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Oral history interview with Laurie Simmons, 2017 May 25-September 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Laurie Simmons on May 31 and September 27, 2017. The interview took place at Simmons's studio in Brooklyn, NY, and was conducted by Christopher Lyon for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Laurie Simmons and Christopher Lyon have reviewed this transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is Christopher Lyon. I'm with Laurie Simmons at her studio and home in Williamsburg [Brooklyn, NY]. And it's May 31, 2017.

We mentioned the Sarah Charlesworth interview with you, and there's one phrase that jumped out at me in there that you said: "The big question for me is, why did my work start where it started?"

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I thought that was kind of a splendid place to start. So if we could keep that thought in our minds as we walk through some of your biography, it would be interesting see if the two things can be woven together. I notice that, in that essay, the sections of it are organized by addresses.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm sorry. Now I'm talking about the—

LAURIE SIMMONS: You're talking about *In and Around the House*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —*In and Around the House* book that was published—

LAURIE SIMMONS: The works in that book were from 1976 to '78, but we published it in 2003, and I wrote the text.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. Now, 11 Strathmore Road. Is that in Great Neck [Long Island, NY]?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yes. That's where I was born. I was born at a hospital in Far Rockaway and taken home to that house. My parents lived in that house until I was 40 years old. That's when they sold that house, but I feel like in that house is the core of my visual language. I feel like it resides somehow at 11 Strathmore Road.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's really interesting. Can you describe the house a bit?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, the house was a neo-Tudor home. Those are those houses that are brown-and-white stripes with kind of a turret. And interestingly, it was built by Mr. Levitt who built Levittown.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really? Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And before Levittown was built—and I can't remember if his name was Samuel Levitt—but I think Levitt and his brother were doing these kind of designed communities that had a really Anglophile tone to them. The streets were called Stonehenge, and Strathmore, and all of the gardens were rock gardens with flowering plants. [Very British. –LS]

It was interesting. The first time I went to England and I went to visit gardens, I thought, Wow, I've seen all this. I've seen this before in Strathmore.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: So Strathmore was this little, sort of perfect community of these English-inspired houses, and I thought I lived in a castle. I mean, it wasn't grand in scale, but it had a turret [with] a round room, and that was my parents' bathroom. It was done in black-and-burgundy tile, matte tile. But I thought that room was just pure magic. I thought the whole house, including my mother's decor, was magic.

So my parents probably moved there after the war; I would say 1947. And I was born in 1949. My father was a

dentist, and I'm sure he had gotten some sort of assistance from [the GI Bill –LS] to put the down payment on the perfect suburban house. And he found a house where a dentist was retiring. It had two little, what he called "operating rooms." And the house had a driveway with two paths on either side, leading up to what looked like two front doors. One door was the office side, and one door was the house side.

I would see his patients going in and out. I would hang out in his waiting room. I loved reading his magazines, looking at his fish tank. I felt like there was a lot to do in my house.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. That's really interesting. So was he in the war?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yes. He was in the naval attachment to the Marines. And he was actually a dentist, stationed in Saipan. I would like to know more about Saipan, but he was, you know, probably like a band-of-brothers type. He wouldn't talk about the war. I don't think he saw any kind of active combat, but he certainly was, you know, a stone's throw from it. But he was in the medical tent doing dentistry.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So the family name was Simmons?

LAURIE SIMMONS: The family name as I knew it—my relatives' names were Simonoff.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Then my father shortened it to Simons, and then when he married my mother, she asked him to change it to Simmons because she thought it sounded nicer. And when I think about the first generation—my parents were first-generation Americans. Their parents were all born in Russia and Hungary. But when I think of when people were adapting, or coming over and assimilating, how casual the last names were—it's really kind of astounding.

I had a boyfriend once, and his family name was Heifgott. And I said, "Where does that come from?" And he said, "Well, when my great-grandparents came over, the only thing they knew how to say was, 'With the help of God, with the help of God.'"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: So it's like you would be [waiting on line and signing a name in the book that was whatever they heard. –LS] That was your name.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's so funny. But it's so interesting, too, though, because your work has so much to do with sort of authenticity, inauthenticity; you know, Who are you?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I think that I always felt like our suburban life—I understood our name was changed—it always felt like a construct, like something that my parents were building, to be part of something. Of course, I lived in a Jewish community, so I felt very much like I belonged, but I think that I intuited what was involved with assimilation, what my parents wanted to do and what they were trying to be part of.

My father was blond and blue-eyed, and he would wear a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, and smoked a pipe. And we had a station wagon. And I got it. I understood, because I visited my grandparents, and I was involved with our larger family. I understood what we were from. And in my little-girl way, I understood what we were doing. I mean, it was all clear to me. But it wasn't something that I really could express or articulate.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was your mother's background?

LAURIE SIMMONS: My mother's mother came from Hungary and was actually, I think, born in this country. She was from Budapest. And my mother's father came from Russia. And the family mythology is that he was selling matches on the street corner to make money for his family, and he hid from his first-grade teacher because he was so embarrassed. And then he grew up to own a dress company. His last name was Trussel. And apparently he had a whole city block with a slogan outside the building that said, "Hustle to Trussel."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: From what I understand, he made one of the first mass-produced dresses. It was sold wholesale for something like 26 cents, or, you know, something crazy. By the time I was born, my grandfather was retired. He didn't have a business anymore. The business didn't exist.

It always sounded like my mother grew up in the lap of luxury, had a driver and dresses from Paris, because they would go—my grandfather would send someone to Paris to buy dresses to be copied here. And my mother would get those dresses, but I can safely say none of the fortune came down to the grandchildren [laughs].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Darn!

LAURIE SIMMONS: Darn. I know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] And this is interesting. Okay. And your mother's name was Dorothy?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Dorothy. Her name was Dorothy Trussel.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And your father, Samuel?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Samuel Ira Simmons. And interestingly, he gave himself that middle name. He adopted that name. I think for a while people were calling him Ira. I mean, it was all part of the mythology and the construct, because I think he felt like his name, Sam, might have [sounded] too Jewish. I think probably his Hebrew name was Shmuel and his American name was Sam, and then I thought, Wow, of all the cool names to pick, Ira?

CHIRSTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: That was interesting.

And he was super-handsome, met my mom. They got engaged, married. He went off to war, came back, and then they started this perfect World War II suburban life.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did they travel a lot? Did you travel with them?

LAURIE SIMMONS: They traveled—when we were little, we [took trips in the car –LS]. We took a car trip to Florida when I was eight. My mother, who had been a teacher very briefly before she got married, tried to make everything educational. So we dug up red clay in Virginia. We looked at women polishing their marble steps in Baltimore. We picked almonds off trees. You know, every step of the way, my mother had a kind of educational little side trip for us. But it really left a very strong impression on me, just about catching visual moments. It really stayed with me.

And once I was older, my parents did start traveling a lot. They were part of that first wave of married couples who went to Europe in groups. You know? If it's Monday, you're in London. If it's Tuesday, you're in Brussels. If it's in Wednesday, you're in Paris. So they did a lot of that. They did a lot of traveling without us. We went to summer camp.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: They would dump us at an eight-week camp, and then they would go off traveling.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was curious, because later on you do these Tourism series.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I traveled on my own a great deal.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: One of the things that they instilled in me was how important it was to travel and see the world. They seemed to have markers of their accomplishments in terms of, you know, being American and living the American life, and travel was definitely on that list. I know that going to Europe, for them, for the first time was really a thrill. I feel like they felt they had really done something. And those were the days when you would dress up to get on an airplane. I mean, you didn't wear a tracksuit. It was all very formal and very exciting.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You could smoke. [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yes. You could smoke. Yes. And my parents would bring back these tiny little bottles of ketchup, and tiny little salt shakers, and things which really inspired my excitement and hunger for tiny things. So any little forks or plastic knives or anything they brought back from the airplane seemed so [exotic –LS].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you have a dollhouse as a child?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I did. In fact, the dollhouse I had as a child, I rebought when I was 21, and used in my later work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The same one?

LAURIE SIMMONS: The some model.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Same model. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Because I was a toy destroyer.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: I wasn't one of those girls who kept their dolls all dressed and, you know, neatly lined up. I was more like, cut the hair, throw everything all over, break things. I mean, I definitely, definitely had attention deficit disorder, which is something you realize as a grown-up when you start to read about it. And if your own kids are diagnosed with it, you think, Oh, my God, that's what they called it. This kind of peripatetic relationship to subjects [and objects –LS]. I mean, it was an exciting way to be a kid, but you couldn't get any support. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You mentioned in one interview being a bit of a tomboy.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And it's too bad that that's the word, and especially in this—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's a good point.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yes. Especially in this new world where we're reexamining gender. But I would say that all of my potential playmates in my neighborhood were all boys. So they played boy games. And the boy games were outside, and they seemed more exciting and more physical. It wasn't that I was very athletic, but I kind of needed—I had a hard time staying focused.

In fact, when it came to the doll collection, the only thing that kept me interested was lining up the dolls and playing *Queen for a Day*. I don't remember if you remember that show.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Vaguely.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, it was a show on TV, and there were three or four women contestants. Each one told a really horrific story, and the audience would applaud for the one they thought was the winner, and the applause was judged on something called the applause-o-meter, I think. The stories would be like, you know, "The barn burned down and we lost our cow, and we lost our truck. And then lightning struck our apple tree." And these stories would—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: —go on and on and on and on. And the person who won, suddenly the curtain would lift and there would be a cow, and a truck, and a tree [laughs].

So those were the games that I wanted to play, these very psychological games.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So there's, like, this wish-fulfillment kind of thing, a sort of—what you said before, like a construct.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You're going to create this—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, it seemed like once it was part of a dialogue, or a play, or a show, or a thought process, but just sitting, dressing and undressing dolls, and curling their hair, and lining things up, I couldn't do it. So the boys outside were playing Rin Tin Tin and all kinds of running-around games, and that seemed like more fun.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And your father gave you a camera, a Brownie?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah, when I was about seven or eight. He was an avid amateur photographer, as most dads were, it seemed to me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. Was he good? Did he have an eye?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I learned a lot from him, in the sense that I wasn't afraid to take an object and put it smack in the center of a picture in the most flat-footed, clumsy way, and just make that be a picture. He would stand us front and center, you know, right in front of a rose bush in our—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: —in our fancy dresses, and take a picture. I mean, it was so straightforward what he did.

But he seemed to love cameras. He seemed to love gadgets. And as we approached the '60s, as memories of the war were receding, things Japanese became interesting again. Remember, he had fought in a war where he

had very specific ideas about the Japanese and the Germans. So for my parents to go back to Japan, and even to go to Germany, was a very big step.

And then, of course, my father got interested in Japanese cameras. So, yeah, he gave me a camera. And I thought it was cool, but it wasn't until I graduated art school—and I mentioned this many times before—that I thought of photography, or a camera, as a tool for art. I thought it was something separate, maybe because my father had done it. It seemed like a hobby. Art seemed like drawing and painting and sculpting. And photography seemed like my father's hobby.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. So—and you went to school in Great Neck?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I went to Clover Drive School, which was a tiny, little school, like walking distance away. And then after third grade, I went to Saddle Rock [Elementary] School. [Laughs.] All these beautiful names. And then I went to Great Neck North Junior High, and I went to Great Neck North Senior High. But I can remember walking to Great Neck North Junior High, and subsequently to Great Neck North Senior High, and counting off the years that I had left to go.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, sort of an impulse to just get out of there when you could?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Although I had a group of friends that I really loved. I had friends that were like family. But I just had this feeling that there was a bigger world out there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Indeed. I noticed that you went to Tyler [School of Art] and did a B.F.A. You must have had a sense very early on that art was your—

LAURIE SIMMONS: I walked into kindergarten the first day, and everyone had to introduce themselves. I remember what I was wearing, and I said, "Hi. I'm Laurie Simmons. I'm an artist." I introduced myself that way. Now, the thing that's interesting is that my parents noticed that I liked to draw. They were attentive to that. And it's interesting to me to think that they might have helped, that they might have foisted that identity on me. I think about this a lot.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, interesting.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And it took me a long time to realize that, because basically, I never listened to my parents, but in this way, I think that the identity of being an artist was convenient for both of us. They had a built-in excuse for my—they had a way to explain away my idiosyncratic personality. And I had a way to present myself to myself as someone who might be—my mother's favorite word was "different." "Laurie's different." Now, different wasn't always a really positive word, but she used that. She would say, "Laurie, you would like so-and-so's daughter. She's different."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I know. It's kind of amazing. But I think that the identity of "artist" was mutually convenient for my parents and, you know, me too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That is so interesting, this sort of feedback loop, almost.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. The feedback loop. And my parents could introduce me all the time as an artist to their friends. So if I was quiet, or surly, or kept to myself, or whatever it was I was doing, they [could say, "She's an artist" –LS].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you had siblings?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I do have siblings. I have an older sister named Susan, and a younger sister named Bonnie.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are they involved in the arts at all?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Bonnie is a doctor. She's an emergency room doctor and director for many years. And Susan is in public relations. Though she started out as a singer. She had a beautiful voice. But she has been in the field of public relations, where she still works.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are you close to them?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Really close. Really close family.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. So, let me see. I gather you did take the photography course at Tyler, but—

LAURIE SIMMONS: —I walked out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: It's interesting because I gave a lecture; I think it was at the Maryland [Institute College of Art]. And I think my former photography teacher had become the dean of the school. And I apologized for walking out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: But I wasn't at a point yet—it just felt so tech-y. It just didn't feel right yet. And I hadn't immersed myself in the history of art. I wasn't ready. Excuse me, I hadn't immersed myself in the history of photography enough to understand that it had its own sort of young and growing history. So I wasn't ready.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So you received your B.F.A. from Tyler in 1971. Is that right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then there's this two-year period where it seems you're sort of experimenting with life a little bit. You live in a commune, Upstate New York?

