

NYFAI

Interview: Leila Daw interviewed by Flavia Rando

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F.R. So, you Leila, were beginning to talk about content driven art or . . .at NYFAI . . . or, I'm sure you had thought about it before but . . .

L.D. Well, I had, I was teaching at Southern Illinois University. I can tell you that I was the only female in the Fine Arts Department.

F.R. And about what time was that?

L.D. This was the late seventies. There was a female art historian and a weaving teacher (laughter). And a faculty of about, I don't totally remember, I think 30 or 35 people.

F.R. Yah, that sounds about right.

L.D. And a . . .

F.R. And your position was exactly a studio member . . . ?

L.D. I was a studio faculty member.

F.R. But they didn't specify?

L.D. I was originally hired to teach printmaking.

F.R. Printmaking, o.k.

L.D. And, while I was there I developed a multi-media class because the printmaking teachers were too set in their ways. I worked with them and they just didn't . . .if you put a pencil mark on a print it was no longer a print. And I was into collaging things, the world could be art, the whole bit. So I started this other program, the multi-media program which went along quite successfully but . . .one of the problems I ran into was that everything was so steeped in formalism and abstract expressionism that to even encourage students to work with personal content was suspect. And I knew that I wanted to do that, and I did in surreptitious ways, but I was kind of finding my way along. One of the things I learned from NYFAI by observing other classes was how to do that. I remember being really impressed that people didn't make value judgments. They simply talked about the work and the meanings of the work. I knew that I could never do that in an art school but I was able to institute my own critique method that I printed out on paper and gave students . . ."Oh, this is Leila Daw's critique method and we have to use that in this class". Part of that, part of the method was that nobody made value judgments

about the work until after we had discussed the content. That was considered revolutionary. One of my students came up afterward, in Illinois, and said, "You're letting students get away with making bad art". Can you believe that? (laughter)

F.R. Yes I can.

L.D. That was one of the students who said that. So that was the time. But actually after, I think anything you Xerox and hand out to your students at the beginning of class begins to carry a lot of weight.

F.R. Right.

L.D. So that began to be . . .it was accepted that in my classes that was how we would do things.

F.R. How did you come to be interested in personal content . . . were you involved in the feminist movement, in the feminist art movement?

L.D. Oh yah, oh yah.

F.R. Could you talk a little bit about that?

L.D. Well, I remember going to a meeting when I was an under-grad. One of the other women said that there was going to be a women's group forming called "The Community of Women Artists", later known as "Women's Caucus for Art." She wanted to know if there were enough people interested in the St. Louis area. And so those of us who were her friends said . . . well why don't we actually just put up notices and say we're going to have this meeting. And probably nobody will come, because no one would want to admit to being interested in that.

F.R. Being a woman and being interested in art?

L.D. Right, well and being a feminist because that was like (sound of gasping for air).

F.R. I know that's what that tells.

L.D. So we put up notices saying we were thinking of doing this thing and would anybody be interested. And we actually got the school to give us a room. And everybody was going "you're not going to that are you?" . . .you know, the men were all saying that. And we were going. .."I don't know, I might check it out, I might see what it was like." And the room was so packed we had to move to a bigger room.

F.R. Right, right, right.

L.D. laughter. So, and of course this was back in the time when art history included no women.

F.R. Oh, I do recall that.

L.D. I know that you know this

F.R. Oh, I do.

L.D. Everything was pronouncements and everything was “this is the way it would be”. And it was wonderful to be in that room and talk to these other women. And this was even before I was in a consciousness-raising group.

F.R. What year, do you remember? Late sixties . . . ?

L.D. Yah, this was in undergraduate. Yah, because I was in a consciousness group in the late sixties.

F.R. Ah, o.k. o.k. And was that at school, the consciousness group?

L.D. No, that was in the summer. I used to go to Woods Hole on Cape Cod because my husband did research there. And I had two small children, we had two small children. And that community was amazing in those days because there were no women scientists. So the men would all be working in their labs all day, and the women would have their children. . . meeting on the beach, or taking their children to whatever activities existed . . . and we would all meet and talk to each other with our kids. And there was a woman, actually a New Yorker; she was a member of Red Stockings, Kathy Amatnick who changed her name to Kathy Sarachild.

F.R. Oh yeah.

L.D. So she, it was a similar kind of scenario, she said she was involved in a feminist group and any woman who was interested in, it was not just artists, but any women who were interested could come to a meeting. And actually men were invited too; it was just anyone who was interested. So, again it was like people were overflowing the house, it was just amazing. And the original idea had been to start one consciousness-raising group and in fact the night that the consciousness-raising group was supposed to meet there were so many people that it was impossible for everybody to say something. So we split into about maybe five or six groups. And that was my consciousness -raising summer. And then the following summer we continued it.

F.R. You did.

L.D. Yes.

F.R. So it was two summers.

L.D. And then in the winter I was in grad. school and I was pretty busy with that . . .and also with the women in my grad. school, we would meet and talk.

F.R. And did the women at grad. school, did you all make art from that group . . .?

L.D. Well no it was not the same women but by then . . .well some of them had . . .

F.R. There was the Women's Caucus for Art at school . . .I wondered if any art came out of that or . . . what was your direction there?

L.D. Well we used to have meetings at which a few people would present work, because there were too many people for everybody to present at every meeting. And we never broke up into anything smaller because everybody was afraid they'd be missing something. So we would meet in one big meeting about once every couple of weeks. After awhile it began to be once a month because of the demands at school. And then there began to be artists who were not in school. There were artists who were older women from the community who also became part of the group. But it was primarily just a chance for us to show our work to each other and then talk about it. I can't trace a particular direct influence of anything in particular that came out of that group except that it gave us all the courage of our convictions to do what we really wanted to do that our teachers were telling us not to do. Of course you did what you had to do in order to get your grade and pass the course. But at that point I started doing rather vaguely landscapey, mappy things.

F.R. And you developed this in grad. school?

