

Gossip and Oral History

Performativity and Writing the History of Women's
Community

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How are **narratives**
of the **women's**
creative community
in postwar St Ives
performed through
gossip in the
archive?

**“bohemian community dominated by art,
alcohol and sex”**

Chris Stephens (1997)

**“Friend of mine in London...Packed up and
came down here. John wrote me a letter
saying that they’ve got the most fabulous
parties...John Milne and all was still alive”**

John Emanuel (2011)

“But you knew that Cornwall had a reputation as an artists’
colony? Didn’t you?”

**“Tom, I’m much more ignorant than that I tell you! I came
down to Cornwall because I thought it was very cheap...”**

“This is the reason that many artists heard...”

**“...and again it was romantic, it was full of wild women
and wild parties.”**

Tom Cross and Karl Weschke (1983)

The oral history
archive is a
collection of stories
from the community

How does gossip
author a community?
How does a
community author its
history?

The archive is both
about a community
and is itself a
community

Gossip defines
community and
keeps it together

‘A community, in short, is any group of **people who come together** and present themselves as such, and a ‘community archive’ is the product of **their attempts to document the history of their commonality**’

(Flinn, Stevens & Shepherd, 2009)

Barbara Hepworth used
to have the most wonderful
wonderful parties Usually towards
the end of the year
And they were champagne parties
And they were held in the old Palais de Danse

(Michael Hunt, 2009)

He would have devastated if anyone had taken it seriously
His wife sort of
Didn't mind
Um
Uh

He was just a terrible flirt
And when he met you
He would give you a cuddle
Or he would say
Oh come and sit on my lap

(Shirley Beck, 2019)

“There was also a Portuguese painter there...Who was very good looking...I don't know what his name was...He was incredibly vain...He was in the same studio...And this chap...Was so vain... And he had black curly hair...Tight curls...But he was going bald... And he was a great one for the ladies...And apparently he used to draw...With charcoal...These little curls...You know...Like you might draw...On a...He used to fill in the gaps with charcoal [laughs] So there would be pillows all over St Ives covered in charcoal...Or so I heard”

Ann Kelly (2009)

“feminist epistemology which does not pursue a broadening of existing categories to include female subjects but revises those very categories, questions the historical narrative structures which produce them and dares to imagine alternative narratives”

Irit Rogoff (1996)



Yes
Well

She used to see Boots Boots
was at Trevaylor With Nancy
Wynne Jones
Boots was Mary Redgrave
And she had the New
Craftsman Shop with Janet
Leach

(Stella Benjamin, 2009)

She
married
Bernard
But it's none
of my business
Fair enough
No she came later

Then needless to say
he died
Then she eventually died
Then apparently she left all
the money to the Redgraves/
When the second Misses Leach
died [drops voice]
She left money and that to Boots
Redgrave And uh
I mean Boots
Lived maybe two years
Three years
And she died

Mary Dobbin, 2009)