LAURIE SIMMONS: It was kind of—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You did a lot of traveling?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I wonder if you could talk about that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I did a lot of that. Well, it was interesting. After I graduated in the spring of 1971, I went to the city and I talked to a few people about potentially getting jobs, whether it would be in fashion, or assisting in —not assisting in an art studio, but maybe in a graphics design studio or something. But I was so not ready to face the world. And I was so ill prepared.

We were a family of women. There were three sisters. My father did not feel comfortable talking about money. My father did not feel comfortable talking about what one does in the workplace, because probably what he could envision was us getting jobs as teachers and then getting married.

And that's the way I got to art school. I sort of said, Well, I can be an art teacher. And then I refused to take any education courses. I wouldn't take anything that could funnel me into teaching or being a secretary. I wouldn't take a typing course, stenography. I wouldn't take a teaching course. I thought, I'm not learning these things, because it's not what I'm going to do.

So I was super unprepared for real life. [. . . –LS]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So this is the summer of '71?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yes. [It was actually, the summer of '67. –LS] I ran away with my boyfriend to Haight-Ashbury, briefly, and decided I wasn't going to go to art school. And that's a saga that I barely talk about, but why not talk about it here? So I checked out the Summer of Love in San Francisco, and I thought, Am I going to come back? Am I going to be a runaway? And I thought, You know, runaway. Not a good look for a Jewish girl from Great Neck.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: I told my parents I was going with a friend to a dude ranch, and they figured out that I wasn't at the dude ranch, and they really panicked and got really upset. And my friend called me and I came back home. And they just thought I had really lost it.

But I was really afraid of the next phase of my life. And I was sort of hungering for some sort of excitement. I mean, it was a really lame thing to do, and if my own kids did it, I would be really upset. But I grew up in an environment where I couldn't just say, "Mom, Dad, can I go check out Haight-Ashbury and the Summer of Love?"

I did not go to Woodstock. I was heading for Woodstock. There was a lot of traffic, so we went to Tanglewood instead. Not a good move, I think.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: But I went to art school in the fall of '67. [. . . –LS]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then you go to school in the fall at Tyler.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Junior year I went to school in Rome. Tyler had a Rome program, so that was really incredible.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Wow. I hadn't read anything about that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was that like?

LAURIE SIMMONS: That was amazing. I mean, that was really my first [trip abroad –LS]. We went over by boat. We went on a ship. We had these terrible little cabins in the center of the boat where most of us were just seasick the entire time, but we started to learn Italian. And then we stepped off the boat—we landed in Naples—and I realized, Wow, this is the first time I've ever set foot on foreign soil. It was amazing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And that was a really formative year. It was really incredible.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So it was the full academic year?

LAURIE SIMMONS: The full academic year.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Take a boat back. And then I finished my senior year in Philadelphia. And, I'm sorry, that's when—1971 is when I felt ill prepared to face the world. That summer is the summer that I visited—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Upstate.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Upstate, Roscoe, New York. And that's when a group of us ended up living in a house in Roscoe that was owned by one friend. So it wasn't, you know, the true communal situation that you read about from—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So Roscoe is sort of like directly west almost.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That fly-fishing area and all that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Route 17. Yeah. That's exactly—the Beaverkill River. So I hung out there for a couple years, kind of going through a primitive art phase, and then learning photography in the darkroom there. So it was really—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you talk about that a little bit?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. I decided that I wanted to learn how—I don't know why I decided that I wanted to learn how to use a camera. And I set up a darkroom, just out of the clear blue. I wanted to learn.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LAURIE SIMMONS: And then during that period of time, from '71, after graduating and moving up there, I tried to figure out what my next [phase would be –LS]. I had a boyfriend there. I liked him a lot, but I knew I wasn't going to stay.

I don't know if you remember this from your own kids, but it seems like when kids graduate school, it's almost random how you figure out where you're going to go. "I have a friend in Chicago. Maybe I should go to Chicago and try to get a job in Chicago." Or, "I have a friend in San Francisco."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I did the same thing.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. We just tried to figure out where to go. And I remember considering Chicago. I remember considering San Francisco. And then, at one point, I decided to take this grand trip to Europe.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. I wanted to hear about that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. So the trip to Europe was—I guess that was '71. I have all of this written down.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So like the fall of '71?

LAURIE SIMMONS: No. It was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Or later?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Later. I'm trying to figure out when we did this trip to Europe. I'm so sorry. I usually have my dates. I think it went from like March to July of—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —'72.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Okay. I'm going to say it's March to July of '72.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That makes sense.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And we went to 16 countries. We lived in a Deux Chevaux [Citroën car]. I have lots of pictures of that time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: We sort of made our car so we could open the trunk and extend it with boards so we could sleep in the car. I mean, we went there with a certain amount of money, bought a car, and ended up selling the car at the end of the trip, and really kind of coming out even. I don't know if we sold the car for more money, but it's amazing how little we spent. We would buy Knorr soups and cook them over a little Bunsen burner thing in our car. We really were on the road. We went to big cities, and we would stay in pensions, or little boarding houses, and there were times when we even didn't know where to stay, so we would sleep in a parking lot or by the side of the road. I mean, yeah, it's not every parent's dream of what their kids are going to do.

And then my dream was—this is so crazy, but this is what people were doing—my dream was to get to Afghanistan. I know this sounds nuts, but it was July and we were halfway across Turkey, and I couldn't even put my feet down on the [floorboard]. I had to keep [my feet in] a bucket of water because the floor of the car was so hot.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So we just thought, We're going to roast. So we turned around and headed back.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Probably wise.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] But still, how intrepid.

LAURIE SIMMONS: As usual, I had friends that were way more intrepid that made it all the way to India. So, of course, our trip was extraordinary, but I always felt like, Oh, I never made it to Afghanistan. I never got to India.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. [Laughs.] Okay. So you come back in July, and then the fall of '72, you're back in New York?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I came back—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You're living in the loft on the Bowery somehow?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. But I'm trying to figure out—I think that was—I'm thinking. Was that the—gosh. I have another book that has my—let me just look at my timeline for one sec. I don't want to drag this away.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know. Is this helpful? No. Probably not.

LAURIE SIMMONS: No, I know I have my timeline.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Let me just pause this.

[Audio break.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah, toured Eastern Europe by car, Romania, 1972. Lived at a farm, Upstate New York, 1971 to 1973. I have all the pictures here. So I think I got the place in New York in 1973, like, the spring of '73, I'm

going to say.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The reason I'm asking is there's the mention of getting the loft with Jimmy DeSana in 1973 in some interview. I think it was the Sarah Charlesworth one. I'm not sure. But there was a mention of you first living in a loft on the Bowery.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, yeah, I did.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You did.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I did.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So that was preceding the—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Preceding the loft on Broadway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I did. When I first moved here—and I'm surprised because I really am good at my dates. I think that I moved to New York—because I got a place in New York, and I was going back and forth to Roscoe still. So I think I moved to New York, maybe to the Bowery, in the fall of '72, having come back from that trip.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That makes sense.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And then by the spring, '73, that's when I got the loft on Broadway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Broadway. Got it. Okay. This is all falling together. Great. The Bowery must have been pretty rough at that time.

LAURIE SIMMONS: A lot of artists lived there. It was rough, but it was full of furniture stores. We lived above a lighting [shop –LS]—it was full of lighting stores.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And there was a place called Moishe's, where everybody went to have breakfast, and we could walk to Chinatown and get really cheap food there. And, of course, we could easily walk to SoHo. It seemed like a really great location. It didn't feel dangerous. And you know, when you're that young and it's exciting to be in New York, you don't really see the dirt. You don't really see the homeless people in any way as being threatening. You just see it as part of the landscape, part of the beautiful landscape actually, having grown up in the suburbs where everything was sheer perfection.

But I remember moving to Broadway in the spring of '73 and feeling just so excited and that life was so full of promise. And, of course, in those days on Broadway, there was not a store on the ground floor. It was all wholesale. Maybe there was one stationery store and one pizza shop. Everything else was not open to the public. So it was just a dark kind of corridor at night with no lights.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: God, what a change.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah, really.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Geez. Right. And it sounds like you made it a point to see a lot of shows, a lot of performances.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. I was hungry to see everything I could see. I started to feel more and more like my education had been very provincial and that there might have been one teacher or two teachers that made reference to things that were going on in New York. But we were never really taken to New York to see art. We were never really introduced to contemporary art. We had a very good foundation education in terms of the way to make things, and also in terms of art history, but there seemed to be very little connection between my education and what appeared to be going on in New York.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do any shows stand out, things that you saw at that time?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, my God. So much stuff. I mean, I was looking at Gilbert & George, and Vito Acconci, and all the stuff of Castelli, all the stuff at Sonnabend. I was looking at photography at Light Gallery, because in those

days, you could go in and ask them to open drawers. A pipsqueak like me could go in and say, "Could you please show me Jan Groover's work? Can you please show me Stephen Shore's work?"—if that work was even there. You know, anyone I was interested in. And someone would respectfully take you to the back room and open a drawer and show you things.

I just saw so much. I saw Laurie Anderson in performance at Holly Solomon Gallery. I saw Trisha Brown dance in very intimate situations. I went to loft parties where people were dancing, and drinking. And I remember I would always laugh because when the dancers—I mean the Trisha Brown level, all of those kinds of dancers were dancing—we thought their way of dancing to rock and roll was so dorky. [They laugh.] Because they were really expressing themselves.

But it was a much smaller world, so you could integrate, or you could go sit in the Spring Street Bar and overhear, like, identify your favorite artists and hear them talking to each other. It was possible to really eavesdrop and even to get friendly with [the older –LS] artists.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. I noted that you were particularly drawn to Deborah Turbeville's work, which is interesting. She's a little outside the art world.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I was always drawn to fashion. And I remember when I saw her first bathhouse pictures that they really spoke to me. There was a kind of romance, decadence, decay. There was something about them that really spoke to me. And I was always sort of hovering, like, emotionally in this sort of interstitial space between art and fashion. I had often thought I wanted a career in fashion.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. When I was young, I wanted to be a fashion illustrator. And I've always been very unapologetic about my interest in fashion history. As it turns out, I'm happy that I am a visual artist and not—I'm happy I'm not part of that world, but I keep my eye on that world, and I get inspiration from it a lot.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm really taken with this phrase that you just used, "hovering in this interstitial space," because it seems to—

[Side conversation.]

That odd place between objects and persons, between, you know, fabricated figures and actual human beings: you seem to, in many ways, occupy a kind of neverland between these—I don't know what to call it exactly, but I love this "interstitial space." [Laughs.] That seems like a good phrase.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I feel that that's also true later on, when we talk about my work, because I feel like I'm attracted to characters that also occupy the interstitial space between human and nonhuman.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Deborah is of particular interest. I did a book with her when I was at Bulfinch Press, *Studio St. Petersburg*.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Really?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. And it was fun to visit her and lay the pictures out.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Did she live in Mexico then?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, no. She had this apartment in the—was it in the Dakota? It was in one of those beautiful buildings up on Broadway. And it was such a perfect Deborah Turbeville space. It was one of those corner spaces where you look out and the whole avenue just goes south.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Wow. I actually—my interesting story about her is that she was having an opening at Sonnabend in 1975. She had this brief period of showing. I think it was Sonnabend Gallery. I think it was 1975 or 1976, and I went there specifically to meet her. And I wanted to ask her if I could work for her. And I ran into my future husband. We weren't dating. We were friends. And he asked me if I wanted to go out for a drink. And I just thought he was being friendly, and I said, "No. I can't. I'm waiting to meet Deborah Turbeville." And I think he was so not used to that kind of, like, blatant ambition. He was like, "If you ask someone to go out for a drink, they go out for a drink. They don't say, 'No. I'm waiting to meet an artist.'"