L.D. Yeah in grad. school. And my professor was incredible, well he would say things like . . ."You have to change your image" and I would always make a joke of it and say . . ."Oh yes, I'm going to dye my hair blonde." But he really felt that I wasn't pursuing art seriously I think because it was somewhat representational; although, it was very abstract.

F.R. Yes I would have thought that it might have passed under the wire . . .so to speak.

L.D. Yes, yes, yes. I had to say that it was so bizarre - and he always thought it was funny. And he would say, "well, here all you girls are. Who's going to sit on my face?" He would actually say that. Everybody would laugh because everybody would say . . ."oh yes, he's the professor who will use the sit on my face line." And of course one

knew that. I remember once I was doing printmaking and I was rolling out ink and he came over and patted me on the butt. In those days it was just like you knew that was going to happen occasionally. But you know, I can't say that I liked it!

F.R. Well I think it's very distracting.

L.D. Yeah.

F.R. At the least, at the very least. And it also makes you, you have to reassert your seriousness as an artist, as a person, as a student every time that happens, you have to reassert yourself to yourself.

L.D. Yes, yes, you do. And when it came time to mid-course reviews when we knew that some people were going to be kicked out, there were three other married women with children . . . there were two others than me, there were three of us total, and the other two were kicked out. So, anyway, you know that was the situation. And then I did my part-time businesses and I actually spent a year apart from my family and husband because I was offered a full-time job as a sabbatical replacement. And I knew that I had to do that, if I was going to establish my seriousness . . .if I was ever going to go on. So I did.

F.R. You must have had a very supportive family to be able to do that . . .at that time.

L.D. I did, I did, I did. My husband was very supportive but I think that we all were licking up our wounds as we went along. I mean it was very hard; it was very hard for him.

F.R. So how from there did you find your way to NYFAI?

L.D. Well, I got a . . . I remember I was teaching at Southern Illinois University and I guess I was on a lot of mailing lists for feminist art things because I was a member of the WCA. I think that must have been how it happened. But anyway, I remember this thing that came in the mail and it was pink with a doily on it and it said New York Feminist Art Institute. And I remember when I got it, I had chills. I thought (gasp) there's even a whole art school. (laughter)

F.R. (laughter) That's wonderful.

L.D. I was so excited. And I wanted to go there but, you know, I was teaching, I had a family; it was . . .I couldn't get away. I remember showing it to the Art Historian, her name was Pamela Decoteau. And she's a lovely person. She was, still is, interested in

women artists . . .in the Renaissance. I mean, early early art. We used to talk. She, by the way, has a wonderful book out on Clara Peters.

F.R. Really I will look for that. I've been putting together a different course on women in art. I look for that.

L.D. Oh yeah? It's a really good monograph. Anyway, the two of us began talking about how it's ridiculous that none of these textbooks even include any women. And I was saying it's really hard for young women artists to really do the art they need to do because they really need a separate supportive atmosphere. But it was a state school so you couldn't exclude men from the classes. We couldn't do the separatist thing. It had to be within the context of the school's curriculum. But we proposed to start a series of courses and we called it "women in art". So the two of us, we team taught all the courses. It must have been a little awkward for her, dealing with some of the studio stuff. I actually had an undergraduate major in art history so it wasn't so hard for me. But at the same time it was good because we supported each other.

L.D. So Pamela Decoteau and I cooked up these classes. And then in order to kick them off we had the idea of inviting some guest artists because the men of the faculty were considering the two of us so bizarre. It was like . . ."where are you two broads coming from that you want to do this" and "I guess we're going to have a men in art class next." And Pam was great she said, "Well, you already do." (laughter)

F.R. (laughter) When students ask me even to this moment, "why do we need women studies", and I say, "Because we have a lot of men studies, the rest of the universe." Although it's sort of an overstatement now, although it still functions as enough of a truth. So do you remember the year that you did present these courses?

L.D. We started trying to get it through curriculum committee probably about '78. But we actually succeeded in kicking it off in 1980. As part of that we invited a series of speakers. We had Judy Chicago and Eleanor Tufts and Allesandra Comini and Nancy and there was one other. Oh, April Kingsley who at the time was doing a lot of writing. So that was when I met Nancy, when she came to our course in 1980. And it was interesting because it was just fabulous. I really really hit it off with Nancy, Eleanor Tufts and Allesandra Comini who were just a hoot. Whenever you were with them they

were just delightful, I just loved them. And I guess Eleanor is still teaching but I have lost track of her a little. I don't really know. Oh no, not Eleanor, I mean Allesandra.

F.R. I thought that Eleanor died; I thought she had just retired.

L.D. Oh maybe she did. Well anyway it was great. We really hit it off . . . Nancy and I. And I wanted very much to come and visit NYFAI but still it was really hard to get away.

Judy Chicago was doing a workshop . . .and she invited me to come up for the Judy Chicago workshop and I just thought, this is just too good to miss. I've got to go. And by then the faculty at my school understood that this might be a legitimate thing because I was teaching this course so I was able to get off time from school to go. And that was my first experience at NYFAI. And that was exciting and exhilarating but it was also . . .

F.R. And that was the weekend workshop?

L.D. It was also on the occasion of her opening I believe . . .

F.R. Was it?

L.D. Maybe it was maybe it wasn't. There was also the opening of the Dinner Party at the Brooklyn Museum but I'm not sure if it was then or it might have been earlier.

F.R. I think it might have been '78 . . .but my timing . . .my memory . . .

L.D. Maybe, it had to be 1980 or after because 1980 was when we did the lecture series and that was when I met Nancy. And I think . . .I don't know, but anyway. It's telling I can't remember the exact chronology of all this . . .

F.R. Well, but that can be solved.

