

# CLOSURE

Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

## Autorinnen

Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Sarah Lightman

## Titel

Aline Kominsky-Crumb in conversation with Sarah Lightman

## Journal

Closure. Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung #6.5 (2020) – [www.closure.uni-kiel.de](http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de)

## Empfohlene Zitierweise

Sarah Lightman: Aline Kominsky-Crumb in conversation with Sarah Lightman. In: Closure. Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung #6.5 (2020), S. 66–84.  
[http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de/closure6.5/kominsky-crumb\\_lightman](http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de/closure6.5/kominsky-crumb_lightman). 17.07.2020.

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# Aline Kominsky-Crumb in conversation with Sarah Lightman

Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Sarah Lightman

This is the second half of an abridged and edited transcription of *'Arnie's Air Conditioner' and other fond memories: Aline Kominsky-Crumb in conversation with Sarah Lightman*, held on 15 April 2016 at *The House of Illustration*, London, during the exhibition *Comix Creatrix: 100 Women Making Comics*, February-May 2016).

In this section Kominsky-Crumb talks about horrifying comics about her body, wearing Tefillin, the hole in the wall in her childhood synagogue in Long Island, and being a godmother artist.

The author is grateful to Aline Kominsky-Crumb for her interview, and to Lora Fountain and Tony Bennett for their help with images and permissions.

Aline Kominsky-Crumb [AKC]  
Sarah Lightman [SL]  
Audience Member [AM]