So I did meet her, and I asked her if I could work for her. And I didn't work for her for very long, but I helped her put some scrapbooks together.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Interesting. Interesting.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I got to talk to her, and meet her, and just spend a little bit of time with her.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's such an interesting character.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm just finishing a book with Duane Michals.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, really?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It will come out this fall with Thames & Hudson. It's a book of his portraits, which hadn't been collected in a trade book. And one of them is of Deborah, quite a bit younger.

LAURIE SIMMONS: She was beautiful.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, just, really, so exotic. Looks like something out of the 1920s.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Is Sydie Lansing—does that name—she just sent me some email about something with Duane Michals, some project she's doing, but you don't know who that is?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sydie?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Sydie Lansing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Gosh. I don't know who that is.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I'll find out what it is. It's another Duane Michals thing. I'll find out what it is and tell you.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, speaking of Sonnabend, there was a mention in something I was reading that you—a Jan Dibbets show at Sonnabend particularly impressed you.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Well, I think that I went to see a Jan Dibbets show, and I think it was the rainbow pieces, and they were made up of small photographs. And I went to the guy sitting at the front desk at Sonnabend who was there. I don't know if he's still there. He was there for a million years, a guy named Nick Sheidy. And I said, "How are these made? Like, just how?" And he said, "Well, he just sends them out to the corner drug store." And that's when I realized that I could shoot color pictures and send them out to be developed at the corner drug store. Like, I didn't have to worry about—I think I was already in the process of learning to print, but I didn't know how to print color.

And I think that hearing that and seeing that show really gave me some sort of permission to not worry about technique. It was like a flipped switch, and I realized that I could do whatever it was that I wanted to do, and not really worry about technique or being accused of not knowing technique. Although I did eventually print my own color, and I became pretty adept in the darkroom. I wanted to make sure I knew how to do everything. But I think that that gave me the permission I needed to just not think about things being perfect.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. There's a comment in that context that implied that a kind of weight of photographic history had somehow been lifted from your shoulders, that you had, again, permission to—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, permission to use a camera as a tool for artmaking, rather than to pick up a camera and think of myself as a photographer who was part of that history, that I could have a foot in each world, or neither world, that I had freedom in some sense.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do you think that you, as a woman artist, were in some sense more aware of the weight of history, the expectations?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Definitely. And I think—and I've shared this with some other women who picked up cameras at the time—I think that using a camera—because you have to remember, you know, the history of photography: if we think that that Niépce picture was 1837—and I have to check my dates—so if this is 1977, we're just like a hundred years and change out of the entire history of photography, which is so short. So maybe there was just room to really play around. Like, as soon as you pick up a paintbrush or start to sculpt, you're part of a different narrative. So I think that there was a sense that things could be more open, open-ended.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So in the fall of '73, according to what I had read, you rent this loft with Jimmy DeSana. And you had met him on a subway going out to the Rockaways, or something like this?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, there was a whole band of people. I think we were going to the Rockaways. We were

going to Coney Island, and my friend Jane Kaplowitz, who later married the art historian Robert Rosenblum, had found a loft for herself at 547 Broadway, and there was another space available in the building. She was on the third floor. The fourth floor was coming available, but it was a whole floor, and I needed to find someone to share it with. So it was how things worked then. I just was introduced to him. I remember he was wearing a white Panama hat and a little diamond choker around his neck. And he had a Yashica camera that was spray-painted white. I mean, he was very cool-looking.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: And very guy-looking. It was just this affectation of this little diamond necklace. And it turned out that he was looking for a space. So we thought, Well, we'll take this big space, this 200-feet-long [factory loft –LS], and divide it. I think the rent for each of us started out at $150 for each side, and then it went up to $300. I know. I hate telling these stories.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: It's painful, but—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It is, really [laughs]. But he was actively working as a photographer.

LAURIE SIMMONS: He was really a photographer. He was making a living that way. He had studied. And he ultimately taught me—you know, I was struggling to learn on my own, but I set up a darkroom in my half of the loft, and he set up a darkroom, and he would just walk back and forth and help. He taught me so much, really, about being a photographer. And I feel like I taught him about being an artist. I mean, I really maybe helped him think about repositioning his work as more of an artist who used a camera than just a straight-up photographer. Although he made a living through photography.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So tell me a little bit about this loft. It seems like you brought your decorating sensibilities to bear in your apartment.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I did.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now, let me get the chronology straight. You had—somewhere upstate, in Liberty, in the Catskills—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —you had found a toy store that was going out of business.

LAURIE SIMMONS: That was sort of the—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was that before this?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I think in 1972, I had found a toy store in Liberty that was going out of business, and I was really interested in what the guy was selling. And he said, "We have a lot more up in the attic." And I went up in the attic of the toy store, and there were all these toys that I had gotten when I was a kid, but they were wrapped and new. They hadn't been opened. And it was like some sort of weird Christmas/Hanukkah redo. I found my old dollhouse. I found a number of things I had. I found Renwal—I think the company is called Renwal Furnishings. I found dolls. I just got so much stuff there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you just, like, filled up your car?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And for nothing. And then at another place—I think it was Callicoon Center, some place like that—there was a general store, and in the back I found all of this old wallpaper. So when I got my own place, it really looked like the inside of a dollhouse. It was really like—thank God, I didn't have a lot of money, or it really would have gotten crazy. But I put linoleum on the floor, and cherry wallpaper in my bedroom, and it really was funky [laughs].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So were you in the Broadway end of the loft?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I was on the Broadway side.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you would have west light coming in, or southern light?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I faced east. I faced east, so I had eastern—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You faced east.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And he faced west.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you were in the back of the loft.

LAURIE SIMMONS: No. Well, the entrance was on Broadway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I'm sorry. On the west side of Broadway.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I faced east.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you faced east.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And he faced west.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Toward Mercer Street and over there.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Toward Mercer Street.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And I had just windows at one end, and a couple of airshaft windows, and dark airshaft windows in the middle. So it was one of those really long, shotgun, skinny lofts. And it had a beautiful—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What floor?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Fourth. And it had a beautiful wrought-iron balcony.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

LAURIE SIMMONS: That we would, of course, sit outside on. And my neighbor, who was one of my best friends, used to wear these gigantic platform shoes, these Carmen Miranda kind of platform shoes. And she would just go out her window and walk up the fire escape, and come in my window, all the time. That's how she came up and down. And when I think about it now, the potential [laughs] for an accident, but that's how we went in and out of each other's houses, via the fire escape.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: I don't know why, but—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Easier than going out into the hall and having to knock on the walls.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, the elevator opened right into our loft, so there wasn't even a hallway.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That sounds great. Now, just in terms of style a little bit—and I don't know Jimmy DeSana's work very well. I looked it up a little bit. There seemed to be some affinities between your—I mean, he talks about, at some point in an interview, I think with you, about using bodies as if they were objects. And you're kind of like using objects as if they were bodies. I mean, there's—

LAURIE SIMMONS: There was a lot of—I didn't think our work was alike, but there was a lot of crossover with lighting that I learned from him, using colored gels. There was a freedom and a spontaneity about the way—I was a model for him a lot, too, so there was this spontaneity with the way that he set things up. Like he would take some props, and two people, and be either inside a house or in a landscape, and just kind of let things happen in the moment. And I feel like that way of working was something that influenced me, because I would have, obviously, my little tabletop set-up, some props, and some lights. And things would just kind of, you know, happen magically in the moment.

I was never attracted to going out with my camera and being in the street, or taking equipment places. I was a little bit shy and lazy in that way. So I preferred to set up worlds in my own studio. And Jimmy, of course, would go out into the world to do his work, to shoot at clubs, to do portraits. So he was very much out with his camera. I didn't want to even walk down the street with a camera.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you talk about that a little bit? Because there's also a mention in the—again, in that Sarah Charlesworth essay—about—there's a certain level of embarrassment that you talk about. I mean, there's a shyness, embarrassment.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you—I don't know.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, thinking about it now, from my perspective now, I think I sort of associated a certain kind of personality with the street photographer, too. I think I saw someone who went out with their camera as someone who was looking for something, waiting for the so-called decisive moment, or searching for something. I did not want to do that. I wanted to make things happen when I wanted them to happen. So there was that.

I just couldn't—my sense of myself was not someone who would be wandering the streets wearing a camera. And maybe even being a young woman, I didn't want to be out in that more vulnerable position. You know, in those days, there was a lot more action on the street in terms of guys catcalling to women, and construction workers. It is so different now.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Really different. I mean, from what I know from talking to younger women, because, finally, men started to be aware of being macho pigs, and you know—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: —women started talking back. You could not walk down the street without, you know, people catcalling and making weird noises. And I had a lot of self-consciousness about that. That's not how I saw myself.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. This is interesting. So again, your social situation is doing a bit of a feedback with your artistic, creative choices. I just find this totally fascinating when social factors and political and gender factors kind of weave into the creative decisions, because the MoMA model is where you've got this, you know, "He's creating something." And it's sort of isolated, as if this were happening in a black box. But your experience is not quite that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And also I was intrigued with Diane Arbus, of course, and what she was doing. I felt like I was very drawn to the things that she was attracted to.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: I was very drawn to what she was doing, and intrigued, but, you know, she was Diane Arbus, and I felt like she had that corner covered. Like, I couldn't imagine—I was very scared of being a second-generation anything. I was smart enough to know that the work that I admired, and the stuff that I was looking at, it wasn't going to do me any good to imitate it. And I needed to find my own place, my own little area to work. So that's what I was really trying to do.

And I really was intrigued with these small worlds, and there was a point—and I would love to know the year of this—but I needed to get work. So I answered an ad in the paper for this toy store that was on Fifth Avenue: Shackman's. They sold miniatures.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I'm going to say this is 1976 that we're up to, '75. And I went and I interviewed to do a job shooting miniatures.

[Side conversation.]

So I got a job shooting miniature toys. And I was just terrible at it. I had no skills, really. But I did take one of the little sinks and put it in front of a piece of my wallpaper and fill the sink up with water. This is 1976. It's called *Sink/Ivy Wallpaper*. That's my first photograph. I define that as, you know, Photo One. Photo A, Exhibit A. That is my first grown-up photograph. I saw something. And it was black and white, and I saw something, and I felt something, and that is where I define my grown-up work as beginning. So I was 26 years old. So, obviously, I was fired from the Shackman's job. I couldn't do it at all.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: But from that, started my—you know, I always say, I got on this train and I haven't gotten off since.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wonderful. Okay. Just one of the quotes—you're interviewing DeSana: "Sex, suburbs becomes a theme in your work in the late '70s, early '80s. I'm referring to the kind of imagery where you combine artifacts from the five-and-dime with people in strange postures." And I thought, Wow, that's interesting. It could almost describe what you're doing.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Except on a different scale.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. True. That's so true.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And he says in reply, in part, "I think of the body almost as an object, which is what I'm doing now. I'm photographing objects."

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. There was much more of a play back and forth, I think, between our work. I mean, he was hugely influential on me. And part of my life's work is to keep his work alive. I have the estate and some—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you're responsible for the estate.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I'm the executor. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Interesting.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And he asked me on his deathbed if I would—we signed the papers and all of that. And that's part of my life.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And he died in 1990. Is that right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And that's just like, my work, my children, my family, my friends—the DeSana estate is a huge part of what I do.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's a great deal more to be said about that. I asked you about that—oh, I know what. There was a phrase, "Amidst the social and financial and chaos of my life and my studio, a calmer place began to emerge in my pictures." I thought that was interesting. So was it a struggle at that time, financially?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, my God. [Laughs.] I can't even tell you. I was just sort of like thrown out on my own. It's interesting because I've always felt like the first episode of *Girls*, where Hannah's parents cut her off and just, like, "no more money"—that was my story. That wasn't my kids' story, but I just was sort of thrown out into the world with no experience, no guidance, and, you know, no financial help.

I think that I knew that if something happened—I consider "privilege" to be this, colon [laughs], knowing that if something happened, something went seriously wrong, you could go home and get medical help through your parents. I wasn't on my own in that sense, but there was no check from home. There was nothing—and my parents—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do you think—I'm asking this as a parent now—do you think that's a good thing, to be sort of thrown on to your own resources?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I don't think it was that great for me, because I was so ill prepared, and because I was—I'm not sure—I was so envious of kids whose parents were helping them. And I took a series of ridiculous jobs, which make a great story, which we'll get to at some point. But I don't know. I don't know how to answer that. I couldn't live in the same city as my own kids and know that they were out there with no resources, because not having money makes you do crazy things. You just think of like, I have to take this job and I have to pay my rent. And you know, you get kind of desperate. But, yeah, I really struggled.

And I had no skills. It's interesting, because now, where I am in my life, there are so many jobs I could do now that would—like, I went to get a waitress job, but I couldn't even get a waitress job at some of the places in SoHo because I hadn't had experience waitressing, like, in college and stuff.