L.D. Yeah. At any rate it was just incredible being with a group of like-minded women artists. It was amazing because even when I was with the women's group in grad. school, it was always in the context of this very male dominated institution. And at NYFAI women were calling the shots. I remember just a few defining moments. One of them was not specifically to do with NYFAI but I think I was helping Nancy to hang a show. And she or somebody. . . we were all kind of giggling or we were off doing the wrong thing. . . and she or somebody said "All right women let's get to work." And it was the first time I had heard anybody say . . . "All right women let's get to work." It was always like all right guys or let's go men. And of course now that was just . . .it's such an insignificant thing . . . but it was like I had died and gone to heaven. (laughter) It was amazing. So I took a number of classes . . .by then I could sort of say that I had to go to

NYFAI because my school would understand. . .well they wouldn't understand but they would give me the time off to go. For me to get to New York was a big deal. It was a day of travel, two days there and a day of travel back and I'd be missing some of my classes. But it was my life's blood in those days because it was a wonderful experience to go where there were a lot of like-minded people and to be able to work with them. And then to experience this different way of teaching which was what I was trying to do but hadn't quite put together.

F.R. So you went as a student at first.

L.D. Well I took some classes. I took a class of Nancy's. I did her book. . .her artist's books. . .I don't remember what she called it. . .the autobiographical. . .

F.R. The artist diaries?

L.D. Diaries that was it. . .yeah. I did that a couple of times and that was very interesting. There was a woman Judy Chiti. . .

F.R. Oh yes, yes I'm going to interview her soon.

L.D. Oh yeah? I was in one of her classes.

F.R. And what did she teach?

L.D. It was a kind of critical thinking class. And I thought it would be wonderful to have a critical thinking class from a woman who was a feminist and not just kind of this straight-line critical thinking. And it was very interesting. And then at some stage I started teaching the occasional class there. I did these map-making workshops. "Map-making and Life Patterns" - some of them had more fanciful titles, but they were always about mapping your sense of yourself to your surroundings.

F.R. Which is so critical for women. . .I mean the whole idea of home and having a place in the world.

L.D. Right, right, and what is your place in the world and how do you make your journey through that. I think that probably a lot of this is in the material I gave you. But it's about. . . a lot of people when they do these maps of their selves and their place they always, well not always, but a lot of them will put themselves outside of the map. Which is really interesting, and sad.

F.R. And how did you. . .what was the relation between the artist's diaries and the mapping workshops. Was there any relation at all between those two classes?

L.D. Well there wasn't really any kind of formal relationship.

F.R. Well I mean was there just sort of an overlap in content in any way.

L.D. Well, in that we were dealing with personal content from a feminist perspective. But I think, I don't know, Nancy might have more to say about it. Nancy and I are friends and we share a lot of concerns and thoughts and so on so I'm sure all of that comes out in everything we do.

F.R. Right, because as I recall, the artist's diaries also had a certain automatic quality to it. A certain way in which form expressed emotion so I guess I was thinking more along those. . .

L.D. Right. I think that was different in my class because I was asking people before they started working to actually try to visualize something in their heads. So that was a little different. And the idea was perhaps a little bit more, what do you call it. . . the word I'm trying not to use is "cerebral".

F.R. Right, but that's o.k.

L.D. But it was a little more about trying to sort something out and not just letting it come out.

F.R. And your students, how did they respond?

L.D. Oh, they were wonderful. It was interesting, I actually had some men students at NYFAI.

F.R. Oh that's interesting, I didn't know men studied there.

L.D. Well one of them, I guess there were two, and one of them was. . .well both of them were very strongly attached to the women they were with. And one woman. . .I forget why one of them was there -- there was a very good reason but I've forgotten. The other one I remember particularly because she had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and he was very, very supportive of her. And they were taking the class because they were trying to figure out what the pattern of how they were going to deal with this and how their lives were going to be.

F.R. That's very interesting.

L.D. And they were wonderful. They were in that same class that Helen Stockton was in that I've given you the thing that she wrote about. . .although I don't think she mentions them in particular. I would start out with fairly simple things like. . ."we're all here in

this room together. . .let's try to make maps of our situation in this room.” And some people would start trying to draw the room, you know. And we'd talk about that but I would kind of push them, I'd say well let's think about it in terms of how you feel about it and how you'd diagram yourself in the room, not just what you see in the room but . . . what it means to be in the room. And then we'd go on into more, what I thought were perhaps more meaningful things like. . .your situation within this year. How would you diagram the year and where you are in it. F.R. I had a very fraught year I'm getting interested already. (laughter)

L.D. Oh, there was one about the idea of home. What is home, how would you diagram it, how would you place yourself within it? And it's interesting because a lot of people do it up looking down, some people do it looking around. It's very interesting. People have very different ways when you're not trying to be a Mercator or somebody. Mapping is so subjective and so varied.

F.R. Sounds wonderful. I could use it right now.

L.D. It was great. I loved teaching that class. I actually tried to offer something sort of like that back in my university. But they said “well, when we do workshops, we usually have those with visiting artists, and there's not enough material here to offer a whole semester class. Anyway there are all these required courses.” So the only place I was ever able to do it was NYFAI.

F.R. In other words they were saying. . . “Let's not think about this.” So you said that Helen Stockton was one of your students. . .

L.D. Yeah.

F.R. Could you. . .

L.D. Yeah I remember she was wonderful because I think she was. . . this sounds really strange to say now but then I thought that she was totally inspirational because she was the oldest woman artist. And she was still producing and she had really wonderful ideas. And it was an inspiration to me to know that that was possible. And she was also very supportive of other people. There was one person who was difficult from the class that she was in. . .who kept saying . . . “well I know this is no good but. . .” everything she would do. And Helen, even before me, was able to come up with very reassuring. .

“well, you’re coming up with something of your own, so of course it’s going to be unique to you.” You know, and she was great.

F.R. So she was able to, I guess from her position maybe of experience, support the other students?

L.D. Exactly, exactly.

F.R. Did you teach other courses there as well?

L.D. They were all variations on the map making.

F.R. So you taught for a number of years there or a number of semesters?

L.D. I think it was more like once a year for about maybe three or four years.

F.R. Oh, so a weekend .

L.D. Mmhmm a weekend. And there were other things too, I would go up when they would do benefits. . .participate in benefit shows and things like that.

F.R. So you really had an alternate community. . .an alternate feminist art community in NYFAI?

