. I'd seen all the pictures of all the stuff. We went for New Year's Eve when they do their second-largest festival, the largest being the Carnival. The Macumba all come to the beach in these enormous skirts and twirl and dance with all these beads on, and put these offerings out to sea to the goddess Imanja. They did this all on the beach and put millions of candles, so as far as you can see, for miles down the beach, it's all lit up. It's just amazing.

LIZA KIRWIN: Is this idea you had about Brazil --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: From reading about it, since I was probably l8. I didn't travel at all growing up, yet my parents always had National Geographic and we always looked at the travel shows and the art shows on television. They were very curious about stuff like that. My father read a lot and I think that opened up the world to me. When I went to graduate school, one of my roommates was a South American. My other roommate was in the language studies of the Foreign Service school at Georgetown, and I was at Catholic U.

A lot of our friends were foreign. It fascinated me that this guy was from Tunisia and this person was from wherever and they would bring me all these things -- things they thought of as junk, that I treasured and still have. That made me want even more to go to some of these places, and the more remote the place, the less westernized, the more I wanted to go. In doing that I started to buy little objects that were, like, folk art. Also, I've always loved children's art. I'm fascinated by it and that they lose it about age eight. They make the most wonderful things in the world until they're about eight years old, then they can't do it any more because we teach them too much what they're "supposed" to be doing, and they lose the spontaneity and the color sense.

You can't really teach anybody about color. You can teach them how to do it but not how to feel it. Either you're good with color or you're not. So that children's art thing and the folk art thing overlap. I knew a photographer, Peter Beard, who's fairly well-known, who moved to Africa a million years ago. He bought Isak Dinesen's land and the man that ran the property for Kamante worked for him. He gave me one of his drawings, which is like a child's drawing. It was done by a seventy-year-old African, it's just a wonderful thing. I think the purity of children's drawings and folk art is the same to me, that what that's coming from is the same place. I feel like I could never make art that good, but it you need to be trained to do it you already know too much, you know what I mean? It's really magic. It was like meeting magic people, to me, going on that trip. It was one of the most uplifting experiences of my lifetime, that trip.

LIZA KIRWIN: Which trip?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The trip to Mississippi and Alabama -- I'm sorry, I'm seeing myself talking to these people

and you're supposed to see what's in my mind! But driving around and seeing these folk artists --

LIZA KIRWIN: What was that year was that?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I don't know, I'd have to look it up. Around '86, maybe '85.

LIZA KIRWIN: Are these people that your husband knew? Or --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, we had always been interested in folk art and we knew that, say, Sister Gertrude Morgan existed, and the black folk art show at the Corcoran in '83, that was just magic. And we'd always been picking up little things in our travels. We've traveled to 50 countries in the last ten years, and we'd start to pick up objects. I've told you that both my teachers in college and graduate school, those women, travelled a lot and they used to bring back magical little tchotchka things that were great. Ed grew up in Mississippi and Alabama and we started to do research on it. We'd get out the catalogues from the Corcoran and started to call people in Alabama and Mississippi, and all of a sudden we knew a lot about these people; and we'd heard of [Howard] Finster, of course, a lot.

We just thought it would be great to go get some of this stuff and meet the people. So off we went. It was very crazy planning; we just went. And it was magic. I really only made my Odalisque series because James Son Ford Thomas was working with clay. When I saw him sitting there doing that, I had to work with clay. I didn't know what I was going to make but I knew I had to work with clay. I put him in the press release for my show with Gracie. I couldn't have done that show without him. I sent him the press release, which I'm sure he didn't read (she laughs) but -- I don't know, it's so pure, you know. I wish I could be a folk artist, I would like to be Sister Gertrude Morgan, I want to make drawings and with Jesus, you know. I had the whole Catholic education, how can she do it?

LIZA KIRWIN: Who introduced you to her work? Did you know about her from the Corcoran show?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Jane Livingston told me about her initially. Jane had visited her before she died, I guess, so that's when I first knew about her. Then David Driskell had told me about her. Then I saw the show, but that was years later. I think it was in the 70s, actually, I first heard of her. And the stories about her were so great.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you know about her when you went down to do a trade show in New Orleans --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I knew of her before then. Was she dead by then? I didn't know. I didn't do anything about trying to find her then, though. I was interested but not enough to follow through. Now, when we go places, we look, we drive around, if we see something we stop. Ed did that day trip to North Carolina. We think about going back to North Carolina, but I don't know -- we want to do it all. We went to Guatemala twice, this past January and January a year ago. We brought a lot of cartons from Guatemala. There's something so pure about that untrained eye that don't do things wrong. I don't know what that is, because if you gave the average person that was untrained something, they couldn't do it at all.