[END OF TRACK simmon17_1of1_sd_track01.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I took crazy jobs, like babysitting dogs, and working in a backgammon shop when I didn't know how to play backgammon, and, you know, going out for drinks with Japanese businessmen, which didn't last very long, but all you had to do was sit and have a drink, and have a conversation. But I didn't have the right

clothes for that. [Laughs.] So, yeah, I was really broke for really a long time. Like borrowing money from friends and trying to figure out—doing odd photo jobs. As soon as I had my first show, I could start to latch on to some teaching jobs and lecturing jobs. But that's all the way up in '79 already.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So let's see. So in '76, you begin making the photos that become this first body of work, In and Around the House.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you meet your future husband in '77?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I actually met him when I had a job at the front desk of the New York Cultural Center for a while. So that was around 1975.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, in Columbus Circle?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. So I was one of the front-desk girls at a museum bookstore. And I actually met him for the first time when he came in. My roommate at the time on Broadway worked at MoMA, and someone she worked with had been his girlfriend. So it was, you know, when you're young and you're just meeting all these different crowds. So I met him, and I already knew about him. And my kids love this. I wrote in my journal, "I met Tip Dunham today. He looks like a mouse." They love that story.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: They just love it. So I met him and we were friends. We used to double date, and he had a girlfriend and I had a boyfriend. And we were friends for a while. And then in the fall of '77, that's when we got together. But the interesting thing is, when I moved into Broadway, I never met him because I was away, but he actually was hired to build the wall—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's what I was going to ask about.

LAURIE SIMMONS: —between my place and Jimmy's place.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: But I didn't meet him. I wasn't there the day he built the wall.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And he gave you a camera?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I already had a camera, but he gave me his old Nikon that he'd used when we went to Andover and he took photo courses. He thought he might want to be a photographer, among other things.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And he studied with Minor White?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Interesting. So what was your default camera for those early pictures?

LAURIE SIMMONS: First I had a Yashica GT 35, and then it got stolen. And then I had a Pentax. That's what I shot with before I got his camera.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then his camera became your camera.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I still have it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do you have a favorite among them? Is that camera important to you?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I love it. I shoot digital now, but I love that camera. It's like an extension of my hand. I love it so much. I like to shoot with it periodically. It just feels good.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. Let me pause this for a second.

[Audio break.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: Once we get to New York, there's so much to tell, too. So maybe you should just digest and see what we have here.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. And then maybe the thing to do will be to—so a lot of territory to cover. We're

talking about nearly, well, I hate to say this, [laughs] nearly 40 years, from the end of the '70s until now.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. No. I'm 67. How old are you?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Same.

LAURIE SIMMONS: '49?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: What month?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: November. So I think just a month after you.

LAURIE SIMMONS: November what?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Fifteenth.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. My husband is the fifth. I think Jimmy was November 15th or 12th. I have to figure it out.

[Side conversation.]

[END OF TRACK simmon17_1of1_sd_track02.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is the second session of an interview with Laurie Simmons on September 27, 2017, at her home and studio in Brooklyn.

We're resuming around 1980. I have a small question. When I was listening to the tape, there's a word that might be important to confirm. You said that you met Carroll Dunham in 1977, and you were working at the front desk of the New York Cultural Center.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I met him in 1972, but we got together in 1977.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Thank you for clarifying that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I met him when I had that job at the Cultural Center, and I met him for the first time in '72, or early '73.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So I'm not sure what the date of this is then. What I heard on the tape was you were mentioning writing a note in a journal or a diary, quote: "I met Tip Dunham today. He looks like a—"?

LAURIE SIMMONS: A mouse. M-O-U-S-E.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's what I couldn't understand. [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Something that my kids just—my daughters transcribed all my journals, which she's pushing to publish. And as of now, I'm very hesitant, but the girls just love that story, that the first time I met their Dad I said he looked like a mouse.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In this interview, how would you prefer that I refer to him?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Carroll Dunham.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Carroll Dunham.

LAURIE SIMMONS: He likes that, but of course, if I'm talking about him, it can be Tip. You can say Laurie refers to [Carroll Dunham] as Tip.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. Okay. So, 1979, you had your first show at Artists Space, and you meet Helene Winer. And Artists Space is where Douglas Crimp did the *Pictures* show that was kind of a turning-point sort of show. You were not in that show.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-mm [negative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. But at this time you meet Cindy Sherman.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I met her when she was working at the front desk of Artists Space.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. And you become aware of work by Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Sarah Charlesworth, who becomes a close friend. Is that right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I didn't meet Sarah until 1982 or 1983. And I'm about to give a lecture about her at LACMA.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, really?

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I'm really busily sort of putting together a lot of personal and art photos. I'm really focusing on her life and when we met.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: But the interesting thing about meeting Cindy was that Helene wanted me to meet her, and I came into Artists Space carrying—I actually came into Artists Space to pick up a little box of photos that Helene had looked at, that had been dropped off to her. And Cindy opened the drawer and pulled out her little box of photos, and it was like, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: And we traded boxes. And that's the first time I saw the film stills.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. What did you feel you had in common, or differences between what you were doing and what these women were doing? Did you feel a commonality?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I did. And it was not just women, because there were a number of men working, and I thought that we were all working in a kind of—I don't know if I would use the word "irreverent," or "outsider," but I was aware that we were all using photography in a very relaxed way, as people that hadn't studied photography. And I think I told you the story of going into Sonnabend Gallery and seeing a Jan Dibbets show.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I felt like I had permission to use photography, and use a camera, and use prints, without knowing everything that there was to know. There could be dirt on my prints and it would still be okay. They could be blurry and it would still be okay.

And I suddenly got the idea that there were a number of people who felt like all of these things were okay as well. Like you didn't have to have perfect eight-by-10, black-and-white prints printed in a darkroom by your own hand. So that's what I felt when I saw Cindy's dirty old prints of her dressing up in costumes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] So I'm trying to recapture a little of the feel of that time, because there's this group of you, were kind of media obsessed, who are engaging with photography. At the same, it seems, or right around then, there's a whole group of people who are embracing an almost retrograde sense of painting, you know, Neo-Expressionists. And there are the two extraordinarily different directions going on in New York at that time.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I think that I felt, to sort of cement my own position, I think that I felt like, Oh, painting is dead. But then there were some painters that I accepted. I was really interested in—did we call it New Image painting at the time? There was—New Image painting?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes. Oh, right.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So there were certain painters that seemed like they slipped through this barricade that I had set up against, you know, a them-and-us thing about painting. I certainly felt like the photography work that I hoped I was doing and that other people were doing was more connected to Conceptual art, and less connected to a kind of linear history of painting. So, you know, I took a lot of comfort in that. But the thing about being young is that you decide who's in, who's out, who's good, who's bad. You have such a dramatic way.

[It's –LS] the only thing you have when you're young—you've got nothing else. You've got no money, no success yet. You've got your opinions, and that's your currency. So I was busy ticking off in my brain which artists were okay, and which were fraudulent, and which were retrograde, and which were cutting-edge. That's what you have.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Okay. So just sort of segueing into the '80s, and yeah, you did mention that Cindy introduced you to Sarah Charlesworth in '82, you say.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was intrigued by this quote. I don't think I mentioned this before. This is you: "Perhaps Sarah felt as we did, that, as women, we might commandeer the camera in a new way."

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: "Not as photographers, but as artists using new technology. Thus extricating ourselves from the weighty and male-dominated history of painting."

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And so this is a bit of what you're referring to here, this kind of struggle or—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. This kind of desire to define yourself, as you do when you're a young artist, define yourself by not only what you are, but most importantly, what you're not. And that becomes a very important kind of definition: I'm not a painter. I'm not an abstract painter. I'm not a sculptor. I'm not a Museum of Modern Art photographer. You know, I'm this thing, whatever this thing is. And I think that desire to—I think that I was very motivated by a desire not to be a second-generation anything, but to be a first-generation something. Which—it was so crazy when I think about it now, considering that I was taking pictures of dolls.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: But, okay. That's done. [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] So some of the people you mention—let me back up. I'm very interested at the moment in sort of the social circles often overlapping—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —that get formed and that become conduits in a way for new directions in art, and I—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, it's interesting that you brought that up, because at the same time that I was doing my work and had this group of friends that I was developing, who also worked with a camera, there was my husband, who was a painter, and his friends who were painters and sculptors, and people I was meeting through him. And he was very connected to an older generation, like Mel Bochner and Dorothea Rockburne and Barry Le Va. And I also had this group of friends, one of whom I had gone to art school with, that was this very short-lived movement that was embraced by Marsha Tucker, called the Energists.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't know about that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: You missed that one, right?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And there were—I can actually dig up the names for you to add to the interview, but Steve Keister was a friend of mine who was very—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, really? Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: —prominent in that group. And they were also dubbed kind of "Canal Street artists," because they were using a lot of the materials that they found in those plastic stores that we all loved on Canal Street, and Pearl Paint, and kind of doing a mishmash of sculptural—is this really a problem, this noise on the outside?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't think so.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. A mishmash of sculptural components. And it was kind of cool work, but it was so interesting at the time because—I was kind of envious of them because they thought they were the next big thing, the next big movement. And they were constantly talking about the collectors that were coming to buy their work. I just wish I had the names of some of them at my fingertips, but I'd love to give you those names. Another person was Tara Suzuki. Nancy [Arlen –LS]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That would be so interesting.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So Marsha Tucker was kind of embracing this gang. And I think that they might have had a show at the early New Museum, up on Fifth Avenue. I'm not a hundred-percent sure. But they seemed like they were poised to be the next big thing, at the same time that my friends and I were working.

The older Conceptualists and Process artists were still in full swing. My husband was trying to kind of find a way

to make paintings that was outside of the box of the history of painting, and perhaps more connected to Conceptual art. I mean, he worked for Dorothea Rockburne, and briefly worked for Mel Bochner. He was trying to find his own place in a different way. So I had that going on in my life.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In the paragraph that I was referring to, you mention Gretchen Bender, Nancy Dwyer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine. You said there were informal gatherings and—

LAURIE SIMMONS: I have something to show you—because I brought this for the Sarah lecture—that I think you'll be intrigued by. It'll just take me a few seconds.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. I will pause.

[Audio break.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. With this, you might want to look at it before we talk. And it ended with the—

[Audio break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. What you've just given me, an invitation to a dance given by Cindy Sherman and her girlfriends.

LAURIE SIMMONS: The reason being, parentheses, that Cindy paid for the party, because she was one of the artists that got out of the starting gate earlier and actually made some money.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And this would be what year, roughly?

LAURIE SIMMONS: You know, we never put dates on things then. It's really crazy. I'm going to say this could be 1982 or '81. And does this have a year on it?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Metro Pictures wasn't putting dates on either? That's just tragic.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Metro Pictures started in 1980.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. So I would say—this is on Greene Street, so they had already moved. So it's a couple of years later. I'm going to say it's '83 or '84.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I'm going to say this is '84, but a lot of stuff happened in between.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So this is an invitation. Is that your image on that?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. An invitation with an image by Laurie Simmons to a group show in end of January, maybe 1983 or '84, with Gretchen Bender, Jennifer Bolande, Nancy Dwyer, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger. What a lineup. Louise Lawler, [inaudible], Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and Julie Wachtel.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Sarah's not in that. That's terrible. But Sarah was certainly part of our group.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. So were there informal gatherings where you just sort of like—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —talked to one another?

LAURIE SIMMONS: We had some real girl parties.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Girl parties.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. There were so many parties and so many openings. I can't remember them really. I mean, there was so much. When you're young in New York, there's so much going out at night to openings and block parties and things like that. But I know that we had them.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We're going to get—I don't want to lose this thread. We're going to get back to talking about girl universe a little bit. I think this is a really, really important subject to take further, but I don't want to

lose the thread of the narrative either.

So the first solo show you had at Metro Pictures was the ones you made in Jamaica?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Did I talk about that last time?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't think so. You had friends—

LAURIE SIMMONS: —come and swim for me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Come and swim for you.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And I think this is a very important part of my history that I feel like it's really important to share for—it's something that I want to share with younger artists and other artists. But I think that in that show, I sort of jumped the shark, jumped the gun. I became really frightened of being known as the woman who used dolls. And a lot of people had responded to the doll work in a very positive way, but I felt compelled to change.

At the same time, on April 26, 1980, a very close friend of mine died. And I was with her. Her name was Rosalie Onorato and she worked at *Artforum*. I think she was the head of either circulation, whatever that is, or selling advertising. But she—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Could you say her last name?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Rosalie Onorato.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Like O-N-O-R-A-T-O?

LAURIE SIMMONS: —O-R-A-T-O. And she was married to a curator called Ron Onorato, but they were separated.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That name's familiar.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And I inherited her cat when she died and a lot of her things, and helped distribute her fantastic—she wanted her books to go to Rutgers. But Rosalie died, and it was my first close experience with death, because I was with her when she died. And it was very profound for me. She had Hodgkin's [lymphoma] that turned into, I guess, leukemia, acute leukemia. And she died. She went to the hospital and died very quickly. So I was in a lot of pain about that.