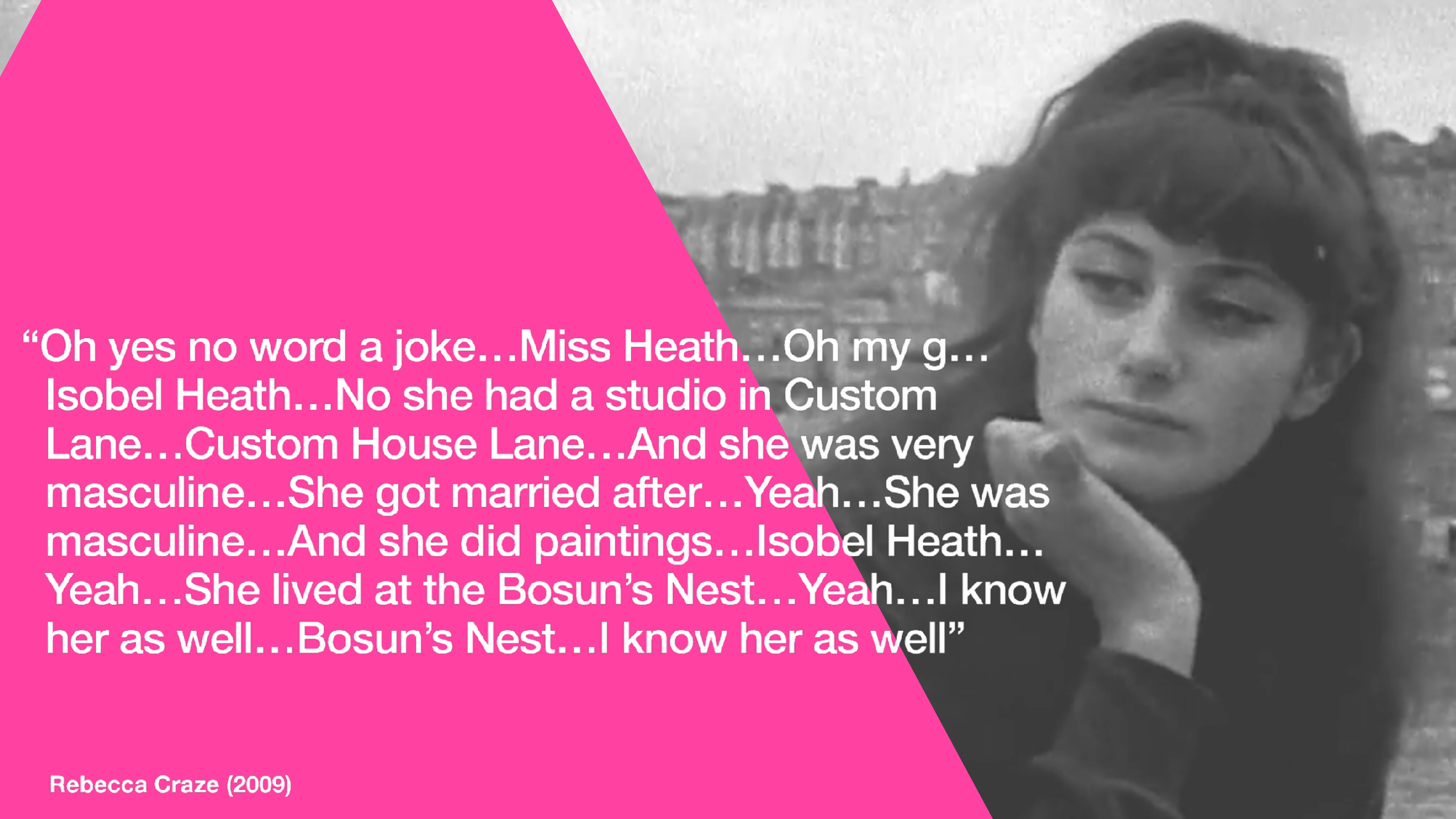
Well I thought it was awfully exciting/There were very interesting people around/But there was a lot of drinking going on/if I'm going to be critical now I wasn't critical then/ There was a lot of partying and things like that/It was a very different environment from anything I had experienced before

(Lethbridge, 2011)

And
Friday
night
was
booze up
night You
know
Let your hair
down Very much so
And all the fish
All the old
All the fishermen used to
be there On one side of the
pub
They probably thought we were
awful
But amusing as well
I suppose
They sort of
We used to be
They used to be
A bit of argy bargy

(Rieke Litman, 2010)





“Oh yes no word a joke...Miss Heath...Oh my g...
Isobel Heath...No she had a studio in Custom
Lane...Custom House Lane...And she was very
masculine...She got married after...Yeah...She was
masculine...And she did paintings...Isobel Heath...
Yeah...She lived at the Bosun’s Nest...Yeah...I know
her as well...Bosun’s Nest...I know her as well”

