NYFAI
Interview: Nancy Azara interviewed by Flavia Rando
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F.R. O.k., I'm going to start going on from what Harriet Lyons said to me, because she began talking to me about the consciousness-raising group.

N.A. Oh, she did?

F.R. That you were all in.

N.A. 1970

F.R. …that really was the idea where NYFAI originated. So, I'm going to ask you about that.

N.A. Well, I don't, I mean, I didn't see it as the idea of NYFAI actually being originated from that; but the idea of my class, the consciousness-raising visual diaries art making class, which I think I had mentioned, came out of that CR group. Now, CR group started in 1970. And, as women were talking in the consciousness-raising group, I was trying to give up smoking and also I was trying to record visually what words we were saying because I was trying to see if there was any way that that was possible. And it was a disaster, it didn't work, because you can't really capture the texture of what words say in a visual manner. So, I kept, as people would talk, I kept drawing. I drew the whole night. I had this black book, a bound open black book that was blank and I would draw and draw and draw and draw and draw.

F.R. Abstraction?

N.A. They were abstraction. I didn't draw people's faces or hands, I was trying to kind of get a sense for how forms would present themselves in a way that was similar to what the words described as happening. But you really had no sense of that. But that was my experiment. What I did find was not only did the drawings have an emotional content, but that my original forms which I had always erased in art school and which people had told me to erase and you know, teachers or others and which I had sort of not allowed to show through because they weren't really "right". You know they didn't "work", you know that word "doesn't work" is a very common word in art school. And, that started to come through, and I began to see that this is really what I wanted to make. You know this is really me and we were already talking about me. It was the first time in my life I

used the word “I think”, “I do” in a public context. Or even allowed myself permission, I mean most of us used “we” or “one” because that’s how it went.

F.R. Or it happened.

A.Z. Right, Right, so you were not permitted because it was considered too, it was considered selfish, women just didn’t do that, you know it just was something you were not supposed to do.

A.Z. It was the first time in my life that I had done that. Between that and making these drawings, I began to see that the way to develop a real sense of self as an artist, I mean eventually as the years went on, because we met for five years, and somewhat after that too, but for five intense years. And Harriet would probably know more about the exact year time, but I began to see that these forms were really me, and that “me” was coming through. And that we were all working on the “me” and that in art school, it was counter “me”.

F.R. Which art school was that?

A.Z. I went to the Art Student’s League. I had a great teacher Edwin Dickinson who would always say, I can teach you, he would underline it somehow, he would always say, “in this class I can teach you technique but I can’t teach you how to be an artist, because only you can do that.” You were supposed to paint like him in the class. He required that of everybody because he felt that that’s what he had to teach, that’s what he knew how to teach, and since that’s what he knew how to teach, that’s what you were supposed to do. And he would say when you left this class, you do what you want to do. I was his monitor, I was like his protégé’ but he was too overwhelming for me so I ran away. So I was still already thinking about who am I as an artist, what is it I want to do and this consciousness raising group really gave me that germ. So in that way, that is why it became a place for people to experiment with how to make this happen. So I did this class called consciousness-raising visual diaries and art making. . .

F.R. At NYFAI

A.Z. At NYFAI and the workshop, it was so crowded at the beginning that people used to beg me to come into the class. You know, I mean it was just a terrific, dynamite class. And they would draw while women talked during the process of consciousness raising, other women would open their books, they could have any art material they wanted but it

had to be bound because I would tell them they're not making something to go into the Guggenheim or the Modern, it's theirs and it's like a personal diary but it's visual information so no one has to show it, they can even hide it from themselves, but they can't rip out the pages, and so that's why it was bound. They sat in the class and as each woman gave testimony, they would draw or paint or make collages, they did all these different things and they would make these wonderful books. And then begin to become more assertive in their personal life.

F.R. I don't think I ever really heard you describe this course.

A.Z. I have at different times.

F.R. But not like this. No, I never really knew what it was.

A.Z. So that's what it really was and about women who had stopped making art, who were making art that they felt was really stale, or who made kind of representational things that they were bored with or stopped and didn't know why they stopped, had no real passion for their art, at that moment they suddenly found their passion, and were making these huge works now in their books. You know people did accordion books, all kinds of books, and I used to work along with everybody, so it was a kind of idea of facilitating rather then the traditional structure. That was how we were experimenting in the seventies. I was more like a facilitator so I did consciousness-raising too and I wasn't really the teacher, in quotes. But I was always there to be aware, because it's a kind of, you know it's tricky I mean there are some places that you can go emotionally in this workshop that no one should interrupt. If it's a true consciousness-raising format if you're the facilitator, you have to work really hard to make sure that that stays that way. And that people don't go on forever.