And at the same time, I was confused about my identity as the woman who photographed dolls. And I had seen—I'm going to be perfectly honest here, because the truth is always so much more interesting than the mythology that you can fabricate.

I had seen the work of Ellen Brooks, who, for a short of period of time in her life, was also using dolls. And I thought, I don't know if this is my territory. I was too afraid to claim it, and I kind of moved away from it. And I had this show in 1981 that was the Swimmers.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And I succeeded in confusing everyone.

[Side conversation about drilling sounds.]

So I think one of the really profound things about shooting underwater was that, for me, whenever I was underwater, I felt kind of weightless and free. And I think it was, in hindsight, a way that I separated myself from the grief of that experience. I don't know how else to put it. It felt so great to be underwater.

But the pictures that came out of that really confused the people that thought that they knew what I did. It really confused my art dealers. Helene had no problem telling me that not only did she not like that work, but nobody did. So you know, that's a good—no pun intended—total immersion into the life of an artist, to have someone tell you at your opening that no one likes the work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That must have been tough.

LAURIE SIMMONS: You know what? I'm here to tell the tale. And it's all—

[Side conversation.]

[Audio break. The interview is moved to another room.]

It's so important to me, because I held onto it for years that I had made a big mistake, that I had made a—it wasn't about being an artist. I got very hung up on that I had made a bad calculation and that somehow it had affected my life as an artist. And what's really interesting is that in later years, and even now when I look at the pictures, they have a real—for me—a real tender beauty.

And you're allowed to go off course. You're allowed to do whatever you want. And being an artist isn't about a big strategy. But when you're young—and you know, you might do it in love. You can do it in your work. You could say, Well, if I hadn't said that, or I hadn't done that, or I hadn't worn that, he would have liked me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And it's the same thing. If I hadn't made that show, I would have been part of this other exhibition. Or this collector might have bought my work—and of course, after that, I moved in a more complicated way back into using dolls and figures.

And there have been a lot of ruptures like that in my work, where suddenly it's almost like a punctuation mark, or an expression of something. There's so much work that I've made that I haven't shown. And I also understand the ebb and flow of thinking like an artist, that it isn't one clear path. It isn't one track that you're on, and if you're off—I mean, there are some artists that work that way, and I'm sort of both in absolute awe and admiration of them, that they can stay on one note for their whole careers. And then in another way, I think, Hey, aren't you bored? [They laugh.]

But it was a really pivotal moment for me, and a moment of great pain in terms of my artistic life. Like I had just gone and screwed everything up by making the work that, you know, I now understand I needed to make for a whole bunch of reasons.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, there's an aspect—and this is just a little bit off-the-wall observation—but there's an aspect of your work consistently of sort of touching boundaries, like pushing, like, How far can I take this? And you had done some miniature things with little swimmers, like divers.

LAURIE SIMMONS: That was right before.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right before this, the Jamaica pictures, right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: And no one saw that work. It was called Under the Sea. And no one saw that work, because—this is another interesting thing. I'm working on a—we'll call it a retrospective now, because I'm at that age. I'm not going to call it a mid-career survey, though I hope it is.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: There's an aspect of that that I'm hitting up against now, because back in those days, if you were an artist that was making money for the gallery, they would tend to show you every other year. But for an artist like me that was making work that was challenging to collectors or whatever at the time, I would have a show every two to three years. That did not mean I stopped making work.

And so I would move through a body of work and a conceptual idea, and get on to a new body of work, but I wanted to always, like most young artists, I wanted to show my newest work. So I feel like people missed the phase of bringing little toys into fish tanks, where I realized that I would rather be in the water with those toys. Took the toys in the water, and then realized that the swimmers looked more interesting. And there I was in a completely new place where I wasn't sharing my—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They didn't see the steps in the process.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I wasn't sharing it. So, hey, shoot me. [They laugh.]

But it's just such a long, long life as an artist. And of course, you're going to stumble along the way. Or maybe not. Or maybe it's all fine now. But you have this assumption that everybody's on the journey with you, and a lot of people aren't paying attention in that way. And maybe I needed to be more careful about opening up my path to whoever these mysterious viewers of my work were, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It must be difficult for dealers, too, to kind of interact and be supportive, and at the same time make a living [laughs].

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, they have a really hard job, because basically, if you're dealing with a bunch of young artists, it's like you have a really dysfunctional family. And everybody wants attention.

[Side conversation.]

But everybody wants—you don't say, "I'm making less money than so-and-so. Therefore I would like less attention." You say, "I'm making less money than so-and-so. I want more attention. I want more focus on trying to help me find—get into shows and help me sell my work." You know? Artists, when they're young, they're hungry, and they're greedy, and they're frightened, and they're arrogant, and there's so many things going on at once.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm not going to try and talk about every series.

LAURIE SIMMONS: No. We can't do that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We'll never get finished. [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: But that was really a significant period.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm glad that—that was a nice discussion. So in 1983, you married Carroll Dunham.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm just going through family things here: 1986, your first child, Lena; and then Grace was born in 1992. Is that right? I was interested to read that Grace's middle name was Simonoff, which is your original family name? Is that right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: My father's—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Your father's family's name?

LAURIE SIMMONS: My father's family's name, and that's the name that they had when they came to the United States, so I don't know if that was their Russian name. It sounds like Simonov, but I'm not sure that that was even—that sounds like something—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How do you pronounce it? Simmonoff [ph]?

LAURIE SIMMONS: No. Simonoff.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Simonoff.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And then my father changed it to Simons. And then when he married my mother, he changed it to Simmons. So there were a couple of name changes in there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was it like to be raising a family when you and Carroll were also very actively pursuing your careers?

LAURIE SIMMONS: It was just our family life. At the time, we lived on the fourth floor of the building [547 Broadway –LS], and I rented a studio on the second floor. So I had a little space between the kids and my work. This was, I think, when Grace was born. And I felt like my studio assistant thought I was a full-time artist, and my kids thought I was a full-time mother. So I would run up and down, up and down, between the two spaces.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Where was this?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Broadway, between Prince and Spring. SoHo.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: The same loft that I had moved into when—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. The same place.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So I was a little bit confused. There was a mention—I'm not sure what I'm looking at at this point. From '86 to '89, you're showing at International with Monument?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I showed from '84—my first show with International with Monument was 1984.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '84. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And it was just sort of an ancillary—people did projects. It was an East Village gallery, and I did a project. And Helene and Janelle [Reiring] didn't seem to mind. I had a show at Nature Morte of a

collaboration I did with Allan McCollum. I had a show at Josh Baer's gallery when he had one. I had a show—I think we did something at Cash Gallery, but I did have this one-person show at International with Monument of the Tourism pictures.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The Tourism pictures.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. I was just asking just for clarity, because I think in the [Calvin] Tompkins article, it says you were with Metro Pictures for 20 years.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I was, but I just did the—you know, it was a way to show in the East Village. I never left Metro. They seemed comfortable with my doing whatever I wanted.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. In the latter part of the '80s, there were two series that I think seemed, looking at them from the outside, to have been particularly important—the Talking Objects, which is the ventriloquist dummies, and the Walking and Lying Objects, which seems to have become kind of a signature series for you. I love the title of the series, Talking Objects, because it seems to capture very nicely that—you mentioned, the last time we spoke, this interstitial space between the human attributes and inanimate objects, and walking back and forth between there. And later on, I picked up, at the Art Book Fair, a copy of Carroll's new book, *Into Words.* Is that what it's called?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, *Into Words*. Yeah. His writing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. The writings. And of course, I looked up his interview with you right off the bat. And in it, you said that the ventriloquist pictures are in a sense—and I'm going to jump ahead a little bit here—precursors of the Love Doll photos. And I thought that was a really interesting contrast, because you talk about the love dolls as sort of having this built-in, obviously, attractiveness. I mean, that's what they're meant to do. And the ventriloquist dummies as being somehow creepy. That made me wonder a little bit about your attitude toward the viewer. Is this a concern? What kind of responses did you get to the ventriloquist pictures from viewers? How do you look at them now?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, it's interesting because I tend not to photograph anything unless I find it appealing or beautiful. You know, another thing—my experience being surrounded by artists my whole life—is that artists really want to push things, and push to the edge of where they can go, and maybe have this drive to shock people, or intimidate people. And then once the work's out in the world, you kind of revert to this little child where it's like, Can't everybody just love it?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: And it's a real contradiction in, you know, action, word, intention, outcome. But I think since I've come to realize that, even if not in the moment, my work really reflects what's going on in my life. I think when I went to the ventriloquist museum and was moving dummies around and putting them in chairs, they were exactly the same size as the child I left at home.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So there was something about the weight and objecthood of holding a ventriloquist dummy that was very reminiscent of suddenly being in the world of children. And there are pictures documenting—for some reason, it's sort of outside my real memory, even though I came from a Jewish family—for a couple of years, we were celebrating Christmas with a tree, and I was really surprised to see that. But I found a whole bunch of pictures in my father's slide collection of my sister getting a ventriloquist dummy for Christmas.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, wonderful.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And you can see me reaching out, like, Whoa, wait a minute. This must be our ventriloquist dummy, because I could clearly—in one of the slides, it almost looks like we're having a tug-of-war. So I think that I was programmed to think that they were really cool, programmed to think that they were really cool and beautiful. And when I got to the ventriloquist museum in 1987, Lena was back home. It was one of my first trips away from her. She was a little over a year old.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Back home from—?

LAURIE SIMMONS: In New York. I went to Kentucky to—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. In a place called Vent Haven?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Vent Haven. So Lena was home in New York, and I was away with hundreds of little dolls. I think at that time I just didn't get that they were creepy. I think I thought it was all so exciting and cool.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I think it's a long-winded answer to your question.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, no, no.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I found them kind of beautiful.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And other people said, "Ew, creepy."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: And you know, there's a lot of my work that people can just dismiss. It's interesting on Instagram. If I post my family, or I post some place I am, and get lots of likes—or some sort of video of something banal—you know, there's a million likes. But if I put up my own work, lots of times—because, parenthetically, the Instagram population that looks at my work, it's not just the art world. So I'll put up a picture, and it's just like a number of like, "Ew, creepy." [Laughs.] So, you know, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. I think we've heard that one.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. It does strike me that the ventriloquist dummy series has an almost documentary quality to it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I would say that's true. Maybe so influenced by Irving Penn's [book] *Worlds in a Small Room*, where he made a studio that he could travel with—I was so influenced by that. And then he brought people into his own world, around the world. And I just set up the same kind of shooting set-up where I could scroll through a number of backgrounds with a rear-screen projector. I had a chair there, and I would just bring the dummies in. And I felt like I was in my own kind of Irving Penn world.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. So then the Walking and Lying Objects. Now, just descriptively, the earlier pieces in that series are done with live models wearing costumes, right? And that would include the Jimmy DeSana as the —

LAURIE SIMMONS: That was the first one.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It was the first one.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And just a quick sentence how I got there. I felt like when I was working with ventriloquist dummies, it was at the same time of a—I had had a political awakening in second-wave feminism when I was 21 years old and when I graduated college. That was a really significant time for me to start to understand what feminism was, and I did a lot of reading then.

But in 1986 or '87, around the time Lena was born, I was having a second kind of political awareness about things that I had understood about the media, about advertising, about subliminal messages, about politicians, about truth, about lies. And the dummies, for me, were so much about a kind of cerebral process of—how can I put this?

They were a very cerebral focus, about the process of who's really talking. Who is speaking through whom? What are we hearing on the news? What are we hearing from our president? What are we hearing from politicians? How is it being filtered?

So from that brainy place in my work, I felt sort of exhausted. And I always think in terms of dichotomy. So I was thinking brains and brawn. And I thought about those early ads of the dancing Chesterfield cigarette packets. I thought about the idea of a woman's legs hoisting these huge, top-heavy objects. And it seemed like that was all about strength, and that was the very opposite of what—it seemed [the opposite of –LS] what I was doing as could possibly be. So that's how I got there.

You know, often, moving from a series is simply being exhausted with one subject and finding the next. Simple as that. How do you move on? So that's where they came from.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. It's a little bit difficult to talk about, because that series has been so extensively and eloquently analyzed, talked about. Kate Linker's essay in the Aperture book is wonderful. She really walks you through many of the dimensions of that.

So [laughs] I don't want to ask you to interpret your own work, but what I was interested in was a statement in the Aperture catalogue where you mention that—and this relates maybe to what you're talking about right now—that in the '80s you had been reading some critical and theoretical works. You mention Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag in that text that's reproduced there. So I wanted to ask how your encounters with critical theory, or whatever, how that may have affected the direction of your creative thought.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I think, in the end, if I could do a kind of look-back on that, I think that reading critical texts, for me, always made me feel less-than, because I felt like there were certain insights that enhanced my work, but oftentimes, the thing about the critical reading is that I'm not an art historian, and I'm not specifically a critical thinker. So one text would lead to another text, which were all very interesting. But if I was to immerse myself in that world to the degree that I was immersed in my own work, or understanding the visual world—I felt like there was always another place to go with it, and that in order to satisfy that itch, in order to do that thoroughly, that I would have to become a full-time reader.