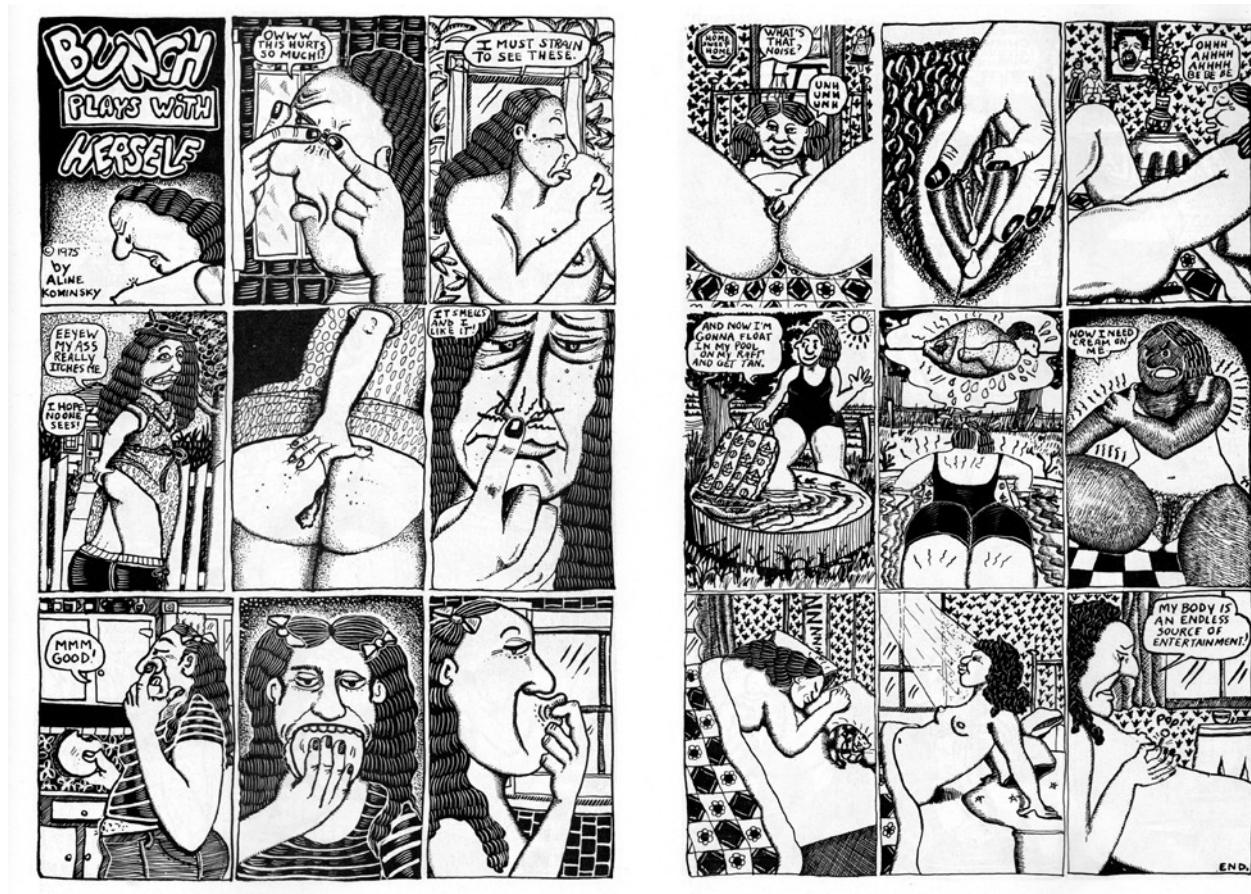


Fig. 1 and 2: »Bunch Plays With Herself«, *Love That Bunch* (1990).

AKC Okay. I just want to say one thing. This is ... [Fig. 1 and 2.] the most disgusting and the most horrifying story I've ever done and I didn't do it ... I wasn't ... I don't plan what I do. I didn't do it to be disgusting but it's, like, about every horrible and fun thing you can do with your body. And I think if a man did it, it might be bad, but it's so much worse when a woman does it. And, like, it truly horrified everyone I knew. When I actually, look at it now. I cannot believe that I came up with this. It's really incredible.

SL Well I think it's an amazing piece of feminist art [...] because women are drawn to be gazed at, and [here we see] their bodily juices, and everything.

AKC Take a look. Does that turn you on?

SL The last panel is the best. »My body is an endless source of entertainment«. [...] I think it's brilliant. [...] beautifully designed [...] a great thing and I'm so pleased you did it. [...]

We talked [before] about the image of you sitting on the toilet [on the front cover of *Twisted Sisters* published in 1976] [Fig. 3].