F.R. And that people stay safe.

N.A. All of that is important you know and in the lesbian book that Darla and I wrote that article for Laura Lampela, we talked about women coming out and what that was like for both the gay and the straight women in the workshop. At the beginning, there was also an art project but I stopped doing this after the third or fourth year because it just seemed to be too much.

F.R. Too much for you or?

N.A. I'm going to tell you, so I continued after the third or fourth year to do the visual diaries but I used to do it plus one art project a semester where people were required, people who took the class, to make one big thing and I'd have these ideas and make suggestions, or the class would come up with the ideas and we'd decide upon them together. So we did something on mapmaking. And we'd trace our whole bodies on big canvases. We'd lie on the floor and then we'd do our whole body as a map. You know where our heart is, we would chart where our friends were, where our relatives were. I had all these questions that I would ask and then people would work on mapping that. And at the end of the semester, each person would give a presentation about this big project and then present their book and then we would show the books at the open houses because the open houses were both student exhibits and faculty exhibits. And when we did that at the open houses, women who didn't want guests to see a certain section of the visual diaries (no one was forced to do anything). They would tie off pages so some women never showed their books, but the books were gorgeous, the diaries, they were just gorgeous. Women who had never made art before made beautiful things too. I mean it was a whole combination of things. So what happened was, we decided, or I suggested, that they could rope off, or put ribbons on places where they didn't want people to look but of course it was fascinating because the people who came would always be trying to peek through what was forbidden. And that was always interesting and we'd have women who'd come over and say "No, no, no, you can't look at that part of my book." And then people would have these little sheepish smiles. It was very exciting. That was the class I taught and that was the most important kind of contribution I felt I was making in terms of teaching, education at the time.

But to back track, Miriam Schapiro came, I don't know if Harriet told you this, if we would double up but, Miriam Schapiro came with Judy Chicago to New York in 19.., Harriet and I thought it was 1971 or '72. I don't remember when "Woman House" was, but they had already done their project in California and they came to bring this Messiah message to New York. So they met with our consciousness-raising group to discuss it. And, I remember having Judy Chicago and Marcia Tucker over to dinner where the three of us sat around and we chitchatted, you know it was very exciting to find all of these new things. There was this huge party to discuss what they were doing. They were

trying to organize women in New York. The women in New York were not that interested. They were quasi-interested in the new ideas, but they didn't find, they weren't so interested in working together collectively which is what the women in California were doing.

F.R. Right. Right. I thought there were students who were doing that in a certain way.

N.A. Sure some of them, but some of them weren't students. There were some students, but a lot of professional artists, I mean Harriet remembers this too a little more than I do, because she was with the arts editor at Ms. Magazine. So, she was involved in all this from the overview in a way that I wasn't. But what it appears, and Harriet said yesterday because we talked about it, that there were professional artists in California who really were supporting what Judy and Miriam were doing. Whereas in New York, the artists were not that interested in their artwork, but in their ideas. And, it may have been too focused on the vagina, so they didn't like Judy's work, whatever. And Miriam had, as you probably know, had had this huge career with the men and then she completely turned it around and started doing doilies and aprons, very feminine stuff. So, Miriam was doing this feminist stuff with doilies and aprons and that kind of thing, and Judy was doing vaginas, you know, "The Life Saver". And, I asked Harriet to show you, but next time you go, because Harriet doesn't like it she's trying to sell it, she has the Kotex print.

N.A. Harriet has one, she bought one and she never really, I mean she showed it for a while at her apartment and then she got tired of looking at it.

F.R. I just showed that print in my class last semester.