I don't know if my work was necessarily enhanced by it, except that when there were oblique references to those people, I can understand what was going on. But I still feel like, being an artist, it's not an applied art. And what are the applied arts? Do you know what that is? What are applied arts? Like weaving and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Arts for a purpose, like decorative arts and functional objects and stuff like that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Right. And it's not like I was going to read a text and then make a work about that text. So it was an interesting period, but I think rather than empowering me, I think it made me feel, as I said, less-than or weaker. It just reiterated how much I felt was out there that I didn't know, because Roland Barthes would lead to psychoanalytic theory, to Lacanian theory, and there was so much. And I was still, like, a reader of fiction, and a person who was really hungry for what was happening in the cultural moment. That means film. That means music.

So you can be really overwhelmed by—especially as the age of the internet was right in front of us—historically speaking, one can really become overwhelmed by the amount of information that's available, and also become paralyzed by it. And I think that that was a real sort of dire warning period, just like, Glean what you glean through your everyday life, but head down.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You mentioned novels. Are there particular novelists that have been inspiring, or interesting, or reflecting?

LAURIE SIMMONS: This is really embarrassing to say because I know people read things several times, but the only book that I've ever reread over and over is *Lolita*, Nabokov's *Lolita*. And it's like poetry for me. I even had to write a text about a young artist, a preface for a Rizzoli book of Petra Collins's, and I even went back to Nabokov again to find inspiration for that text. [. . . I still have a huge list of books to read. –LS] I read a lot, but still consider myself part of the great unread.

And there's so much music that I haven't really—like a lot of my friends are really involved in opera, and I feel like that's a whole thing waiting for me, you know, when I'm mature enough to understand it. [They laugh.]

So I don't know how we digressed here, but, you know.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, no. I think it's important for people to understand the context, the cultural context in which you are and aren't swimming.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. And I think in that part of the '80s, the requirement for artists like me, that sense of the requirement to read, I didn't understand that that could be left to the critics and I could do my work. And I feel like those requirements are—if you feel like that's a requirement, it's going to really stress you out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I just—for some reason, it came to mind—I did an interview with Lucy Lippard, about Louise Bourgeois actually, and I couldn't help asking her about, you know, the whole issue of theory and so on. And she was very funny. She said, "Well, you know, theories are just ideas with hardening of the arteries." [They laugh.]

And she's maybe the—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I was going to say—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —definitely has to be one of the two or three smart—

LAURIE SIMMONS: She's part of the problem! [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: She's also one of the two or three smartest people—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, my God. She's extraordinary. But I mean, in terms of feeling overwhelmed and intimidated by what's out there—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my God. Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: She was the buzzword.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And I'm sure it would be really interesting to talk to her at this point in my life, because I'm sure we probably share so many ideas and can find so many common threads. But I go back to the idea of feeling a lot of these texts and sort of required readings, for an artist, making you feel less-than. And in the end, I can think of artists who were very reliant on that kind of material, who were very incredibly well versed in that kind of material, and I don't know what they're doing now. I don't know where they are, but whatever work they were making didn't have the kind of—it didn't have legs. [Laughs.] No pun intended.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: It didn't have the kind of endurance that that work needed to transcend that period, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Good. Let's move on. In 1994, you did a separate series with the dummies, Café of the Inner Mind.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. I'm going to be showing that in April at Mary Boone.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mary wanted to do a show, and I had some ideas about work that I wanted to revisit. And she came to my studio one day with practically a gallery plan of what she wanted to show. And those pictures have been little seen, and she decided that that's what she wants to show. So I'm kind of thrilled about that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I love the thought balloons. [Laughs.] Those are very funny, almost like a movie cliché. And that made me start thinking—it's always easy to see things; everyone has 20/20 hindsight—that in retrospect, a lot of your work looks like steps toward film or performance.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Absolutely. I think that I always had a sense of either making a musical or cinematic movies the way I would set up the early bathrooms. And then I would jump all around. I wish I had clued into this sooner. I would jump all around and shoot it like it was a series of animation cells. You know, like, probably if I did a flip book of the bathroom photos, you could probably see the woman moving in some way.

But I think that I had the cinematic urge, and I don't know if I mentioned this—and if I did, please stop me if I mentioned it in our earlier conversation—but I felt like I got away with murder going to art school. A very close guy friend who went off to film school, and I always felt a little envious that he was going to—he's the guy that introduced me to New Wave cinema, and he was going off to film school. And when I went to Italy for my junior year, he was in France studying film, and I went to visit him. And I always felt that I was lucky to get to art school—I had to do a lot of maneuvering with my parents—but that if I had mentioned the words "film school"—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] They would just—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. So I always had film envy. That's my point.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Film envy. I like that. Okay. So that's—girl universe and film envy are two things we want to hold in abeyance for a moment.

I just want to walk through quickly—1997, you were given your first major museum retrospective at [the] Baltimore [Museum of Art], right? Was that a satisfying experience?

LAURIE SIMMONS: It was a great experience, but it was one of the couple of heartbreaks of my work life. Or should we call it a career? I kind of hate the word, but—the show never traveled. So much work goes into it. A lot of friends came from New York, so that was really satisfying.

But to work on a show like that and not have another venue for it—as I get older, I understand that there are so many reasons that shows don't travel, but at the time, it felt like a heartbreak, like one of the really big moments for an artist when you really—it seems like something so good is happening, and it also feels so crushing, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What was it like to see all this work brought together? Did it bring any realizations to the surface?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I think that it began a period of tremendous change that culminated in my making my first movie in 2005, where I feel like I said goodbye to—let me see. Wait a second, '76 to '86, '86 to '96, '96 to 2006. Saying goodbye to like 30 years of work. I'm just trying to figure this out. '76 to '86, '86 to '96, '96—yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Just about.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I feel like that film was about saying goodbye to a whole period of time. Then 2006—my first film.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. And this is *The Music of Regret*.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. But I feel like that was the beginning of a kind of rumbling, of a kind of sea change that took a long time to—in 2000, I left my gallery that I had been with for 20 years, which was like jumping off, you know, an abyss into nowhere. And I kind of liked the feeling. That was May 17, 2000, at around 11:30 in the morning that I left the gallery, but I don't remember the exact second. [Laughs.] Only the exact day, year, and hour.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: But it was a really liberating thing to be with a gallery and have that kind of self-identification for so many years, and just decide, I'm going off on my own.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I just jumped ahead in time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So in 2000, you went to Sperone Westwater?

LAURIE SIMMONS: No. I stayed on my own for like three years.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You did. Okay, so that's incorrect. And at the end of the '90s, you were living in Brooklyn. You were on College Place there?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. That little street?

LAURIE SIMMONS: We rented a carriage house and we got a dog. We rented a carriage house and the girls went to school in Brooklyn Heights.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So they were at Saint Ann's?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. They got to walk to school together. And it was a period of time—I don't see any reason to hide this stuff—but we were, like, broke beyond what anyone could ever imagine. It was during the dot-com-era boom. We owned our loft in SoHo, and we were able to rent that loft to a dot-com company, which covered the rent in Brooklyn, the studio rent, with money left over to live on. So it was sort of like we had to clear out and use the only asset we had. And it was actually a really nice—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It must have been nice for the girls to be near Saint Ann's and everything.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I watched them walk off to school in the morning holding hands, and it was kind of like, Wow, this isn't too bad.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Of course, 9/11 falls in the middle of that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Fell right in the middle. That was not a great day.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That was pretty scary. My son was at Saint Ann's at that time.

LAURIE SIMMONS: He was there? How old was he?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: He was in like fifth grade or something at that point.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So he wasn't in either [of our kids' class? –LS]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: My daughter is a little bit older than Lena, so she was in her first year—she had just gone to college in September of 2001, so she was in Princeton when this happened.

LAURIE SIMMONS: But Lena wasn't as—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Lena was two years younger or two years back. She was maybe a junior at that time at Saint Ann's.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I can't remember. When did Rachel graduate?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: 2000.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. So Lena graduated in 2004.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do I have this mixed up?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I'm pretty sure—wait.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No. That can't be right.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. Lena graduated—well, Grace graduated in 2010, so Lena was six years older, so she graduated in 2004. And then she graduated Oberlin in 2008.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow, I didn't think Rachel was that much older than Lena.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How old is Lena now?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Thirty-one.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah? Okay, Rachel's 35.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. No. It's exactly right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's right. That's odd, because Lena was in a play that Rachel directed.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, Lena was kind of a squirt, but she was, you know, always out of place, out of time. So some of the older kids liked her. She was like a pet.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: You know what I mean, how younger kids that are too smart for their own good kind of cozy up to the older kids.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sounds right. [Laughs.] Okay. I'm going to go past a little bit.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Whatever you want to do. I mean, you have a concept.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's the Instant Decorator pictures, and Jerry Saltz gives you a book that inspires—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Those are the 9/11 pictures, because I couldn't go to my studio.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: And Jerry Saltz had given me this book, *How to Decorate Your Room* book, where you could just paste in different wallpapers and fabrics to see how your room would look. It started as this crafts project I did with the kids to have some fun with them. I couldn't go to my studio, and it was just like a big distraction that turned into a series.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. And then the Long House pictures and the Boxes scenes are using cut-out collage figures in them, and then you photographed the whole thing.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Absolutely, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, that's clear.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So they're kind of connected.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm particularly interested in the Boxes pictures, because the scenes look so much like contemporary stage sets.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, the history of the Boxes were that I saw them at one of the Pier shows, an antique show. And I saw them and I flipped out. I kept circling and circling and circling, because they were—I asked about them. They were made by a Latvian artist named Artis Winkler. I have one catalogue. I loved that this artist was called Artis.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: And they were mock-ups, maquettes for stage design.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They were. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because that's exactly what they look like. They have no ceilings, and they're lit. And you've lit them in this wonderfully dramatic, theatrical way.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I interfered with them like crazy. I interfered with them like mad.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. That's so funny.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I circled and circled, and finally I got the nerve to talk to the guy who had the booth. And it was the last day of the show. I told him what I was interested in. I said, "Maybe I could rent them," because they were way too expensive for me to buy. And he said, "Okay. I'll drop them off later tonight." Because it was the end of the show. He probably was thrilled to dump three big boxes at an artist's studio who was going to pay him—he hadn't sold them. So, my luck.

And he rented them to me, and I ultimately ended up buying them, because I took the money from the first few pictures that I sold from the series and thought, I can't let these go. They're in my archive. I just couldn't let them go. And who knows if I'll visit them again. But they were stage sets made by an artist, a Latvian artist.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Perfect. Okay. That explains the name. So back to, now, *The Music of Regret.* It's a 40-minute film. Is that right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Forty-five.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Forty-five?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Too long to be a short, and too short to be a long, I always say.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And in it, some of the Walking and Lying Objects come alive. The house tap-dances, I think, and—

LAURIE SIMMONS: The gun shoots.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The pistol does a tango. Is that right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: The pistol does a tango. The cake does ballet.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. And you worked with Meryl Streep on this.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you describe just a little bit the experience of making it? Was this very difficult for you?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yes. Films are difficult to make. I think it's kind of like childbirth. There's no way around it. There's no easy film to make. There's no film that doesn't turn you inside out, and challenge you, and make you think you're going to die. And also when you're making it, you think it's the most important thing going on on earth at that moment. Until it goes out in the world with all the million other little films that everybody felt that way about.

So it was very difficult. It was very contentious. I had just the most brilliant cinematographer, Ed Lachman. And standing next to him, having him shoot that film was, as far as I'm concerned, like going to film graduate school. I mean, one thing I'm really good at, if I can boast about this one thing, is knowing when to be quiet and let the experts step in, and observe and learn from them. Ed wanted me to tell him how to set up a shot, but I learned

so much from watching how he set up a shot.

When there were breaks in filming, I would just see him—he had a stack of my books and he was just looking through my pictures. So that was really lovely. And you know, of course, whenever I give a lecture, everybody says, "What was it like directing Meryl Streep?" And I'm like, "Excuse me? Do you think I had to direct Meryl Streep?"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: So to jump into a first film and work with people who were so knowledgeable and had their own vision about things, there was a lot of stepping back and just allowing the inevitable to happen.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. You mentioned earlier that this was a saying goodbye to a body of work. So where did that then leave you in terms of looking forward?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Pretty much nowhere. And it was like this kind of funny—let's call it this kind of funny Adam-and-Eve moment, you know, where I realized the creation had to take place again. And I just tried to think analytically about what I wanted to let go of and what I wanted to hold onto. And what came after the movie. Movies kind of turn you upside down. [. . . –LS] They turn you upside down. They paralyze you. They make you feel like you can't move on. I mean, I'm at that phase, still, a little bit [paralyzed from –LS] my more recent movie. And I think that I sort of made a list in my head of what I wanted to let go of, and one of the things was nostalgia. I wanted to try to make work that existed in the present moment, where there were no trappings of the past or clues as to a time period. So I thought, Well, how do you start over?