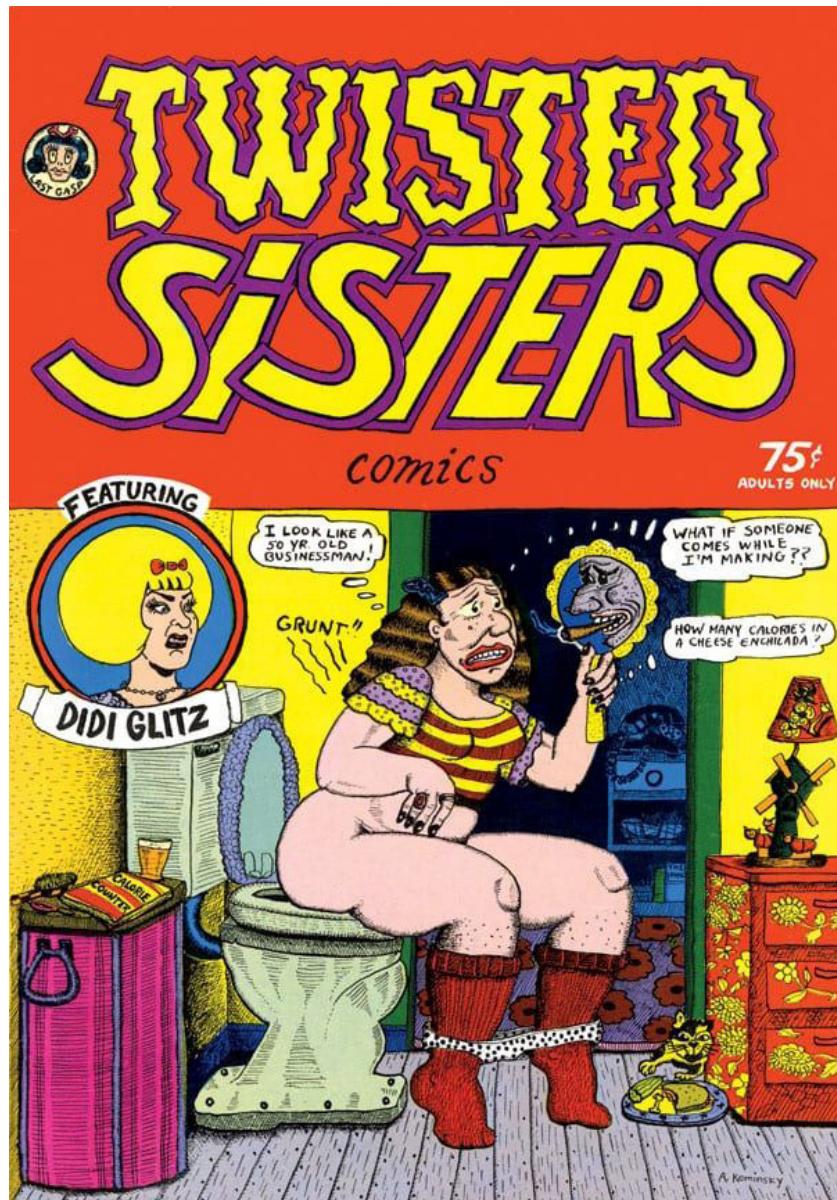


Fig. 3: Front cover of *Twisted Sisters*. No. 1, (1976).

AKC Oh yes. When I did the first *Twisted Sisters* comic, I drew myself on the toilet because, like, when I was drawn to underground comics, and why I left the fine art world and was drawn to underground comics was because I wanted to do something that people would throw away. Basically, they'd read it on the toilet and throw away. That's what I like. I wanted to do the most unimportant art that I felt that there would be the most freedom in that art.

And so, when I did the first *Twisted Sisters*, without thinking about it, I drew myself on the toilet reading my own comic. And I didn't think it was provocative or in any way unusual. And they couldn't find a printer that would print it, because it was done

by a woman and I think there was three printers refused to print it. And it was finally printed in Mexico, where they just didn't care, you know. But that amazed me.

SL The same printers that will print anything by men.

AKC Anything by men. Like, you know, horrible cruel porno or whatever you would want. Like S. Clay Wilson who chopped off body parts and everything. And all kinds of violent stuff, that was okay. But a woman on a toilet was too horrible. And that really amazed me.

AM You've asked the audience if we're still okay with your art. [...] Can I make a comment about this? [...] I don't know how many people have seen this. It's big in New York. It's called *BROAD CITY*,<sup>1</sup> a sitcom, that's out there now. And these two women are, their characters Ilana [Glazer] and Abbi [Jacobson]. They came out of *SECOND CITY [Touring Company]* and Tina Fey<sup>2</sup> and Amy Poehler<sup>3</sup> discover them after YouTube things they put out there just didn't get it out there. And now they've done two seasons.<sup>4</sup> They've just got a three season deal, and Hillary Clinton was on two weeks ago. And all Hollywood's fighting to get on this show.

The first episode of this season showed them both in their separate apartments, just in their toilet. The whole thing. And all these things taking place were all sex, smoking pot, and so on. The last one showed them talking to each other via Skype, and when they would fart they would mute it. And talk to each other. And then turn it back on again, like, no I'm still in, let's just keep going. And after seeing a few of these, I've just seen like ...

When was this drawn [the Front Cover of *Twisted Sisters*]?

AKC Well, this was drawn in the 1970s. 1975.

AM Decades, decades later, and now it's the basis for one of the biggest hits out there, that's only growing. And it's not on a network at this point.

AKC Maybe they read my comic.

AM I can guarantee you they have and they've definitely lifted it off.

SL And, what I was saying before ... So, about that whole male gaze, is that it's okay for a man to get any level of pleasure from looking and engaging with a woman's body, but for a woman to engage and give herself pleasure, and for a woman to engage with her body in a way that isn't about being sexually attractive to a man, that becomes a problem.