N.A. Absolutely, but Harriet has the original, one of the originals, because it was a print. So Judy came, and she was doing work like that, and it was very exciting, but the New York women were very resistant. So Judy and Miriam went back to California and there was an addition to a dialogue that they brought. I mean there was a group that I used to meet with which was Louise Fishman, I think Joan Snyder came to the meetings, Jenny Snyder, many women came to these big, huge meetings and I think it might have been WAR, I think it might have been Women Artists and Revolution. I think that's what we might have called ourselves. And that was more political than the CR groups, with demonstrations, and Lucy Lippard was active in it. And then Miriam came to New York, and she had split with Judy, and she was friends with Joyce Kosloff, because I think Max

(her husband) had been teaching also at CAL Arts at the same time that Paul Brock (Miriam's husband) had been teaching there. And I guess Miriam taught there too, and Joyce might have, but I don't really know those specifics. Anyway, Miriam and Joyce were very close. So Joyce was instrumental with Miriam in making this group meeting. And our group met and Miriam and Joyce talked about starting a magazine and a school. The women who wanted to be in the magazine were most of the room. But I wasn't that interested, now I think I was a dummy because it would have been very interesting and I think it would have brought my work out and that's why the women wanted to do it. But I've always been more interested in education; the process of how people learn, how I learn myself, probably because I had such bad learning experiences when I was little. So it interested me much more. I had done a whole spectrum of things in education before. I had worked in Vest Pocket Park helping street kids make parks with concrete in the sixties. I had also worked with delinquents who came to my after school class who wouldn't go to regular classes. So I had this kind of history that was really my interest. We met for a while as a group, the spin off of this meeting.

F.R. And how large were you?

N.A. That group may have been about 15. It was Susanna Tony, it was Miriam, it was Joan Semmel, it was Harmony, it was Marty Pottinger, I don't know if you remember her.

N.A. They spent a lot of time talking about the salaries we were going to make at the school. So they weren't so interested really in the organization and involvement of the school, so I dropped out. I think Elke Solomon might have been involved, but a lot of people dropped out because it wasn't really meeting their needs and what they wanted to do, one reason. And, the other reason why was that the magazine was taking up all of their time because getting Heresies going was really, really like you know, a major thing. And this was still probably 74…72…73 maybe, maybe part of 74. I was active at the Brooklyn Museum and in saving that art school, so I got elected to the board of that. I was busy with that and I just felt that that group wasn't going anywhere. But Miriam and I had become friendly, and so we used to go out. We had this connection, which was that we both loved fabric, we both loved embroidery. I had been a costume designer for the theater and so I would share my books with Miriam about things and we would go to

thrift shops and Miriam would be sitting on the floor tossing the pillowcases and the aprons and everything, and I just loved it. I mean we had a great time. So we really liked each other and had this great time. I was always interested in what Miriam was doing because Miriam had this background, you know, of being this great feminist. She had started the school in California with Judy and so I was always interested in hearing what she had to say. I was interested in hearing about the school group, and, she was the one who told me that the group fell apart which was no surprise to me. Harriet Lyons was then meeting with Miriam for Ms. Magazine, she sent that essay about her. So Harriet Lyons was meeting with Miriam and she was getting fired up about Miriam's history of what she did in California and was very excited and of course we would see each other in our CR group together. And, Harriet and I used to go out almost every weekend, our kids used to go out together, we joined a health club together and we used to take the kids swimming in the pool there, go in the sauna with the kids, Nana and Gillian her daughter who's a year younger, used to have a great time, they were like twins. I mean they were really, really close, and they were just beautiful together. You know, one was a blonde beauty, one was a dark beauty, you know, they were just lovely. So, then we would do that, and that was in Soho, but then after we got the kids all fired up and tired from swimming, we used to take them to the galleries. And then they used to give reports to us: "I like this, I hate that, that looks like nothing." And, sometimes they would crawl on the sculptures. We would have to pick them up and take them out of the gallery. But Harriet and I had this wonderful familial connection, and she started telling me all about her talks with Miriam. So Harriet was the one who was the liaison. . .

F.R. The bridge.

N.A. She was the bridge, so she kept saying, you know Nancy, it would be wonderful to start a school and Miriam would love to talk to you about it. So I called Miriam up and Miriam said, oh I'll bring my files to you, you really should do it. And, I said I guess you know that I can do it because I had an administrative background as a costume designer, costume design is about 25% design and 75% organization as you know, you've done it.

F.R. Right

N.A. So, I was spending my life not doing organizational stuff but I really had learned it because I had worked on major television shows as an assistant when I was twenty. You

know I only had two years of college at the time. I got an Associates Degree. My parents wouldn't send me to school for four years.

F.R. Did you study art at that school?

N.A. I studied fashion design.

F.R. Just fashion design, so they didn't include [art?]