L.D. Yes. It was funny too because I lived so far away. You wouldn’t have thought that I would have a feeling that my community was somewhere that took two days to drive to. . .but I did. That was where I felt that my community was. And Pamela Decoteau and I were great friends but she was an art historian and I’m an artist so there wasn’t that kind of artist-to-artist thing.

F.R. Right, right, right.

L.D. We’re still in touch Pamela and I.

F.R. Is she still teaching?

L.D. Yes, yes. Still there at Southern Illinois University.

F.R. More power to her.

L.D. Well you know who else is there is. . .Margaret Simon, philosophy scholar author ed a definitive biography of Simone de Beauvoir.

F.R. Really.

L.D. Yeah, she was also very involved in helping us and so on. She’s great. She’s still there too. . the last I heard she was still there.

F.R. Did your experience at NYFAI help you back at Southern?

L.D. Oh yeah, it helped me to survive. When I had Nancy come as a visiting artist there, . . .which I did more than once. . .the first time I had her come after the initial thing, there was a small faculty party for her. . . for the visiting artist. . . and I wasn't invited.

(laughter)

F.R. Well there's a little message.

L.D. I wasn't senior enough I think they said. They were only inviting the full professors and I was only an assistant or associate or something like that.

F.R. So how did you deal with that?

L.D. I didn't go. And I said "Nancy, you've got to tell me what happened, you've got to tell me about this."

F.R. This rarified group right?

L.D. Yes, yes.

F.R. So when Nancy came to speak there did she help to radicalize the community or was that possible or how did that work really?

L.D. I wouldn't use the word radicalize because I don't think that was even. . . .she didn't do that. . .and I don't think that was appropriate there. What was appropriate was to be supportive of the women students who needed the support. And she was wonderful at doing that. She was able to talk about what happened . . .what things were like in a different place. And it wasn't just women students who were interested . . . because we had both men and women in all our classes. When I think about it, I can easily polarize everything in my mind and say "Oh my gosh it was such a sexist place" but there were actually male faculty members who were very supportive. There were some who were incredibly antagonistic and those are the ones I tend to remember.

F.R. Well because they in a way it's not really them personally, but behind them is the whole structure that they're representative of. . .

L.D. Well we had a department chair who was just incredibly horrible.

F.R. And there's also a bigger art world out there, which sort of had the same perspective. And I think, as I always tell my students, that most men, if they just take a moment and admit it are suffering almost as much, not as much, never say that, I'll never say that. . .but quite a lot [as women].

L.D. Well the whole gender role thing was and continues to be there. It's just present, it's part of our society. And I don't see that it's going to go away in our lifetimes.

F.R. No, I don't think so. And in fact what we're living in I think is a huge backlash right now.

L.D. Oh absolutely. But the other thing that was interesting. . .I don't want to overstate the case but. . .the terribly dictatorial department chair began to get on other peoples' nerves as much as he had always gotten on my nerves. And I really think that this kind of. . .I don't know what to call it. . .maybe softening of approach. . . had something to do with the fact that our department chair was impeached a number of years later. (laughter)

F.R. Well, well (laughter). Well I think that you began sort of an infiltration and showing that there was another way to do things that actually was more. . .was a better way of teaching and learning.

L.D. Well I don't think that everybody would have agreed that it was better but they agreed that there was some validity in our method other than the "tried and true one."

F.R. Right, right. And that it was something beyond. . .the other thing that I've heard was that in feminist teaching, especially when you have content driven work, that it's all touchy feely and there's no rigor in it and there's no theory.

L.D. Exactly. Hence the comment that the student made about how I was letting people get away with bad work.

F.R. But I think that when you have sort of artists like Nancy coming to talk and you keep going back and getting support for that approach. . .

L.D. Mum. That was very important to me. And then when I went to Mass Art --

F.R. And when was that?

L.D. That was in 1990. I was there for twelve years. But when I went to Mass. Art, my immediate reaction was that I was in paradise because everyone there had had some kind of sensitivity training. And who knows what they thought, but people knew not to say certain types of things that people in the Midwest would .

F.R. After my situation at Perdue, which was actually in the late nineties. . .,it hadn't changed very much.

L.D. You know even here in Connecticut now Veronica, my studio assistant, will have somebody make comments about women.

F.R. Now let's see. Did you show at Ceres or did you show at NYFAI?

L.D. Actually I showed at Soho 20 for awhile.

F.R. And did you learn of Soho 20 through NYFAI or was there a connection of any sort?

L.D. Through Nancy and NYFAI. I had a couple of shows, I was not a member of Soho 20, but I had a couple of shows there, two shows there. And then I was in some group shows at Ceres, quite a few.

F.R. Do you think those group shows were an important element in the NYFAI experience for people?

L.D. Oh yeah. There's something really affirming about seeing your work in a show. And for people to be in those shows was very important. Absolutely. Also it was wonderful to see the breadth of ways of working. It was much more diverse than most shows at the time even when there was usually a theme [at Ceres]. Well of course we know what most artists do with themes. You just say "oh, yeah, sure, whatever." But those themes at Ceres were very important. And then, I'm an alumna, but I'm going to have another show at A.I.R. so that's the trajectory that I think my best shows have taken. I've also had commercial dealers, but there's something very . . . I hate to overuse the word that gets overused so much but . . .empowering.

F.R. We can work with that word.

L.D. O.k., o.k., there is something very empowering about putting a show together in a supportive community and showing the work you really want to show as opposed to what the dealer thinks will sell.

F.R. Do you think that NYFAI sort of led you, because you're talking sort of completely about feminist coops. . .cooperative galleries here. So NYFAI perhaps led you in that direction but even more than that do you think that it has had an affect on the work that you continue to do or has it strengthened the direction you were going in or . . .

L.D. Well it certainly made me not afraid to put my content in. Afraid is probably too strong a word, but I guess it's made me more able to kind of thumb my nose at whatever the prevailing convention might be.

F.R. That's important.

L.D. Another thing. . .at the time. . . I actually, aside from the occasional incredibly sexist comment or something, I've had pretty good responses to my work always from men as well as women. Maybe they're just being polite you never know, but I really do believe in what I'm doing.