Oh yes

Lots of parties

Lots

Well the artists themselves

I mean there were

Everybody turned up and brought something

Brought a bottle I s'pose

And that's how it all grew

But um

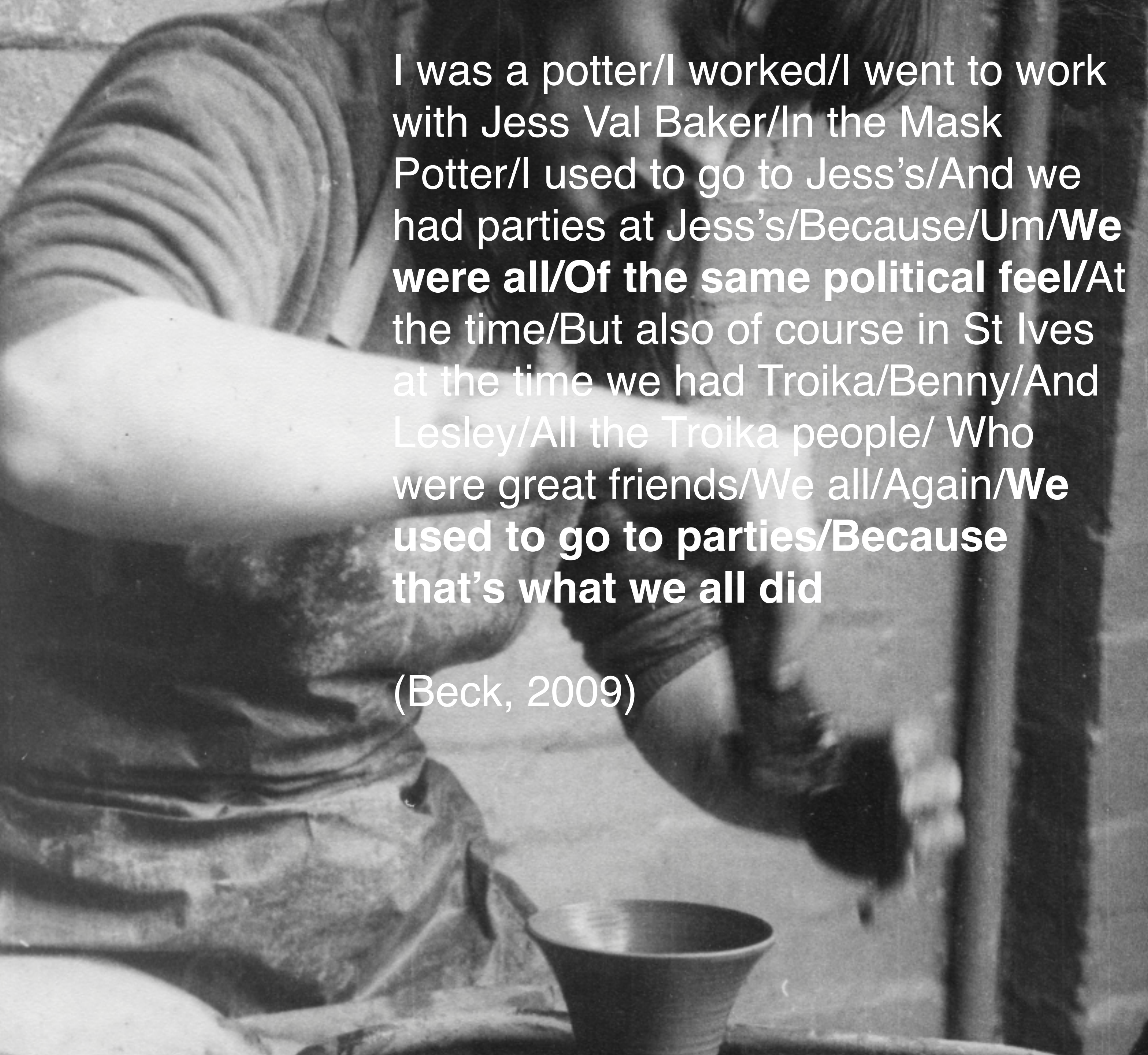
There were a lot of parties

I didn't go to them all by any means

[laughs]

Because I had to get someone to look after my baby

Mamie Lewis 2009



I was a potter/I worked/I went to work with Jess Val Baker/In the Mask Potter/I used to go to Jess's/And we had parties at Jess's/Because/Um/**We were all/Of the same political feel/At the time/But also of course in St Ives at the time we had Troika/Benny/And Lesley/All the Troika people/ Who were great friends/We all/Again/We used to go to parties/Because that's what we all did**

(Beck, 2009)

My friend and I decided in the middle sixties/To have an anti-Vietnam shop/Very naughty I suppose/In Fore Street/**We were so fed up with the terrible things that were going on/**And there was a shop in Fore Street that was coming up/And of course people thought/Who were these two girls/Well who are they/And I was talking to Patrick about it/And he said/Oh tell them I'll stand guarantor if there's any problem/And Barbara said the same/So Barbara and Patrick/Stood guarantor for Jill and I/**While we ran our anti-Vietnam War shop/In the mid-sixties/In Fore Street**

(Beck, 2009)