LIZA KIRWIN: What did you see when you went to Alabama and Mississippi?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The first person we saw was Lonnie Hollie. He lives behind the Birmingham airport, so it was very easy; he actually came and met us, in his truck. He's very strange, and rambles. (We've seen him again since then, he's gotten worse, was almost incoherent.) We got to his place and it was like we'd discovered gold. Millions of sculptures, and his wife and then only three kids -- now there are, like, 82, I think -- it was unreal. He was almost living in a dug-out hole at that point, his home was very, very primitive.

We were so excited. We bought a lot of stuff and put it in this white Cadillac (laughing) and we were going to spend the night there and we got so excited we drove all the way to Finster's from there. We just couldn't believe it, that this existed, this thing.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you buy sand pieces from him?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. One broke, which was a shame.

LIZA KIRWIN: He has the most wonderful narratives to go along with the work. I thought it was brilliant once, that a gallery did a show and sold with the work the tapes in which he talked about it, as a pair.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: That's wonderful, I didn't know that. He was being robbed, basically, by dealers when we were there. Somebody had taken a piece and cast it and gave him no money. We heard so many horror stories we were shocked. He told us about a lot of pieces, you know -- this was "a unicorn" and you turn it around and it's "Adam and Eve." I like this stuff, and it's so African. We heard that Robert Ferris Thompson went down to interview him after we were there; we were amazed.

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes, Robert Ferris Thompson has been down to see a lot of these people in the South. He's seems to be making a lot of connections between Africa and African-American art.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Did you read "Flash of the Spirit," his book? (Liza Kirwin says yes) It's wonderful. He wrote about the Yoruba culture in Brooklyn. We went to hear him lecture once. It was like listening to Robin Williams talk about anthropology.

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes, I heard him lecture, too. He's a great performer.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: We wrote him a fan letter. I can't remember whether we wrote him as a scholar or a fan letter "forget Michael Jackson." He wrote back! He said, "Your letter made me so happy." It was so funny.

Anyway, we went to this Mr. Hendrickson, in Jameson, Alabama. To his house, and then we went to Fred Webster's house in Berry and then we went to Jimmy Lee Suddeth's house in, I think Lafayette, Alabama.

LIZA KIRWIN: He's up by Tuscaloosa, I thought. When I gave a talk in Alabama, I said "Lafayette, Alabama", and four people yelled out, "That's 'LaFAYette

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: OH! In Mississippi we couldn't find this guy Earl Simmons, whom not many people know about, and we stopped at a light. I said to this guy, "Excuse me, how do you get to Bovina?" (she pronounces it Bo-veen-a) And he said, "Bo-VINE-a, like the cow!" And I said, "Bo-VINE-a is like a cow??" And Ed said, "Shut up -- " How do you know, right?

We stopped at Tuscaloosa because Ed went to school there, but we got some misinformation from the real artists. Some of them knew folk art, some of them didn't. It was very interesting. Somebody said there's somebody at this woman's house who's making embroidery on shirts. It wasn't folk art at all. It was very curious, but that's how we got misdirected.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you meet Robert Cargo when you were in Tuscaloosa, he's a dealer.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No, but we didn't on purpose, because he had told Mr. Webster to change one of his pieces. He had done "Daniel in the Lions' Den" for him and made, like, a little jail room for Daniel in the lions' den and put a board on the front of the bottom, and the man told him that he wouldn't take it unless he took the board off. Mr. Webster wouldn't take the board off, so we bought it -- he loved that we wanted it with the board on. I was mad that anybody would try to tell him what to do.

LIZA KIRWIN: I didn't go to see him either, I can't remember why. I just saw an exhibition of his. He has a collection of really nice Haitian flags that are up at Montgomery --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The beaded ones? (Liza Kirwin says yes) I tried to buy some of those. They were too expensive for me when I was in Haiti, I don't know why they were too expensive. We don't "do" collectors. The only dealers we've ever been to, really, and we've looked at the ones in New York just to look, is Gaspari in New Orleans because he's been showing stuff forever. Bill Fagaly and I went there years ago. The guy's really into it. That's one of the first places I've seen some of the things.