F.R. Well, it's beautiful work actually.

L.D. Well of course beautiful is not necessarily. . .its suspect in a way.

F.R. I know but I use it anyway. I like that. I like that.

L.D. You know that was one of the things that. . .it's made me . . .even more so made me not hesitate to do work that I purposely make beautiful. I think that the whole thing about, you know, everything should be a little gritty and rough around the edges. Well, it's o.k. and sometimes my work is but there are also going to be these beautiful little things in it. And I think beautiful is important to the world.

F.R. Well right and I don't think beautiful is necessarily little. You see, beautiful/little, we're taught that beautiful is some feminine or feminized quality. I could say another thing about your work, it has a great completeness, which is really a wonderful thing. It's very, very satisfying to both look at as an object of beauty and then think about as sort of a critical tool. . . use it that way.

L.D. Hmm. Yeah, also I guess the other thing that has really been a result of the feminist art movement, which for me was really NYFAI, NYFAI was the feminist art movement for me. Well that and the courses that Pam and I were teaching. And even at Mass Art by then there were already courses being taught about women artists and they were included in the main stream and so on. But in my myth and ritual class I was including a lot of. . .I would usually do slide presentations or something and then the students would do their thing. And I included a lot of non-western stuff and I think a lot of people were surprised because they thought oh, myth and ritual well that'll be Zeus and Hera. Well of course it did include that but we also did a whole thing on Yoruba ritual and things like that. I think what happened as a result of feminism was that the world opened out more to other so-called fringe groups. I think that feminism really was the opening of the crack that allowed non-western tradition and different ethnic groups to coalesce into their own thing. It has really permitted the kind of diversity we have in the art world.

F.R. I think so. I do think so. I think that there were many other politically based art movements but I think feminism probably was the nature shift.

L.D. Yeah. And I think that with my own work. . .sorry to be jumping around so much but . . .there was a degree of . . .the word I use is “specificity” in my work. You know, a particular river and a particular boundary and a particular path [that sort of thing] that I do in my work all the time. That is something I don’t think I would have done if I didn’t have the courage of my convictions to do it. The support I got from places like NYFAI and from my association from other feminist leaning artists.

F.R. What do you think about the way in which your students or other younger associates think about feminism today?

L.D. Oh, I think that feminism is a bad word today. I don’t think anybody wants to admit to being a feminist.

F.R. And why do you think that’s so?

L.D. I think there’s a stereotype, a particular kind of a . . .aggressive. . . there’s a stereotype of totalitarianism.

F.R. It’s interesting isn’t it when we’re in the midst of an actual totalitarianism.

L.D. Yeah, yeah. But I think that people can point to particular instances. For example, the exclusion of certain women artists from the feminist canon, which I think there was, in the early development . . . like the fur-lined tea-cup woman who was sort of not in the canon back then because she wasn’t a feminist. People overreacted to those facts and saw that as a kind of totalitarianism within feminism. And I think also . . . and maybe this is the primary one, it’s true that back in those days, there was a lot of really hard work involved. I mean it’s hard enough to be an artist, but there was a lot of even extra hard work. And they look back at that. . .at the historical period and they think, “I don’t want to work that hard, I want to have some fun”. . .you know it was like. . . “girls just want to have fun.” I think that is a part of it.

F.R. Well I think we’re also, our culture has given the idea that in fact that struggles over now we can just have fun.

L.D. Exactly, exactly. Yeah, and interesting facts like when you look at auctions, works by women still don’t bring as much.

F.R. Like a tenth, as little as a tenth.

L.D. And I think a lot of people think that feminism means not being feminine.

F.R. I think so. . . isn't that strange?

L.D. Yeah, yeah.

F.R. It means being like a man, but of course that is the model for a successful individual in our culture it really has nothing to do with feminism in a certain way.

L.D. Yeah, but it's interesting because I remember there was a time when we people who were feminists were completely involved in being feminists and proud of it and happy about it. And now, if you approach a curator it's not the first thing you're going to tell them about yourself.

F.R. Unless you go to the Brooklyn Museum. . . the Sackler Center, you know the feminist wing.

L.D. Yeah, unless you think they're like-minded.

F.R. Let's see. Do you see your work, your current work, in any way activist or feminist directly?

L.D. Ah, well yes and no. Yes in where it developed and came from. The feminine qualities of the earth, and earth power and earth centeredness and feminist spirituality definitely, definitely. And one of the reasons I want the work to be beautiful, even when it's terrible, I want it to be beautiful because earth is beautiful and no matter how devastating the earth may be, it is worth saving. I just read an article about Boone, North Carolina. I read the article because it was where my son moved. It's a little outpost of 60s and 70s. You can get a bumper sticker there that says something like. . ."look after the earth because we need a home to boogie in", or something like that. (laughter)

F.R. I think I'm just about ready for that myself to tell you the truth. Now that was Boone where?

L.D. Boone, North Carolina.

F.R. North Carolina. O.k. I'm writing that down, that's for myself.

L.D. Actually it was in the Times and you can get the actual quote. It was in the last Sunday's Times, the travel section.

F.R. So now your work is in many public spaces. Not an experience too many artists really have.

L.D. Yeah, it's funny, unlike a lot of artists who go a slightly different route, I went from. . .well I did have commercial galleries but I didn't have, I've never had one of these hot shot New York commercial dealers. I've been in regional commercial galleries and in coops. I like being in coops. There's in fighting, but there's also a lot more support I think, and you can show what you want. You feel like you have control over your own work.

F.R. That's very important.

L.D. Yeah, absolutely. And of course financially you're better off because the coops take less commission. Even though you pay dues, nevertheless, you still come out ahead. So I seem to have come from the regional dealer thing directly into public art and I think a lot of people have to go through the big gallery system first. I don't know how that happened. It was just the way life went through. It was my own little journey, I can map it.

F.R. Well, do you see your public art, because you have your art in places where people who would never enter a gallery see it, do you see that as a political. . .?