N.A. Well no, my studies included no art. All my art history learning is self-taught, except for a survey class, all of it. A lot of my literature education, after two years of college was mostly also self-taught. And my art education was self-taught because at the Art Student's League you learned about art but not about art history. So I really taught myself all of those things, and through friends and stuff because you met people at the Art Student's League. I went to lectures at the Metropolitan, I went to lectures that they used to give, you know those weekly lectures I went to a lot of them. I mean I really did teach myself all of that. So, where was I. . .so Miriam said to me, I'll open my file. I said "Sure that's great." I went over and looked through Miriam's files and she said. . .

F.R. And what did these files contain?

N.A. They consisted of all the Woman House stuff. That's all I remember. So they couldn't have been that significant because I don't remember them as making a major impact on me. But Miriam was very dynamic and the files were pictures and all kinds of stuff that she had done. She opened the files and we talked, so I started to organize women to come and I wanted women who mostly weren't involved in Heresies. I was teaching at the Brooklyn Museum School . . .

F.R. Why was that?

N.A. Because I felt that they were too busy with Heresies, not for personal reasons because I didn't like them or anything, it's just I felt that Heresies, from the first group, just took all their time. And I wanted women who weren't involved in that, or less involved in that so that they could really focus on this idea of education. I must have called 150 women.

F.R. Really.

N.A. Oh, I just spent all this time calling and calling. And out of that, I don't remember how many came up, but I must have found ten or twelve women. Sometimes we'd have these meetings and no one would show up. Carol Stronghilos, who was teaching at the

Brooklyn Museum School also got excited about it, so she and I started and there were a few women many though who came and who would leave. You know, there were a few women though and eventually we began to make this nucleus.

F.R. And when was this exactly Nancy?

N.A. Seventy-six or seventy-five, I think it might have been seventy-six. It must have been seventy-six, toward the end of seventy-six. Miriam wouldn't come though, so I'd call Miriam up and report to her.

F.R. Ah, so she was like the advisor.

N.A. She was the advisor, and I would call her up and report to her, but it became intolerable. I couldn't do a group where I would call Miriam up and report to her, she had to be a part of it. You know I mean we'd have a meeting and then I'd call Miriam up and she'd tell me. . .it couldn't, it didn't work as far as I was concerned, maybe someone else could have pulled it off, I couldn't do it. So Miriam agreed to join and I think Harriet was instrumental in getting Miriam to change her mind too. Because Harriet didn't remember any of this when I spoke to her but she finally remembered yesterday. And she's getting to remember more. So, Miriam then started to come to the group and out of that then, I mean, we even went to the Hamptons because Miriam was in the Hamptons to have a meeting, I remember that. And I think we began to develop a nucleus of eight or nine women. There was a woman, a black woman who taught at, whose name I don't remember, who taught at Syracuse or Cornell who came to our meetings. Theodora Skipitaris was involved for a while. I can't remember all these names, they'll come back to me. But anyway, we began to develop this nucleus of women such as Lucy Lessane.

F.R. Who is she a friend of?

N.A. She recommended because I kept calling all these women, and this was a woman that was recommended who was interested in being an administrator in a feminist art institute. She, Lucy, lived on the Lower Eastside, was kind of, somebody who was, had that kind of Lower Eastside manner. She had two young kids, she worked a regular job, but she was really interested in the kind of spark of this, so she would come to meetings too. And she was our administrator and then we started to write grants.

F.R. What's her last name?

N.A. Lessane. And she was part of the school at the beginning. I hope I mention her when I talk about it, sometimes I forget.

F.R. This is the first I've heard of her.

N.A. Is it? O.k. She didn't stay too long, she stayed maybe three months after the school opened. It got too overwhelming for her. And Irene Peslikis I had called and she never called me back so then when word got around about the school, she was so upset because she wasn't involved. But she knew that I had called her because she would sort of shrink every time that I said I had called her. So she said that her husband never gave her the message. So whatever, Irene was part of it and Irene was a founder of Red Stockings and was very dynamic, and so she brought in a whole group, Miriam brought in a whole group. I brought in who I had from my consciousness raising group and from a lot of other things. My consciousness-raising group I don't think met much then but I was still pals with a lot of the women, so we had this kind of support system.

F.R. Harriet did enumerate who was in the group, do you want to?