Anyway, that went to Mose Tolliver's, which was a true experience. He was half-dressed and went to put on his clothes and was saying, "You know, I'm just some old black man, these white people don't care if I'm dressed or not." And it was just phenomenal. Sitting on his bed, with his son and daughter; it was really very surreal. We spent a lot of time there.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you buy some of his pictures?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, five things. We asked what the prices were and she said they were $75 each and we said, "Fine, we'll take these five." And she said, "If you're really going to pay that and not haggle about the price, you can have 'em for much less, but most people come, they want ..." [trailing off] Isn't it terrible?

LIZA KIRWIN: People try to talk him down.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: And he told us that somebody had bought everything in the house for $5,000 and gave him a check. He took everything out of there and the check bounced. It killed us, pissed me off. It's like stealing from a child.

And then we did Ed McGowin's triumphal return to Chapman with the McGowin family, and we took them back then to Mose Tolliver's. He liked one of the women we'd brought with us, he kept giving her stuff to take. She didn't want to take it, because he was drunk, you know, and kept giving the stuff back, to his wife. We had to give the money to her.

LIZA KIRWIN: She was there when I was there with some other relatives but he wasn't there.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Then we went to Mississippi and we went to see Mary Smith.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you talk with her? I couldn't understand her.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: The best you can; she cackles. She's had a stroke or something, she hardly spoke any known language at all. And Earl Simmons, who wasn't home and , his wife writes to us. And we've ordered stuff from him since then. I got Ed a boxing piece as a gift. He's the one that made all the cars. We bought a car, and a big steam train engine -- all about this big -- and a race car and then found out that they were lamps and they all plug in and they all have sockets. We didn't know it, we just thought they were objects. He has a fake jukebox in his place that doesn't work that has all the pieces that you need.

We couldn't find Luster Willis, and finally did. And that was a horrible thing, he's so sick and poor, I can't believe poverty exists like that in this country. And he was so depressed about not being able to work. And Son Ford Thomas, which was wonderful. And then we went to Oxford and ended there drinking all night with Barry Hanna, who teaches English at Oxford. He's a well-known Southern writer, who wrote "Airships" and a whole bunch of stuff. And seeing Bill Ferris, whom we know, because Ed's on the board of that Center for Southern Culture.

I think that's everybody we saw. One of the best things, though, was Jimmie Lee Suddeth, whose wife was ill at the time and the whole house was filled with smoke from the woodburning stove being on. Even though it was l00 degrees out she was cold. And we walked in and I had polkadot pants on, and she said, "Girl, I love those pants!" (both laugh) And then he came outside and played the harmonica and all the neighborhood dogs came and sat at his feet. And he staring at us and the dogs. And I've never seen anything so pure in my life.

We were very "high" on that trip. It was just like everything was so touching and meaningful and weird and real and -- (trailing off). And all these people are poor, except Mr. Webster, who's a retired high school principal, who studied whittling with some guy in the woods.

LIZA KIRWIN: I saw a number of his things at this collector's I mentioned, Mickey Beth Stiller in Montgomery, who has about a dozen of his pieces.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: We have five or six -- Adam and Eve, the Statue of Liberty, Jonah and the Whale, Daniel in the Lions' Den, et cetera.

LIZA KIRWIN: Does folk art enter into your teaching at University of Maryland?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, I talk about it, I don't want to lecture all the time, the kids don't change enough, I don't want to bore them with it, but I think it's really important. I list it on my seminar topics in my seminar class, under the major topic of Trends in Contemporary Art, one of them is Folk Art. Last year a kid did it, brought in a Finster that somebody had lent him and he wrapped it up and passed it around. Finster's was the weirdest because it's, like, actually the Prattville was strange too but Finster himself with the TV and the grandsons making copies and the whole -- it was just amazing. Every part of it was so amazing, I don't think I'll ever be the same.

You know, it changes you to travel but this was like changing you spiritually. It made it very art to make art when I first came back. I kept thinking, I'm not as good, it's so spontaneous and so real, there's no question about it. And it's so different than art in that they use repetition, they do the same things over and over again, they do these primitive pieces over and over again.

LIZA KIRWIN: Your dolls --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, and the columns are very similar except for what's on top. They really do repeat a lot. And a lot of them think they're in touch with God, which was interesting. I think they may be (she laughs) I'm not sure. I wouldn't question it.