AM And, to that point, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler right now are on working on *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE* and how they were doing something and Jimmy Fallon<sup>5</sup> said, I don't like it. And they were like, fuck you. I don't care if you like it or not. You're not in charge here now. And that's why I think what these two women are doing is exactly what they wanted to do with *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*, but they couldn't do that ten years ago.

AKC I have to see it. I haven't seen it.



Fig. 4 : »Nose Job«, Twisted Sisters (1991).

SL You're given permission for this generation. And that's what Aline doesn't know and that wasn't her intention, as she stated right at the beginning. The effect of what you've done is you've created possibilities.

AKC Well I think the hardest thing is ... it's not making yourself attractive to men or trying to make yourself sexual. But I think making yourself really gross and really making yourself, you know, completely grotesque and really showing the underbelly of yourself as a woman. I think that's actually more, you know, forbidden than to make yourself flagrantly sexual. So I think if that cover had been sexy [...] If on the cover I'd shown myself naked that would have been okay. But on the toilet, it's just the grossness of it is what's really unacceptable I think.

SL And also to do that kind of disgusting abject thing, and then making it actually a very beautiful, well-designed piece of work. I think that makes it even more complicated. It's difficult to judge it on aesthetic terms because of the subject matter. People find that difficult. But actually, as a work of art, you can see it's very beautifully designed. [...] The next thing I wanted to look up to was things related to your Jewish identity and Jewish experience. I wanted to just highlight how the Bunch turns up with, like, a Magen David, a Jewish Star of David, sometimes.

AKC And don't forget the evil eye.

SL Yes. [There] is *Nose Job* [Fig. 4], [where] Jewish identity is identified through physical manifestation. I think that's such a wonderful [...] story, [...] the way [...] you knew, even then, that you didn't want to do the things that were going on.

AKC [...] The Sixties were just happening and I think I was saved by, like, Buffy Sainte-Marie<sup>6</sup> and Joan Baez<sup>7</sup> and Judy Collins.<sup>8</sup> [...] And then big hair started to be okay, so I actually was spared. Like, I kept my nose, but it was really a close call, because my mother had me in Doctor Diamond's office and he measured my nose. I remember that. They took an instrument and measured your nose. And then he took a piece of paper and he said, look, we can make it look like this.

And I said, »Oh my God«. My mother said, »Oh, it's gorgeous, gorgeous«. And they had an appointment for me but fortunately I got out of it. I kept, like, putting it off for reasons, and I got out of there, like, you know, just in the nick of time. [...] Can you imagine me now with a pug nose? Horrifying.

SL Can you see right at the top-hand corner [of this page from *Drawn Together* (2012)] you've got [a Star of David] [Fig. 5]? They're having a discussion about whether or not Robert was being anti-Semitic in a previous page [...]. And there Bunch is wearing, not only a Star of David, but also a T-shirt that says Kosher on it.

AKC And *Tefillin* [phylacteries], I had *Tefillin* on my head.

SL Oh you had *Tefillin*, I didn't even notice that, wow.



Fig. 5: »A Couple A' Nasty Raunchy Old Things«, *Drawn Together* (2012).

AKC That's orthodox. Totally orthodox stuff.

SL And there's a whole discussion about the Passover, and Robert says to Aline: »You must know about Passover!« And you say, »All I remember is some actress like Yvonne De Carlo finding baby Moses in a basket floating in the reeds! What movie was that?«

And he says, »Didn't you study about Passover when you were a little yidlock?« And then you do this whole amazing discussion about what the synagogue was like and on Long Island. You were telling me you used to take your granny.

AKC I used to take my great-grandmother, walk her to synagogue because she was blind. And then we had to sit behind a black curtain upstairs, while all the boys were downstairs.