And literally, I thought you start over with characters that had no clothes and no furniture. I kept thinking about characters in their birthday suits, because I remember hearing about a birthday suit, which, of course, refers to being naked. But I heard someone mention a "birthday suit" when I was really young, and I kept wondering—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What's your birthday suit?

LAURIE SIMMONS: What's this special suit you wear on your birthday?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's very funny.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So I wish I had used it in the title. But I started with photographing women I knew naked, including myself. And it was just not neutral enough and somewhat uncomfortable. So the only place I could figure out to find unclothed, naked women was downloading free internet porn. And I quickly realized that the porn that I was downloading didn't have a kind of tawdry, salacious, sexual look. My interpretation was that there were a lot of college students that maybe wanted to make extra money—they just looked like friends of mine I had known who had taken their clothes off, and the expressions were very neutral, and it was the perfect character for what I was trying to do.

So I downloaded them. I cut them out. And at the same time, at a tag sale in Connecticut, I found the blandest dollhouse you've ever seen. It looked like half-finished contemporary construction. And I say "contemporary" in the most negative way. It just was you know, a shingle house with boring wallpaper, wood floors. I mean, it really looked like this suburban housing development.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I know what you mean.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. So I started putting these characters in these rooms and kind of color-coordinating them. And I simply called the series Color Pictures. That's what they were called. I was trying to strip it down to its essence.

I had one booth of them at the 2007 Miami Art Basel, when I was at Sperone Westwater Gallery. And a number of women came up to me at the art fair, and I really felt like people were looking at me a little bit like they were wondering what was going on. Maybe not like I had lost my mind, but close, because I think the simple answer might have been that they thought of me as some sort of feminist artist. And disrobing women in the positions they were in—because a lot of them were in suggestive positions, even though to me they didn't feel super sexual, [made people uncomfortable. –LS]

I think, once again, I felt that feeling, like people were very confused by that work. And I also felt Angela Westwater's discomfort with that work. It was clear. And, you know, there's always that feeling when you feel like the person that's representing your work, if they're not comfortable with the work, you worry that you won't sell any work, and that you won't be able to make more work. So it's always that really discombobulating feeling, like, Where's the support? And you feel like you really have to stand up, be strong on behalf of your work. So it was another really uncomfortable period. And I ended up never having a show of those pictures. And I

have like a hundred of them. So they're something that I want to include in my retrospective.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That sounds pretty interesting.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. They're something that I really want to include in depth in my retrospective, and they're something that I really want to revisit.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. Just briefly, you and your husband bought a house in Cornwall [CT], where you spent your summer, as you mentioned.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I'm going to spend most of my time there now.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You do.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. And you had been vacationing in that area for a long time before you bought the house, right?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. We rented a house. We rented lots of houses, because that's where we took the kids in the summer. They didn't go to summer camp. They hung out with us, and we would just move our work life there and drive them around to things they wanted to do. That part of the world worked for us. It was pretty, and we just kind of liked it there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We had friends for a long time that had a house in Salisbury, which I think is a little bit north of there.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. We lived in Twin Lakes; the first place we rented was in Salisbury. Who were your friends? Were they New York people?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. A couple named Allen and Ann Cohen. They have a house on Pacific Street. He used to have an old Morgan that he would drive around.

LAURIE SIMMONS: So many people have old cars around here.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] And there was some racetrack near there where there used to be a—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Limerock.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Limerock. Right. Actually, I met Meryl Streep because of them, very briefly. We were all going to an antique fair one Saturday, and she was walking around, I guess with her daughter and a pack like this. And I had my son and a pack like that. And she made some charming remark about, you know, a match made in heaven.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

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CHRISTOPHER LYON: She was very nice.

LAURIE SIMMONS: She's so sweet.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really sweet. So, summer of 2009, you go to Japan for the first time, and this is in connection with a show, right? And you discover the love dolls.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, what's interesting is that—just to backtrack a little—I saw this house in Cornwall in 2005. A friend, an art dealer, who lives in Cornwall, John Van Doren, said, "I think I saw a house you guys would really like. It's on the market." And I walked in the front door and I got zapped. I saw my whole life when I walked—I looked around the house. I saw my bedroom. I saw myself making work there. I saw a whole life there. It was like, you know, one second of cosmic consciousness or something. And all I could think about was that house. And we couldn't afford the house. There was no way that that house was going to be in our life. So that was 2005.

And I tried every trick in the book to think about a way to get the house, including saying to my husband, "Well, maybe if we got the house, I could take a picture in every room and sell the picture, and maybe that would pay for the house." I mean, it was pipe-dream city, what I was doing.

And somehow, in 2007, not going into it in too much detail, we decided to try to go for it. And it was right around

the time—right before everything collapsed in 2008, literally at the height of the market. But we met with the people that owned the house, and they found out that our daughter went to Oberlin. They had gone to Oberlin. They liked us and they wanted to make it possible for us. And at the time, a bank—not to go into too much detail, but it would have been hard for us to get the appropriate mortgage, and they agreed to hold the paper.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I mean, it was like one of those magical things. Okay. So, got the house. Got to move into my bedroom. I used to drive to the house and park. It was empty. People hadn't lived—it used to be a school, so people hadn't lived there for a dozen years. But I would park my car outside the house and just think, You know, if I could just sleep up in that bedroom, everything will be okay. So we got the house.

Then I went to Japan. My daughter Grace saw a little ad for the love doll. She said, "Mommy, look at that doll. It's a life-sized doll." She was pretty young. And I talked to the people I knew in Japan, the gallery that represented me, and they arranged for me to go to the showroom of the love doll [manufacturer], which was a very disconcerting place—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'll bet.

LAURIE SIMMONS: —because there were—love dolls are sex dolls. We know that. But there was a whole corner of the love doll showroom where the dolls were dressed up as schoolgirls, in plaid parochial school uniforms. There were dolls in various state of undress. There were dolls with different hair colors, different ethnicities. And forget about the ventriloquist museum. I was surrounded by dozens of dolls, beautiful dolls just staring at me. I asked the interpreter that I was with to please tell the owner—I was with my daughter—to please tell the owner of the love doll factory that I was there because I wanted to photograph them. But he kept going up to each doll and showing me how the legs could move, and kind of moving them in more suggestive and sexual ways. And I was with my 16-year-old daughter.

I mean, we can laugh about it now, but I still think, Was he sort of just playing with me a little bit? Or trying to test me?

So I saw them. I realized I needed to get one. The first one arrived in my studio with the help of my Japanese gallery at the time. The first one arrived in my studio in October of 2009. And then I took it up to the house, and then I did end up taking a picture in just about every single room, in every single situation.

So it was like everything I saw about the house kind of gelled in this—pretty weird. And then my movie was shot there. It was like everything I've done since getting the house has basically—with the exception of one series, How We See—has been done in the area or within the confines of that small, little complex.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That is so odd. So you found your dollhouse in a way.

LAURIE SIMMONS: It's a big dollhouse. And the crazy—it is like a big dollhouse—and the crazy thing is that I move furniture around just like it is a dollhouse. I mean, at one point my husband said, "Do you think we could stop moving things around from place to place?" Now he's much more into it, but it takes a few people to move a bed and a chair, and this and that, but I'm constantly seeing it in that way, where things are fluid. Like, I'll put the office in this room, and then decide that the office belongs in that room. The dining room has been in three places now. Now I think it's in its final resting place. Sometimes I forget where the dining room is because we've moved it so much.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: That's how I used to play with my dollhouse. Rooms didn't have definitions.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In [Carroll Dunham's] interview with you, he makes that point that, from his perspective, a fundamental change happens with the Love Doll pictures in terms of scale, that what he calls the "rough edges" of the pictures of miniatures and actual doll-size environments, where when they get blown up to a large scale, you can see that they're—

LAURIE SIMMONS: They're flawed. They're inherently flawed. They have to be.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. That aspect of the pictures kind of goes away in the Love Doll pictures. And you make such an interesting observation, that for years you've tried to get viewers to a place where they weren't quite sure what was actual and not actual, and that you kind of got there with these pictures, and that you didn't like it as well. I was just totally fascinated by that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, it was interesting because suddenly, you know, I used to search far and wide to find props that were scaled at least vaguely similarly to the subjects, whether they were dolls or ventriloquist

dummies or cut-outs. Given the inherent limitations of what I did, I would try to make things as accurate as I possibly could. I never really went for any sort of dissonance. That wasn't interesting to me.

With the love doll being life size, every environment was appropriate for it, whether it was a tree, or a bike, or a car, or a chair, or a bed. And—I'll say this word wrong—verisimilitude?—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Verisimilitude. Yes.

LAURIE SIMMONS: —of the whole experience, in some sense, became a little bit disappointing to me because I got used to a kind of dissonance, and I relied on it, a kind of subliminal sense that the scale was out of whack.

When I put the Love Doll show up [*The Love Doll: Days 1–30*], a couple of people came in, and at first they said, "Are you using real people?" And I thought, Oh, my God. I've just gone too far, where a couple of people, who I don't think looked very hard, but mistakenly thought that I had just started to photograph real people. I mean, that's how clean and clear the scale and the accuracy of the portrayals of the love doll were.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. The most surprising thing to me in that interview was you saying you didn't like to watch the dolls being prepared.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-mm [negative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you want them to take you by surprise?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I think that that speaks to a number of things. Number one, I wasn't one of those little girls that sat patiently combing the doll's hair or dressing it carefully. I was much more prone to cutting hair and, ultimately, heads off.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: My collection of Ginny dolls were just like a pile of clothes and shoes, and a pile of messy, uncombed dolls. So that kind of grooming—I mean, I was happy to do it with my children, who, of course, needed to be groomed, but that kind of grooming and even deciding what they would wear, I was so uninterested in that. And I also feel, number two, like I needed to have the characters brought in, revealed to me as though they were actors ready for the scene.

So I would ask—and it didn't matter—if I wanted to color coordinate it, I would throw some yellow clothes at the person I was working with and say, "Can you put these on and, you know, find me some yellow books around the house? And here's a yellow cushion." But I really wanted the doll brought in like, let's call it, camera ready. There was nothing about the preparation or the handling of it that appealed to me. And, in fact, I felt like it might have detracted from my ability to work with it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. Okay. So in [an interview with you by Carroll Dunham, –CL] the subject of a geisha drawing you made when you were a child comes up, and then you point out that you made drawings also of a Scottish girl in a kilt. And that leads to the phrase that I was so fascinated by: "We were all part of the same girl universe." You know, that there wasn't something specially Japanese that you were responding to. It was the girlness.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you refer to a sense of shared girlness. And I really wanted to try and get at this a little bit, because there seems to be—I mean, I realize there are male figures in your work as well, and that's not unimportant.

LAURIE SIMMONS: But they're always kind of an aberration or experimentation, like the male dummies and the cowboys. But I always return to a kind of female universe.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you had three sisters.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Two sisters.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, two sisters, I'm sorry. You're one of three sisters is what I meant to say.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I am.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Your daughter creates a hit TV show called *Girls.* I'm starting to wonder if there isn't almost like a creative DNA in transmission.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I feel that way sometimes. My grandmother was one of six sisters. My mother had some brothers, but I feel like I was in a very matriarchal world. My grandmother was very strong. And my father was a very strong personality, but seemed to want to defer to my grandmother and mother on a number of issues, even though his moods dominated the airwaves of our house, because my mother was sort of programmed to, you know, let her husband dominate. But she was the true boss. She was just smart enough not to show it.