LIZA KIRWIN: A museum director in Athens, Georgia, once took me aside and said "Well, tell me, do they really have visions??" (she laughs) "I'm not one to question it!

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I mean, really, why not? They're seeing something I'm not seeing! I'll have to go to class again.

LIZA KIRWIN: I think I may have pretty much covered everything by now. I did want to talk to you a little bit about new directions in your work, and we got into teaching at Maryland a little bit. Maybe we could do just a bit more -- (they negotiate a date)

LIZA KIRWIN: This is April 24, the third and last interview session with Claudia DeMonte. We're again in her office

at University of Maryland. Could I ask you about your teaching career: you've been at Maryland since l972. When you're there 20 years you get a gold watch or something?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: No. I don't think you get a gold watch if you die here but we're in a Recession, we don't even get raises next year. I've been teaching 20 years already because I taught a year before, at Bowie State College and Prince Georges Community College, but next year will be my 20th year at Maryland and that's hard for me to believe. And I've been commuting since the Fall of '76, so the last l5 years I've been on Amtrak. It's gone fast; I love teaching, actually.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: What do you teach?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: It's called Art 100 now, it's like a Foundations Design course, for freshmen. And I teach an Artists Survival seminar" -- what do you do with this when you get out of here, how do you get your career going? And I run the interne program, so I have about l5 students out doing unpaid internships in different galleries and printmaking places in the city. And I do independent study things. But that's about it. It's usually the Foundation and the Survival seminar that I always teach, and that I sometimes run these other programs.

LIZA KIRWIN: How do you feel teaching has contributed to your own work?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I think it keeps me alive. I really love it, I don't know if it's because I don't have children I get so much from it, I love what I get from it. I keep thinking I learn more from them than they do from me. I don't know what that is, I think it keeps you young; you get all these fresh ideas all the time. Last week in my seminar class one student was showing Walter de Maria's installation at the Pompidou Center in Paris, and a student whose ancestry is Chinese said, "It's the Y Ching, he spaced it according to the Y Ching." And it was based on some Chinese thing but he could see from the spacing of the pieces and there was this connection that was just magic.

And to watch someone grow is wonderful, I mean, to watch someone come in who doesn't know what they're doing, to learn. I think teaching is very rewarding. I think you have to like to teach, you have to be able to convey ideas. One thing I learned about teaching is that not everybody can teach. You know, you can be brilliant but not be able to transmit information. When we see those lights go on, it's really exciting. Although some of the best people come here -- some of the best graduate students came here who were already "who they are." I wish I could take credit for what they learned, but you can't. But it keeps my work fresh. And they're always reading things and they know stuff sometimes that I don't know. It's very exciting somehow to me.

LIZA KIRWIN: Being here for 20 years, how have you observed the curriculum changing in the art department?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Well, the basic stuff, we never gave up the fundamental things you need to know. In the mid-70s, when everybody was having totally open curriculums and you could do what you wanted, we didn't do that, we kept that you had to have the basics to go on. So I think those things haven't changed. I think that we're trying to restructure the graduate program so there is a seminar in it that kids have to -- they can't just work on their painting, they have also to be thinking. We're going through a big curriculum change right now where we want the students to be aware of what's happening in contemporary art. I mean, we keep thinking that freshman kids know this stuff but they don't. You say "Andy Warhol" they may know but you say somebody else, they have no idea. So we're trying to integrate all that more.

But I think our curriculum expanded. We have more sculpture areas now, more sculpture teachers, but I think the strong thing is basically the department. You couldn't have gotten out of here without learning how to make colors, for example. When I went to school we worked with those papers called Color Aid, which was great, all my projects were beautiful but I didn't know how to make the colors. I knew how to choose them. So I make my kids make the colors.

But I think the curriculum has stayed more or less the same, just expanded when we were able to. We have a foundry now and much more sophisticated -- really, in sculpture and in printmaking there have been more changes. And the technical things; when we moved into this building about ll years ago we had more space, so some of that stuff expanded. And we have the best graduate students we've had in years, which is very exciting. The better people that come through, then the better people who want to come. So we have very serious students now.