So one day I said, »Bubbie, why do the women and girls have to sit behind the curtain?« She said, »Because we're dirty«. I said, »No, I just took a bath, I'm not dirty«. I said, »You know what? I'm going to wait outside«. So, from that day on [...] I still had to walk her every Saturday, but I brought a book and I waited outside, and I never went in there again. And, you know, she didn't make me go in there. So I realised in some ways ... that was her way of saying, »No it's not right, you know«. So it's very interesting. She was a very powerful woman. Her name was Sophie, by the way. Anyway. [Fig. 6]

And years later my grandmother, who was president of the women's auxiliary of their congregation, and the other women raised enough money to build a new synagogue. But before they would give the money, the stipulation was that it had to be Conservative instead of an Orthodox synagogue, and the women had to sit in front on one side, and the men on the other. And so, from then on, it was like that. But it was too late for me. I was, like, an anarchist communist atheist by then. I never went back in there, anyway.

SL You have been to that Old New synagogue in Prague where it's like ...

AKC Hole in the wall.

SL Yes. Totally hole in the wall. So the women went behind this whole wall and there was only a tiny little-looking area, and... you were talking a little bit about your great granny. [...] Who used to take you to see the New York Comedy?

AKC [...] My grandfather was like, you know, he was a comic, he was a great storyteller, and he used to take me to see all the stand-up comics in New York. And I saw, like, Jackie Mason,<sup>9</sup> Joey Bishop,<sup>10</sup> what was his name? Alan King<sup>11</sup> and Henny Youngman<sup>12</sup> and Don Rickles.<sup>13</sup> All those guys. I saw them all when I was a kid and I was, like, the first grandchild so he just took me along with him. And I'm sure that that's where my writing style and humour and all of it comes from that. That's the main aspect of Jewish culture that really speaks to me.



Fig. 6: »A Couple A' Nasty Raunchy Old Things«, *Drawn Together* (2012).



Fig. 7 »Aline 'n' Bob 'n' Sophie in Euro Dirty Laundry«, »Merci Au Revoir« *Drawn Together* (2012).

That, plus the food. I make all the food for every holiday. So it's the humour and the food that really gets to me.

And then from my great-grandmother Sophie, I got superstition.

So I have no religion. Just superstition and food, you know. It's okay. [...] I have a terrible fear of the evil eye [Fig. 7]. I have, like, two on right now, and stuff like that. That somehow was, like, transmitted to me and I like that kind of spooky stuff. And I won't say that I'm not a spiritual person, but it's very personal and it's completely individualistic and bizarre. And I can't relate in any way, Jewishness and spirituality. It's just, you know, food and humour and scary punishments, and stuff like that.

SL And so here's this picture [Fig. 8] where you took everyone to France and it was as if you were acting out the Wandering Jew phenomenon.

AKC Yes, I *schlepped* them. I *schlepped* them over to France, that's what I say. The Schlepp Set, not the Jet Set.

SL And there he becomes an Orthodox Jew then.

AKC Yes. And Robert, you know, he just kind of went along because ...

The point is though, in California where we lived, it was really redneck and really alienating for us. And Robert and I taught in this school for free because Reagan, when he was governor, gutted the school budget, so we gave free art classes in Sophie's school.

And then, one day I went in, there were hardly any kids in there. And I said, »Where are all the kids?« And he said, »Well the preacher at the local church told them that you and I were the agent of the devil and they should take their children out of the classroom when you come«. And I said, »Alright, we've got to get out of here then, where they're going to burn a cross on the lawn soon, I'm going«. So, that was one factor that made me leave.

But also Robert complained about where we lived so much, because it really was alienating, every day he complained. And finally I just think it got to me. I said, »Alright, we're getting out of here«. And, you know, there was nowhere in America that really spoke to me. And Lora, who was our agent, happened to be living in Paris. She often did call me. When she came to call me then someone said, »You know anyone that would be interested in house-sitting our apartment in Paris, and feeding the plants?« I said, »Yes, as a matter of fact I do. Me.«

You know, so Sophie and I spent the summer there, and that's when I decided it really would be nice to check out what it would be like living here. I made an exploratory trip and found this village and ... Anyway, it's a long story.

We moved over and thought maybe we'll stay for a few years, and in the end we stayed for ever. And now Sophie is married to a French guy and I have three Franco-



Fig. 8 »Aline 'n' Bob 'n' Sophie in Euro Dirty Laundry«, »Merci Au Revoir«, *Drawn Together* (2012).