L.D. Oh, absolutely. I want to do "art for the people." I absolutely want to do that. I want my work to speak to humankind not just to an elite group of curators, dealers, and writers. Yeah I definitely want that. And some of the people I look to, their careers, I wouldn't want to be like him but. . . Frida Kahlo's husband, what's his name?

F.R. Diego Rivera.

L.D. Yeah, right. His work really did speak to people and it had a point of view and I think that's fabulous. That's very important to me. [Not that I want my work to look anything like this]

F.R. Now prior to NYFAI, did you have that idea to work in public spaces or was that something that developed later?

L.D. I think that's developed. I think that NYFAI made me think about where I did want my work to be. But I don't think that I came up with public spaces as being the place. I don't know how that happened. Well it happened pretty early on because I was doing these skywriting things. That was right after graduate school. Back in those days people would ask me why skywriting, and I knew how to make the right formalist answers and I would say things like. . . "I've been in print making and it interested me that when you

are making a print, you have an image which exists independently of the surface that it's on, that can land on whatever surface." Which is true, I mean I'm sure that's part of where the idea came from but that wasn't what it was about. It was about giving people an experience, of sandwiching them between the diagram of what might have been there, or was there, and the ground beneath their feet. A lot of my skywriting was about pre-historic sites. A big component of my work is about how we as human beings inhabit the land. And how we find our place within it. The skywriting was very much about that. But I was doing that before NYFAI.

F.R. But I think that your ideas and support of NYFAI was a very good match. . .

L.D. Oh yeah. And it definitely affected my life in very important ways. But just thinking about the public aspect thing. I really, really knew I had to do the skywriting and it was very hard to bring that off. I spent a whole year just writing grant proposals and that kind of thing. These are actually some photographs of some of it. That's Cahokia Mounds [pointing to an image in her studio], which was the ancient Native American city of Cahokia and is now a national historic landmark. I got one of my grants to do it from the group who was trying to promote it as a historic landmark. Talk about being at the right place at the right time. And who knows, maybe the project even helped, you don't know. I was also always doing artist books and smaller things. And I was, NYFAI was, not directly, but I was encouraged by just some of the thoughts that came up. To think about what was the destination of this work. I knew I was doing it for myself, which was what NYFAI was basically teaching us all, that we had to first and foremost be happy with what we were doing, or if not happy, at least believe that it was saying what we wanted it to say. I knew that was true, but I did at that stage really begin questioning where did I want it to wind up. With commercial dealers, of which I still have some, one of them sold a very big piece to Monsanto Corporation, a big chemical company that was doing all the genetic stuff. I remember thinking hmmm, is that really where I want my work to be? But then I thought, yeah it kind of is, and later on I sold a piece to Texaco through the same dealer because it's sort of the "heart of the beast" thing. That maybe people will see it and somehow be influenced or affected by it. And so that got me thinking. Even though it is wonderful for somebody to wind up with the work in their bedroom so that they see it every morning when they wake up, and maybe it

gives them something, I mean that's important but I want it to reach more than one person. And I don't want it just to reach people who can afford to buy art.

F.R. Do you ever have symposia about your work when you put it in a public place?

L.D. Well only a little bit. There's a , I think it's actually in the car but I'll give it to you. . .this project that I'm doing with the map benches. . .

F.R. Map benches?

L.D. Yeah, there were two of them in the car behind you when I picked you up.

F.R. I couldn't quite tell.

L.D. They're benches with maps on them.

F.R. That's wonderful, that's wonderful.

L.D. So that people can sit in the landscape and position themselves in the landscape. I'm doing a series of installations of these that are one-day installations and then I pick them up and bring them away. This is in connection with a grant that I got and with open studios in New Haven which is a big deal. . .my weekend was the weekend before last but there are two other weekends. . .different parts of the city open. And there was this guy who. . .I don't know that he was homeless but he was sure close to it. . .and he came over and asked me for thirty cents for the bus. And I gave him thirty cents and then I took the maps and put them back in the car. And he came over and he said "Why are you taking them away?" And I explained that it was part of a project. And he said "but it's so good to have them here, they're really nice, they look really good" and he just went on. And I thought "wow!" You know it's really great to know that you've reached someone like that too. Of course you always wish you could reach all of those people in the string pulling echelons but. . .

F.R. Yeah, I don't know what to say about that at this point in time. A few years ago I would have had a lot to say, now I've been silent, not silent, but I don't really know what to say. I'm going to ask you in what way would you describe the legacy of NYFAI? It's a big question. I guess for you you've already said a great deal but maybe it brings up other. . .

L.D. Well I think a lot of it I have already said but one thing I haven't said. . .and I wouldn't say that this is the first thing I would think of. . .but certainly this is something I haven't said yet which is that there is a kind of nostalgia for the time and place.

F.R. Yeah

L.D. Which is, I'm afraid, does seem a little inappropriate for today. I think that if NYFAI still existed, well of course in the beginning it was called the New York Feminist Art Institute and then it became the Women Center for Learning and then it passed out of existence. And I think that it was entirely appropriate for the time but would need yet a different name today.

F.R. You mean that it changed names. Do you think that it was appropriate that it passed out of existence?

L.D. No! But I think an awful lot has to do with money. And I don't think there was the support for it, for whatever reason women weren't feeling supported by it enough to support it. . . or I don't know what was going on. . . I don't know why that happened. I'm sure that. . . well Nancy was much more involved and would have more to say about that. . . I was sad.

F.R. Do you think the fact that it was always sort of outside of the university and art school world as well as outside the sort of. . .

L.D. . . . mainstream. . .

F.R. . . . yeah, the gendered power structure, that that had a lot to do with. . . as good as it was for the students and faculty, that that made it hard to support in actual dollars?

L.D. Yes, I think so. You know these were all not-for-credit courses. I think that if there had been some courses that were taught for credit it would have been a completely different situation. At the same time I tried to get through courses like that, well I tried to get through the map-making and life patterns course and wasn't able to in a for-credit institution. So I don't know that it would have been possible. Interestingly, I think that probably the nearest class that ever was in an institution was the myth and ritual class. Because that would have been a course that would have been entirely appropriate for NYFAI as well.

F.R. Right, right.