LIZA KIRWIN: Have you had some notables in the class and followed their -

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Sure. One of my students, my children, Henry Acheobel, has a tenure track job at Arizona State University now. Another student of mine, Barbara Johnson, is running the biggest art supply store in Chicago. One year she taught at Brownsville Community College on the Mexican border, that was really exciting for her. Craig Buck [phon.sp.] was my student. I'm very close to some of them. I'm still in touch with my teachers, my main graduate and undergraduate professors, and it's made a big difference to me. I like that. Eva

Lunsager [phon.sp.] who won the best prize here as the best student when she graduated, then worked at Gracie Mansion in New York, I put them together. Now she's going to have a show at White Columns in a month. So I do keep in touch, not with all of them but with the ones that want to keep in touch.

LIZA KIRWIN: One of your students, Rita, and now I can't remember her last name, wrote an article about you in the UMCP papers, teacher of the year, or something along those lines.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: That's very nice. I've had nice press from the school.

LIZA KIRWIN: What have you done at the New School for Social Research?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I have a consulting job there that I've had since l980. It's an adult education program at the New School, the first in the country, basically, to teach serious adults serious things. They have an art program they've had for, maybe, 40 years, that very well-known people have taught in -- Mary Frank, Robert de Niro [Liza Kirwin says both the movie star and his father, a well-known painter, whose papers are in the Archives of American Art, are/were both involved]. I basically organize the program, and fill in when people retire or, unfortunately, die -- a lot of those have been teaching for 30 and 40 years. Chaim Gross, for example, has just retired after teaching there for 30 years. Right now we're trying to add some courses.

It's very exciting. You know about the New School? It's the "university in exile," they kind of took in the European Jews that were being tortured and gave them freedom and a place to work. The reason the place was founded is wonderful. They fought the NEA last year on First Amendment grounds and won. It's totally non-bureaucratic.

LIZA KIRWIN: I've seen the catalogue and am amazed at the diverse courses they offered.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: "How to Boil Water" is probably the joke course. They really have a course for some people who can't cook. But they have very serious courses, and I actually taught one there occasionally. It's amazing, because the program are not going to be artists but they're serious adults who want serious knowledge about art. They wouldn't want to go to art school with a bunch of l8-year-old art students, but they're bright. I had a woman who started the high school math program in Pennsylvania, and another woman who made Miss Piggy's clothes.

They really get interesting people there. Before I worked there I took a course in Italian, which was great, so I saw how the School operated. It's a wonderful place. George McGovern lectured there last week on presidential politics. They bring in Palestinians, the day after the Israelis come. And they're really about "Would we let Khadafi speak here?" "If Hitler were alive today, would we do it?" It's so much based on freedom of expression and all the right causes and it really makes you think while you're there. They realized recently that a lot of minorities that worked at the School were in lower-level positions, and that is not what the New School is about and they've made a huge effort to change that.

LIZA KIRWIN: Since we talked last, Gracie Mansion announced that she is closing her SoHo Gallery.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: We'll have to talk fast, God knows what will happen next week.

LIZA KIRWIN: How has it affected your life and your relationship with the Gallery?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: My husband, who also shows there, and I saw it coming, in a way because we can count -- we knew she had investors' money and how much she had and what she was making. So we knew it was bad and that the Recession was making it worse; we knew she'd grandly overspent on renovation, but we still didn't think it was going to close April 30. Basically, she's almost closed now. It's a shame, because I've been with her a long, long time, and it's very nice to have New York representation. Right now, besides the hundred thousand people that have never had had galleries, there are now about l,000 people that were showing at the 30 or 60 galleries that have closed in the last few months.

So there are a lot of us floating around that are going to be gallery-less, and I've been advised by a lot of people that buy for corporations that even some of the galleries that are open will not reopen in the Fall. So, not to look right now, because you could get realigned with another place that's hanging on. So I think I'm going to wait, but it does affect us. My husband and I made a lot of money through Gracie last year, so there's a definite outlet.

I'm very lucky in that I have galleries in Washington, Florida and Michigan that handle my work regularly that will continue to show my work. And I have the New York City Percent for Art Commission and I just did a big commission for Prudential Life Insurance. I have other projects I'm working on; I'm having a show in Poland in June. So it's not like nothing else is happening but it's something I want. It makes a difference to be able to say you can go get a piece there, you know. Just in the last few weeks I had to ship a show to Poland and I haven't done this stuff in years. I had to have somebody make the crate, get consignment sheets, et cetera. So that part

of it's horrendous, it makes you realize that they do earn their 50 percent. That's where they just kind of took the work, it went away, and the show opened in the other city. I'm now realizing that part of it.