American grandchildren, and I'm going to die there. Fine with me. Is that a good place to end? I'm going to die there.

SL So, as you know I curated *Graphic Details*, a show about Jewish women's confessional comics, and the themes of belonging and not belonging within the Jewish community is explored by other artists in the show. [...] Ariel Schrag wrote a beautiful comic *The Chosen* (2007) about trying to rent her flat to an Orthodox Hassid in New York, and how she had this toothbrush with the Star of David on it. And how she thought [...] these explicit Jewish signs, encouraged the real estator to rent their flat.

And it's this whole way she wants to pass as more religious, because she's actually half-Jewish. She wants to be more religious. Normally Jews are looking to pass as not Jewish, but this one kind of reverses that expectation.

So she wants to be seen as more religious and she ends it by saying, »I didn't find out if all my Jewish symbols around the flat helped me rent the flat. The next day Joseph left a message that the apartment had been rented. I couldn't help he didn't notice, he didn't say Shalom this time. But no matter what, for at least those two weeks I had been one of the Chosen.«

And there's this sense of even a temporary identity, and I think what I feel with Aline's work is it's a kind of ... She's trying out different identities. It's a kind of transitional developing identity, working out the things that work. And having, you know, momentary closeness to some parts; cultural Judaism, or ...

AKC Yes. I grew up in like a 95% Jewish area and I thought that it was illegal to be a doctor if you weren't Jewish. So, it's a whole other, you know. There was a whole other reverse kind of thing that I grew up in.

I thought the world was like that because in our generation, you know, these holocaust survivors and people that had lived through all that, they wanted to protect us from reality. Nothing of the past was ever talked about and it was a, kind of, a golden ghetto bubble. But it was truly suffocating and horrible. So the Jewish thing was oppressive where I grew up and it was more social than it was religious. It's very upward-striving and post-war values, but with its Jewish competitiveness and craziness.

We had a lot of entertainment lawyers and Wall Street people. And these, incredible, cut-throat business people ... So it was more culturally Jewish and, in a way, and very oppressive. So I had the opposite thing ... I just wanted to separate myself from that. I was so alienated from that, so...

SL [In this comic] [Fig. 9] It could be end of comics for Aline. Is that so? You're finished? You don't ever have to draw another comic as long as you live?



Fig. 9: »Aline and Bob in High Road to The Shmuck Seat featuring more than you want to know about senior sex«, *Drawn Together* (2012).

AKC Yay. Alright. »My career's over. Finally ... Break out the champagne. Ga' night an' good riddance. No-one ever got my work anyway except for a couple of Jewish women here 'n' there.« »Say goodnight, Aline.« »I wanna make films now. Who can we get to play me??« »Verbose to the last second.« Actually I don't want to make films and I don't want anyone to play me, that's a joke, but ...

SL If you notice in *Drawn Together*, you're seeing this conversation where Aline says, I don't want to make comics any more. Robert always says, oh really. I think you're great. I think your work's wonderful [Fig. 10].

And he's always incredibly supportive and, if you think in the history of art, how many husbands have been supportive of their artist wives. Very, very few. Because generally they're quite demanding individuals who require the wife to give up everything to support their own career ... They're critical, they're unsupportive, and they're very needy individuals. But actually, in your case, it's a beautiful example of two creative people who work very well together and who support each other's practice. And I think that's a wonderful thing.



Fig. 10 »Krumb and Kominsky in their cute lil'l life together«, *Drawn Together* (2012).

AKC Yes. I've been really lucky that way. When I first started doing comics, I was drawing comics before I met Robert, but then I met him and I hadn't had anything published yet, and I hid everything from him. And then the story came out, my first story came out, and he thought it was really great and he really laughed. And I thought, oh phew, you know. It's okay. Because, if he had, like, you know, condemned it, I would have been, like, devastated. So, yes.

SL And so, maybe, you might not ... You're finishing a comic now about the houses you lived in.