L.D. But I don't know. I think it would have to have become part of a university to survive.

F.R. Or at least have an association with a university where credit could be. . .

L.D. Yes, credit was the issue, I think not part of a university but able to give courses for credit.

F.R. Yeah, because I taught at the Arts Workshop in Assisi and we could give credit for some of our courses through an institution and then that credit could be transferred to your own institution.

L.D. Right, right. Yes I think that that is a big part of it.

F.R. Do you think though that in a way the NYFAI community represented the world apart from the “real” world. I’m wondering, you know, I’m just beginning to think about these things as I’m beginning to do these interviews.

L.D. Well it was certainly an alternative universe for me.

F.R. Yeah, and that has both good and bad elements it’s. . .

L.D. I think for the time and place it was good. I think absolutely for the time and place it was good. If it were still going today in exactly the same way it might be a little bit of a retreat from the world. But it wouldn’t be still going today in exactly the same way.

F.R. Well I guess that what I meant was. . .two elements. . .I guess what I meant was that as a world apart when it came to actually supporting it financially, that it seemed to exist on this other plane, so it was very hard to really put the dollars there.

L.D. Well I think there was more to it. There’s also this other aspect . . .I went to a women’s boarding school for high-school and I went to a women’s college for undergraduate work. So I’m always reading in my alumni magazines about how it’s so much harder to get support for women’s schools than for men’s schools and one of the reasons is that a lot of the wealth, until recently, has been concentrated in the hands of men more than women and they’re more likely to give money. And I certainly think there is an aspect of that. Plus a lot of the people at NYFAI were taking classes at NYFAI because for whatever reason they couldn’t be full-time students. I don’t think that that was the whole reason they were there because they wanted a feminist art class. . .but I think that if they had been able to be full-time students, they might have enrolled in a university that would give them a degree. And if NYFAI could give credit and degrees, I think that would have kept it going. It would still be going. I think there weren’t enough people with money giving endowments and things like that, I mean there

were people, but there weren't enough. And everybody was working so hard all the time to raise money. To the extent that I think people were just worn out.

F.R. So the actual political fact that money was concentrated in the hands of men was actually, literally was a factor in wearing women out as they tried to raise money for NYFAI. That's sort of a direct line, I mean male domination has a lot of. . .

L.D. I suppose so. . . I think you're right.

F.R. It's sort of a stark thing to say but I think there is a certain truth in it.

L.D. Now they say that the wealth is actually. . . something like 51% is actually in the hands of women.

F.R. But is it really under their control?

L.D. I think it's under their control but the question is a different one, are their minds under their control?

F.R. Right, right. Do they really control it or do they rely on? I would really love to see how that works, that would be such an interesting study. I

L.D. But you know, the other thing is, I think that a lot of women, even more than before, are really male identified.

F.R. Yeah.

L.D. I mean my own mother was.

F.R. What do you mean by that?

L.D. Well, what I mean by that is that she got her entire sense of her identity from her position to men. I have to say, I think men are cool. I'm married to one.

F.R. Yeah this isn't really about individual men, it's really about the way masculinity and femininity is formulated. So I feel completely free to have these conversations.

Because I was thinking when you said male identified I think there's a new kind of male identity.

L.D. Oh, where they believe of themselves as men. . .

F.R. Where they have to be like almost a stereotypical man, sort of like a layering on top of whatever they are as a woman in order to succeed.

L.D. Well I think that's been there for a long time. As a matter of fact when I was hired for the job in Illinois, the tyrannical department chair said. . . he actually said "We knew we had to hire a woman" when he introduced me to the faculty. "We knew we had to

hire a woman, these times being what they are but I think you'll find that she's just one of the boys." And he meant that as a compliment and I was just thinking "fuck you."

F.R. Amazing, amazing. It shouldn't be amazing but it still is.

L.D. Oh yeah. But you look at the women early on who were successful artists. I mean like Judy Chicago. Yes, she was dealing very much with women's bodies, but she was presenting herself in a way that was very much like a man. Tough, you know, the whole bit.

F.R. Do you want to comment on any of the other faculty or students who made an impression on you at NYFAI?

L.D. Oh, Darla Bjork. She was wonderful, still is wonderful. She was always able to put into words what everybody else was thinking and talking around but she could really put it right into words. Plus, people always tell me that I am a cynic because I'll say sarcastic things like "Oh yeah, that would be great." . .or whatever. And when Darla and I would get going, you know we could both do that, it was really fun.

F.R. Yeah, she does have that edge. Is there anyone else that you want to talk about that made an impression on you?

L.D. I'm sure there are many many other people. Some of them I don't even remember their names. There was a figure drawing, it wasn't even a class, it was a figure drawing session, but there was one woman who kind of organized it and she was really good. But I don't remember her name. Because I went to some of the figure drawing sessions too. Oh now let me think. Let's see. If you gave me some names. . .

F.R. Well let's see there was Arlene Raven?

L.D. Oh, of course. Yes. . .oh yeah, she was so important. Particularly when she was writing for the Village Voice she was able to promote stuff. But I guess she finally lost her job over it. But she was, oh yes, she was wonderful. And there were a lot of people who I met. . .but Arlene Raven was really wonderful and wonderfully supportive. And it was very important to have somebody with that kind of intellect and that writing ability to explain to other people in the world what we were doing. She was great. She was fabulous. And also, not directly through NYFAI, but kind of peripherally were two other people I think were very important for the same reason. Oh my goodness, I can't think of

her name. Anyway the woman whose name I can't think of and Johanna Fruh who is now somewhere out in. . .

F.R. Las Vegas? The University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Are you thinking of Cassandra Langer?

L.D. Yes. That's exactly who I'm thinking of. . .Cassandra Langer. And there was also a lovely young woman although I don't know if she was directly related to NYFAI. I actually met her through Nancy. . .who later went to divinity school . . .Elise LaRose.

F.R. That's the first time I'm hearing her name.

L.D. Well she may have just been a friend of Nancy's, but she was a young woman who was very much into women's spirituality and she was really interesting to talk with. Who else is on that list that I might remember.