So it's funny, when Lena named the show *Girls*, I remembered my mother coming in to wake us up in the morning, clapping her hands, going, "Girls, girls! Get up! Time to get up!" Because we were always referred to as "girls."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

LAURIE SIMMONS: The three of us, rather than our names. So I do think there is this sort of sense of this female universe.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, you referred earlier to a kind of awakening to second-wave feminism, and I couldn't help thinking about Nancy Spero's decision, in 1974 I think, to work only with woman as protagonist. Of course, she's framing it in very heroic terms, and that's the way she meant it, but there's this interesting narrative that peels off from modernism sometime in the early '70s, where it's not one story anymore. There starts to be, if you will, a girl universe along with the men, the boy universe.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And I don't know what to make of all this, but I'm just curious about your thoughts.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I also just realized that every summer—I think my parents' effort to protect me from boys, in quotes—I was sent to a girls' camp in Maine, which was really typical at the time. And my parents intermittently struggled with money, but my father really made us feel like we had a life of ease. That was a goal of his, as a result of the way that he grew up. But we were all three of us sent away to a girls' camp from June till August. That's eight weeks—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

LAURIE SIMMONS: —of being in a girl universe. And it was always better for me, because it was an arena where my talents were appreciated, my songwriting talents and my artistic talents. And in the world I grew up in, in the winter, you know, high school, junior high, grammar school, in Great Neck it was more about the clothes you wore and if boys liked you, your athletic abilities, too. Your coolness, however coolness was measured. So that girl world of summer camp was much more empowering for me than the winter world of school, which ultimately was really meaningless to me. It wasn't a place where I excelled, a place that I really consciously wanted to get away from.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do you see your work from where you are now as—do you see your work in a feminist perspective?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I think that my work is multilayered, and that it has to exist—in order for work to get out in the world, it has to exist on three levels for me for it to function. And that would be the personal, the psychological, and the political. And I think I mix the orders around, depending on where I'm at in my life. But it's like those three Ps are a kind of governing factor.

So I think if you're making work only about women, which I do, that there has to be a feminist read in that act alone, that I think that making work about women is so important. But I don't think that's it's—like in the Ballet series in 1983, I don't think that was a particularly feminist statement. I don't think I was only talking about the prison of training to be a ballerina.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. No.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Issues with body dysmorphia. I think that it was, like a lot of young girls, I was given ballet lessons. It was part of the whole package of being a well-rounded girl. I think what I'm ultimately saying, to simplify it, it's never one thing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But that's a nice explanation, the three components.

In 2010, you had a very substantial role, more or less as yourself I guess, in [Lena Dunham's film] *Tiny Furniture.*

LAURIE SIMMONS: It was so not me.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: 2009. I think *Tiny Furniture* was shot in 2009.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Shot in 2009. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Or was it released in 2010? [Correct.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Maybe released in 2010.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. You're in the right time period, but 2009 sticks out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How not you?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, Lena really, when I think back on it, she really directed me. And whenever I tried to show compassion or softness—I think that everyone in the film was directed to be a sort of a caricature. And I think that the mother, Siri, in that movie, was somewhat distracted. Maybe a little bit cold, not very empathic until the end of the movie. I think she was a single mother, and I can only assume that she struggled really hard to support her children.

There was absolutely no mention, as I can recall, of a father figure or a husband. She wasn't sharing the responsibility. One of her children was much easier than the other, and she seemed to really favor that child.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. All proud of her and everything. Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. I mean, the idea of favoring one child is pretty abominable to me. I know it happens, but it wasn't going to happen in my life, because I certainly felt like in my family I was never—growing up, I was just the horror show. I was never the favorite. And so some of my friends who saw the movie, who got really confused, they were horrified at the portrayal of this mother character. And they said, "People think it's you. It's so not you." And I said, "That's why they call it acting." I mean, whatever it was, people that knew me—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You were all quite skillful. It's really, I have to say, pretty impressive. I don't have to say. Everybody liked—it's an important film.

LAURIE SIMMONS: It was kind of easy to do when you thought five people would see it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You weren't so intimidated?

LAURIE SIMMONS: No. I mean, there came a point when I realized that I thought what Lena was doing was really incredible and very sophisticated, but was the world going to see it, or get it? I knew she had something special, which is why, when she won a prize—I can't remember even what the prize was, but when everyone responded to it at South by Southwest, I wasn't surprised.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It really works. And it seems, in retrospect, almost to provide a template, or be almost a prequel in a way, for *Girls*.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Oh, sure. The people that wanted to make *Girls* were definitely eyeing the—how can I say it? They were definitely eyeing the essence of the narrative of *Tiny Furniture* as a place to spring from, to use as a springboard for the next series. They wanted aspects of that. I mean, that's something I know.

[Side conversation.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We're in the 2010s.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay. You skipped How We See.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So 2016, a decade or so after *Music of Regret,* you make your first feature film [*My Art*].

LAURIE SIMMONS: I started it in 2013.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '13.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I started writing it probably in 2011 or '12. I really worked on it a long time, ridiculously long time.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So this was at Venice last year?

LAURIE SIMMONS: A year ago, and then at Tribeca last April.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And then Tribeca this spring?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Last April.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And in this film—I haven't seen the whole film.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I can give you a link if you want to see it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I would love to see it. You recreate shots of famous films like the final scene of *Some Like It Hot.*

LAURIE SIMMONS: And the opening scene of *Clockwork Orange*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So tell me a little bit about the genesis of this.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I think that after Lena's written portrayal of Siri, and my portrayal of Siri as an artist, I felt like Siri was more of a caricature. I think that artists like to discuss movies about artists. We like to discuss how wrong everybody gets it. So I always thought about taking a crack at the life of an artist.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You played a dealer, I think, in one episode of *Girls.*

LAURIE SIMMONS: Of *Girls.* Yeah. That was fun. You know, there was really this story that was the *Alien*, like bursting out of me. I would go for walks and I would tell more of the story, and I would write down notes. And I finally found this kid from NYU who taught me how to use Final Draft, and I started writing the script. But this thing was, like, truly—I have to put it in the obsession category.

I have a rhythm with making my artwork, and it's something that I know how to do, but this was something else. This was something that I had to think about what life would be like if I couldn't make the movie, because it was really—it's interesting, because I watched *Jodorowsky's Dune* so many times to try to understand how somebody could live after they didn't—he never got to make his *Dune,* and he had to live with that. So I watched that several times.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LAURIE SIMMONS: And I think that for the years leading up to making the movie, I just thought, Will I make it? Will I not make it? Will I be able to finish the script? Will I be able to shoot any of it? So I started to shoot it in May of 2013, and then Sarah Charlesworth died in June of 2013. And that was a very significant moment in my life.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I did want to ask you about that. Yeah.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. Really a very key moment. And I remember when I understood.

Her boyfriend called me to tell me. I was in a taxi going to an opening, and her boyfriend called to tell me something terrible had happened. It was like, the moment when I was integrating the news of her death, another my part of my brain said at the very moment, I'm going to make this movie, because one of the last times I had spent with Sarah, we had been walking around the yard of her Connecticut house. She had so many plans. "I'm going to build my studio here. I'm going to do this. I'm going to do that." She was always very plodding and slow. Everything was a process, a very organic process for her to make it happen. And I thought about the plans that she had that hadn't—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How did she die?

LAURIE SIMMONS: She had a brain aneurysm.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my gosh.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah. It was like, one night, and she was gone. And it was really a shock. I think at that moment something crystalized, where I thought, I will make this movie. And of course, I didn't finish till—that was 2013. We shot the bulk of it in 2015. We shot the rest of it in 2016.

So it was a really long process, but Sarah is—there was a part that we shot where I talked about her death, but we took it out of the script. But there was something about her death that was very electrifying in terms of me feeling like I had to complete things. So I did it. And now it's done. And the obsession, that itch has been scratched. The obsession is over. The movie is made.

And then sometimes I think like, number one, How did I make it? Number two, Why did I make it? It all seems like part of a fever dream now, in a strange way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Are you pleased with it?

LAURIE SIMMONS: It's the movie that I wanted to make. And it's going to have a commercial release.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, good.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Everything that has happened is more than I ever anticipated, but being the artist that I am, I always wish more had happened. So that's just the dichotomy. So much [more] happened than I ever dreamed would happen with this movie, and then the other part is, Well, why didn't more happen?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: I'll categorize the movie in the column of true obsession.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: True obsession. Okay.

LAURIE SIMMONS: But just to finalize it, I made the movie I wanted to make. And the response from artists—and they're my most important audience—has been amazing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's great.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I keep an email folder of the letters that I got from artists, because they're the most important. Those are the most important reactions.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That raises a really interesting issue—going back to the notion of art as a social activity, as an expression of relationships and so on—that how you think about your audience or audiences—I put it in the plural—who you're making it for, who you're doing this for—yourself, of course, but beyond that—how you think about that. I don't know.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Well, I've thought about this a lot, and my husband and I—you know, living with another artist, we talk about it a lot, because in the beginning, I feel like you're in a card game. I don't know how to play poker, but I feel like it's a poker game, and you're dealing cards with other artists in art history. Like they put down this card, and you put down that card. And again, I don't know how to play poker, but you're in some kind of like negotiation in your own mind with art history.

Then, as you progress, you're in some sort of narrative or negotiation with the people that represent your work, the gallery artists you're associated with, the collectors that buy it. And then you find yourself having built your own narrative and your own mythology at this point in your life, wondering who your audience is and who you're actually making it for. And that becomes a new kind of crisis, and a new kind of challenge, to understand, Who am I doing this for? Because you may be interested in the art of younger artists, but you're not in dialogue with younger artists anymore. And you end up being in a kind of dialogue with yourself.

And it's a very interesting, kind of lonely period that I think that artists have to navigate. I mean, I don't consider myself anywhere near my late work, because I intend to live for a really long time, but I'm in the beginning of my later work. And it is a very interesting place to be, because it's a very singular place, and it's a very alone place.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is interesting because you're suggesting that there's a dynamic to this audience question that changes as you grow older.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Constantly. Because as you get older, there may be aspects of your audience that you truly don't care about anymore, you know? When I was younger, it was hard to imagine who the viewer was, like who the viewer coming off the street—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Who's looking at this?

LAURIE SIMMONS: I remember the first time a stranger came up to me, someone I didn't know, who said, "I really like your work." I was at my first show. And prior to that, the only people that said they liked my work were people I already knew. So I put a show up. I was standing in the gallery, and someone I didn't know—I remember the moment—came up to me and said, "I really like your work." And I thought, Oh, my God. I don't know you. You don't anything about me. All you saw were my pictures on the wall, and you liked them.

So that was an amazing moment. I was 29 years old. But I think less about that person now. I'm used to that person. I'm used to having people come up to me and talk to me. It's always a pleasure. I always appreciate it, but that's not what's on my mind now. I would say that the dialogue has become more internal. And again, my husband and I talk about this, and I think that the prevailing drive, thought, interest, is how to keep myself interested in what I'm doing. That's the biggest challenge. How do I stay interested in this?

I've been doing the same thing in many different ways for so long, how am I going to keep myself in my own process? How am I going to keep myself in my own game? How am I going to push myself? How am I going to challenge myself? And that's where the movie came in. It took me to a completely other place, where I could embarrass myself all over again. And I think there's a little of that going on. Like, I made that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

LAURIE SIMMONS: There's a little bit of complete humiliation involved. Like, You really had to be in the goddamned movie?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. And I just wanted to conclude by just mentioning How We See, the series that you just mentioned. And these are photographs of models whose eyes are closed. Is that right? But their eyes are painted on their closed eyelids?

LAURIE SIMMONS: Their eyes are painted on their closed eyelids by really great makeup artists, so I didn't do any of that work. I hired a makeup artist to be an artist. Just to clarify, that convention of painting on eyelids also comes out of *kigurumi* cosplay, Japanese culture. There are all of these tutorials on YouTube of girls painting anime eyes over their eyes. I didn't invent the idea of painting eyes on closed eyelids. But it really was philosophically rich for me. It was conceptually rich for me, politically.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, the title How We See, I mean, what you're suggesting is, we see from inside, or something like that.

LAURIE SIMMONS: How are we seen? How do we see? How do we see with our eyes painted? And also, it spoke—I've had total immersion, particularly for someone my age, into internet culture. I can go down the rabbit hole for just hours and hours. And there are a lot of people our age who really seem proud of claiming that they're Luddites, and—I don't know. Our president doesn't know how to use the computer. I hate to call him—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Unfortunately, he knows how to use Twitter.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Unfortunately he's adept at Twitter, but I mean, he gets things printed out. A lot of people around our age, around my age, do not know how to deal with internet culture, and they don't want to. So I feel like I do, and I understand so much about it, and I understand, not fully because of my age, but I understand how it's changed culture, so extraordinarily changed culture as we know it. And that's why the idea of masking online—I mean, look what's happening now. Look at what we're discovering about Facebook and the election, and these 600,000 bots that posed as Trump supporters. I mean, it's just an extraordinary way of cloaking.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But this is so central to the work that you've been doing all along.

LAURIE SIMMONS: I think cloaking is a—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean, sort of fake humans, in a way.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And it can seem charming and girlish, or it can seem monstrous and threatening, as it does now, but that's all on a continuum from dancing cigarette packs to—

LAURIE SIMMONS: Totally true.

[Side conversation.]

[Audio break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We're, I think, at the end of this. That was just about an hour and a half, which is a target length.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Great. Look, if you need me more, the chances are that I will be more available now. Lena's better. She's doing well. I'm going to go out there and see both girls, but I have commitments in the city. Over the summer, I didn't. I had one lecture thing, July 26th. I don't think you'll need me, but you can also always call me, and I could just blah blah on the phone.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay, I appreciate that. So I'm going to stop here.

LAURIE SIMMONS: Okay, Good.

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