So on that basis it's horrible. My resume is on their computer, it's not compatible with my computer. That's awful, I have to update my whole resume. And not having the outlet. It's also like the end of an era -- I mean, Gracie Mansion kind of represented the 80s, in a way -- the boom, the East Village phenomenal. So I also think it's the end of that era.

LIZA KIRWIN: Have you talked to other artists who've been involved with the Gallery over many years?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes. Some of them are pissed. One of the photographers in the Gallery is furious, her show would have been next, so besides the Gallery folding she has just spent thousands of dollars on framing, etc. So she's devastated, she's really, really mad. She's mad at Gracie, she's mad at everything --

LIZA KIRWIN: But there would have had to be somebody who was next. At most she could have given six months' notice and just not scheduled.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I guess Gracie had hope that some miracle would happen, and she had had a huge sale to Japanese people about a month before she decided to close. So I think the hope was something else big will happen. But I think the reality is, if you know that it costs you, like, $20,000 or $30,000 a month to keep a gallery open and you have $l0,000 in the bank, you can be pretty sure you're not going to be open in two months. So, in a way, I can see why the photographer is mad. Gracie doesn't want to close either but it's just time. I think she'll deal privately. She's asked to handle all of our work privately. I'm going to do that but in the long run I would rather have a dealer with a space.

LIZA KIRWIN: She gave me a card that she's working out of her apartment.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: She did? I didn't know that she'd gotten it together, she's having electricity problems, like she can't have her washing machine plugged in simultaneously with her computer, because of the power set-up in her little old East Village apartment. It's sad, for us and for all the artists. Not all of us but a lot of us had very similar imagery, it all tends to be narrative and figurative. That's a problem, in that where do we all go with similar kinds of images? Most of the other galleries aren't even looking -- I mean, nobody's going to take on nine people or a dozen, however many of us there are. So I think it's going to be not easy.

LIZA KIRWIN: I didn't realize you were having a show in Poland, what's that?

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Oh, on June 4, in Lodz, which you pronounce "woodge." It's at Gallery Eighty-six and the new curator at P.S. l, Richard Wasko, a really interesting guy who's done big installation shows all over Poland and Germany and lives in Berlin -- it's come to P.S. l for a couple of years -- saw my work and said "nobody's ever seen anything like this in Poland, this comes out of the Malevich tradition, they need to see this." And he arranged for me to have this show. It's supposed to be one of the better galleries in Poland. The heads of the gallery had been museum curators, so it's a very serious thing. I'm very excited about it. So we're going to Eastern Europe. Then we go to Malmo [Sweden] for the complicated folk art/folklore thing.

LIZA KIRWIN: I wanted to ask you about where you think your work was going recently. I saw at your studio a large amphora --.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: That was Prudential.

LIZA KIRWIN: And a life-size Claudia doll --

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Yes, a life-size me. That's what I've been doing in the last year, doing these life-size things. Ed takes pictures of me doing different things, like running, or standing with a paintbrush, and then we project the slides onto board and I draw them and then cut them out. And they're exactly me. I've never shown them, which is interesting. Gracie didn't like them that much, which was interesting, she wasn't sure how she felt about them, so it was curious. The Prudential bought some of them, and two of them are going to be in the show "Art in Context: Scale at the End of the 20th Century" or something like that, I'm not exactly sure of the title, at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. The invitation will have to be extra long! So they've done very well, people really like them. And I've started to put -- was the one you saw a life-size of me with lots of little ones around it?

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: I've never made work this big before, so I evolved a course of making little ones and I didn't know what I was doing with them. So I started making a series of little ones that tell a story -- some of them were written on, some of them bore images of countries I've been to, like bananas for Honduras -- a stereotype -

- and the one big piece is surrounded by them. So it's kind of what I'm doing now, but I've gotten a little sidetracked from the big city commission, which is taking forever -- I mean, the paperwork is taking forever, the Prudential Bache Commission.

In the middle of this, these big amphoras have started to sell somebody commissioned one, Prudential commissioned one -- which is nice but it's sidetracking me a little bit. With the end of this semester I have a feeling it won't all come back together until mid-June when we're back in the States.

So I think it's going in the direction of the large cutouts and the three-dimensional amphorae, but I'm not l00% sure.

LIZA KIRWIN: Thanks very much.

CLAUDIA DEMONTE: Oh, you're welcome

END OF THIS SIDE, END OF INTERVIEW

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