F.R. How about Miriam Shapiro?

L.D. Yeah well, I met her. I'd have to say I admired her work but I never really knew her as a person I just knew her to say hello.

F.R. Harmony. . .Harmony Hammond?

L.D. Um. . .again I just met her, she was not somebody I knew. Although interestingly there's an artist here in town who wanted me to come and look at her work and I did and I asked if she knew of Miriam Shapiro's work because this young woman is basically replicating it and doesn't realize she's doing it. And she then had occasion to meet Miriam out on Long Island. And she said she wouldn't have even known to avail herself of that opportunity if I hadn't mentioned it. So I think in many ways the legacy continues.

F.R. If you were going to establish a NYFAI-like institution now how would you, what would you have taken from that, what would you do, would there be a place for something like that?

L.D. Hmm, that's an interesting question.

F.R. Would you think that those lessons have been well learned and are now mainstreamed so to speak.

L.D. I think that you could still do it within a women's university. But maybe you couldn't because I went to Wellesley and, even though most of the teachers were women and it was known as a feminist institution, the worldview was very canonical. And what

you had to do to succeed was very much a part of the mainstream. And maybe all I'm saying is that unless the place has changed a lot that wouldn't be where I'd try to do it. But maybe it has changed. I don't think it has though.

F.R. I think there have been changes but I don't think there has been THE change. You know, the real sort of turning.

L.D. Certainly things like, for example, my critique method, which was definitely based on a feminist teaching model, that other people, my students, have adopted as their teaching method as they have gone out and gotten teaching jobs. So I think that that kind of thing has infiltrated. And you look at the art world now and the kind of diversity and variety of the things people are doing. . .but it still . . .well it isn't easy to be an artist in the first place.

F.R. Not in this country.

L.D. No. No. But, I'm just thinking, I mean it really couldn't have existed at Mass. Art mainly because the institution would have considered itself so enlightened that it wouldn't have needed it.

F.R. Do you think there is still a need?

L.D. Well probably not at Mass. Art.

F.R. But I mean in the world.

L.D. In the world. . .sure, sure. But I think that the places where there is the most need are the places where it would be the most difficult to establish it. I think maybe one could establish it within a women's college, art school, and university. But in such a place, there's always the danger that you might be speaking to the already converted.

F.R. Do you think that while some of the ideas of that moment in time have been mainstreamed. . .do you think that. . .I'm sorry I just completely lost my train of thought. But I guess what I was trying to say was do you think that we'll forget that. . .do think it's sort of coming back around again, that there is again a need, in a more particular need . . .rather than this general gender inequity in society that again there is a pressing need. . .

L.D. Well I certainly think there is a pressing need for political and social change.

F.R. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

L.D. I just can't believe. . .It's gotten even to the point when I read that America has this position on something. . .it's as if I'm one of those students whose map of America is outside myself, and I'm standing over here.

F.R. I feel that way myself. It's actually terrifying.

L.D. It is. It is. I think there is a need for, yes, that and so many other things as well.

F.R. But you made any interesting comment, or you seemed to suggest that this kind of an institution could only survive under the umbrella of an accredited university, college, art school. . .

L.D. Or it could be, itself. . .I don't know how one could make it an accredited institution, but it could in itself be an accredited institution. And I don't know what it takes.

F.R. I guess I'm asking because I'm really wondering what kind of. . .it's almost as though the right-wing has taken over this idea of grass-roots activism and grass-roots institutions and I'm really wondering how a progressive interest could again reclaim the grass-roots.

L.D. Well I think that from the very beginning the problem was the students themselves didn't. . .it was a cyclical thing. . .I mean the students were there because it wasn't demanding of their time. I mean all apart from the fact that they needed this and we needed it, you know. All apart from that there was this aspect that, and I'm thinking of the women in New York who went not the people like me who went across half a continent to get there, but the women in New York were there because they couldn't be in a full-time school.

F.R. Well they couldn't be not only because of the time or the funds, but because they couldn't flourish.

L.D. Exactly. Exactly. But that engenders the situation where it's almost self-selecting the institution to not get the support it needs .

F.R. Because it's already outside of those kinds of institutions.

L.D. And I don't know. I always believed that it would go on forever.

F.R. How did you feel when it closed?

L.D. Oh, sad. . .very sad!

F.R. Was there a last minute flurry to keep it alive or. . .?

L.D. Oh I think it was more just that everybody was worn out.

F.R. I think that's always one way that the status quo can to some degree be reinstated just wearing down the opposition.

L.D. Yeah, absolutely. I've seen this happen not just at NYFAI. In a completely and much more individual way: I was with a coop gallery in Boston for awhile, it was a sculptors gallery, and it got down to the point that one of the members suggested and everyone else agreed that we would all make Christmas tree ornaments to sell in an edition to be called "The Edition of Christmas Tree Ornaments" or something and that we would make them out of cast bronze. And we all had to do this. I've never worked in cast bronze in my life, I have no desire to work in cast bronze and I didn't want to make Christmas tree ornaments. And I dropped out of the gallery at that point because I didn't have that much time and energy anyway because I was teaching full-time. I think that to a certain extent that kind of thing happens with any institution that starts out being incredibly idealistic and having a point of view and then all of a sudden it comes down to doing stuff that you never wanted to do just to keep something going. . . but you're no longer doing the thing that you started the thing to do in the first place.

F.R. Right. I understand.

L.D. And I was not involved in the struggle the way the women in New York were. I was from a distance; I was way the hell out in the middle of the Midwest.

F.R. Were there others like you who traveled?

L.D. There was a woman in Pennsylvania. She came to the Judy Chicago workshop and she's the only one I remember. But then we wouldn't have all been there necessarily the same weekend.

F.R. Right, I'll have to ask Nancy.

L.D. Yeah. I don't know. I don't think anybody came from quite as far as I did.

F.R. Yeah. I think that was remarkable.

L.D. Well but it was very important for me at the time.

F.R. Yeah well that's a testament to how important it was. Thank you, thank you.

L.D. Oh, you're welcome.