AKC Taking me a really long time, which is proof that I'm really sort of, slowing down incredibly. I have been painting and I really, I'm interested in doing a lot of other things. So it's not like I'm not going to be creative, but I am interested in exploring things that I've left behind. And, you know, I've told a lot of stories and I have a lot less anger. And I'm not as mean and, when I think of good stories now, they're all mean and I don't necessarily want to tell them.

SL You say in one of the panels [...] »An' I don't even have anything bad left to say about my mother!« [Fig. 11].

AKC No.

SL Which was quite a ...

AKC No. It's shocking but true.

SL Well, I never would have thought of it but now that you've pointed it out, that's nice. [...] So, here you are. Here are the things you're ... Nowadays you're interested in sharing the wealth. You've got an art gallery, you do yoga, and you want to concentrate on being a happy old lady.

AKC Yes, it's true. It's true.

SL And here is ...

AKC Yes. What's wrong with that? Come on, give me a break.

SL And this is the gallery and this is the next show you're working on with the gallery.

AKC The gallery is a local gallery in the small village that I live in. And there's a lot of local talented people that barely eat, and they would like to live off their work. So I decided... I have been very fortunate and I have enough to live on, and everything like that, I'm now determined to help other artists. So I'm selling their work and trying to, you know, get things out there and make more things happen in the village. And we have concerts, like John & Eden<sup>14</sup> [of *Eden and John's East River String Band*] play with Robert every summer there, and we have a lot of activities going on.

We've now been there 11 years and we actually have some clients and we sell stuff, and it's been, kind of, amazing. And we have silk screens by Robert in there. That helps pay the rent and stuff like that. And this is the next show, which are »The Other Crumbs«. It's opening 1st May [2016] and it'll be there all summer.



Fig. 11: »Aline and Bob in High Road to The Shmuck Seat featuring more than you want to know about senior sex« *Drawn Together* (2012).

So that's very satisfying and I've ... You know, I'm helping ... One artist doesn't have any insurance and he has to have a cataract operation, so [...] I'm paying for his cataract operation. It's stuff like that.

So, I'm becoming a nice old lady. Generous, you know, [a] godmother artist.

## Further Reading

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- 1] BROAD CITY stars Ilana and Abbi, two Jewish American women in their twenties, in New York City. It was created by Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson and is based on their real-life friendship, and their lives in New York.
- 2] Tina Fey is an American actress, comedian, writer and producer, a contributor to SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE and creator of 30 ROCK (2006–13) and UNBREAKABLE KIMMY SCHMIDT (2015–19).
- 3] Amy Poehler is an American actress, comedian, writer, and producer, a cast member on SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE (1975–present), and starred in PARKS AND RECREATION (2009–15).
- 4] BROAD CITY finished as a series in 2019 after Series 5.
- 5] Jimmy Fallon is the host of THE TONIGHT SHOW STARRING JIMMY FALLON (2014–present) and previously, LATE NIGHT WITH JIMMY FALLON (2009–13).
- 6] Buffy Sainte-Marie (born 1941) is an Indigenous Canadian-American singer, musician and composer.
- 7] Joan Baez (born 1941) is an American folk singer, song writer and musician.
- 8] Judy Collins (born 1939) is an American folk and pop singer and songwriter.
- 9] Jackie Mason (born 1928) is an American stand-up comedian and film and television actor whose work was grounded in his Jewish background and was awarded a Tony Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, an Ace Award, an Emmy Award, and a Grammy nomination.
- 10] Joey Bishop (1918–2007), was an American entertainer with his own weekly comedy series playing a talk/variety show host, who was also a member of the ›Rat Pack‹ with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Peter Lawford.
- 11] Alan King (1927–2004) was an American actor and comedian.
- 12] Henny Youngman (1996–98) was an English-American comedian and musician.
- 13] Don Rickles (1916–2017) was an American stand-up comedian, actor, and author.
- 14] *Eden and John's East River String Band* is formed of two members, John Heneghan and Eden Brower. They play country blues and often feature other guest musicians including Robert Crumb.