N.A. Oh sure, well if Harriet has it than it's not important. So, I mean we had some people move in and out, I mean I don't know if Harriet mentioned Eunice Lipton?

F.R. Yes.

N.A. Joan Snyder

F.R. Right

N.A. Pat Steir

F.R. Yes

N.A. Marcia Tucker, Elke Solomon who was curator of the prints and drawings at the time at the Whitney, Victoria Barr. Anyway, Harriet mentioned most of those. O.k. So, where were we?

F.R. And you brought the women from your consciousness-raising group that was the last thing.

N.A. Yah, they were supportive many of them, not all of them, but many of them were supportive. And I was obsessed, you know, I was just obsessed. To me, you know how you feel like that sense of coming home, of belonging?

F.R. uhhuh

N.A. It was a place where I knew I wanted to be. Because as I had always said I was interested in education, and I was interested in feminism, in knowing how we learn to be docile and submissive, how we develop that, how we find our own self and bring it back to yourself and how we express that in our art. And so we started to write grants. Lucy and I think Judy Chiti, I'm trying to remember, Judy Keedie must have come in at some point. I think she came in later because we started to write grants and we started to prepare for benefit. Now I know April Kingsley was the arts writer for the Village Voice, she was very active at the time in the meetings. She and I would walk through every single gallery with benefit posters. We would start in the 70s and we would walk all the way down through every single gallery all of 57th Street and downtown with the brochures for the benefit inviting people to come. And April was the art critic for the Village Voice so you better believe that a lot of the galleries at least paid attention to her. So that's what we did and then Harriet was working on her end at Ms. Magazine.

F.R. She secured the space.

N.A. She secured the space from Ronnie Eldridge, who was at the Port Authority. And she got Gloria Steinem, she got Karen Lippert who was the press person at Ms. Magazine who found the complimentary rum and the drinks. We worked with the head of the banquets at the World Trade Center. And Carol Stronghilis and I, I'll never forget this, we went to see Louise Nevelson at the dedication of her piece at the World Trade Center, and Louise said that it was one of the most important pieces of her life. And I don't remember how it was specifically but it felt like it was about 100 feet long, it was her masterwork. It was huge and beautiful. And so I kind of sensed who she was, and I managed to wiggle out her phone number, her personal phone number. Doing all this wheeling and dealing that I was doing, I managed to talk to Diana her partner who was also sort of like her assistant. So I managed to talk to Diana and talk her into Louise being the guest of honor. These were certain kinds of things I had to do, for instance. We wanted to give her flowers and she wanted black roses and I had to find them.

F.R. Fabulous (laughter)

N.A. I found, I got all the flowers donated, from this place that was on West Broadway and the woman was lovely. So I got flowers donated, I got a bouquet for the table. Louise's flowers.

F.R. You found the black roses.

N.A. I did. They're really not black, they're dark grey.

F.R. No, very, very dark grey.

N.A. Charcoal grey, beautiful. So we got Louise, once we had secured Louise, you know, then you can get everybody else down the line. So I got all these other people.

F.R. And what did you say to get her? What did you say, do you remember what approach you took?

N.A. Well I started with her masterwork, I don't even remember if I personally said it but I might have. I didn't speak to her, I spoke to Diana.

F.R. Right, to Diana.

N.A. And told her that her work was a master work and I had gone there and it was so beautiful and I had seen it and that this was a big deal at the World Trade Center and it was going to be in her honor and I know how important this piece was and we had started this feminist art school. Whatever it was, Louise Nevelson was inspired and no matter what people say sometimes on the outside, she was a very feminist woman in many ways and she did I think a record or a tape with Arne Glinsher about her struggle being a woman artist and then there's a biography of her and about how she was treated. So she acknowledged the struggle, I imagine she was very sympathetic. Other women who were younger artists like myself who knew her personally said that she had helped them. She had a very ferocious reputation but there was this side of her that was very kind also to women artists. I don't know now exactly what I said but I'm very good at that generally speaking, because I had done that in the theater. I'm very good at that kind of putting it together. And I know that I was extremely excited. I remember I was working in my studio, but I spent hours on the phone or hours waiting by the phone to get these interchanges. And then we got Louise, you know, and Harriet was so excited, she got all these other women. And that's how it works, you know, everybody gets excited and it's an interchange. And finally we got a grant from this place called the Joyce Foundation. And it was a woman named Sally Bingham or somebody with a name like that. Ferris would know who that was, because she also gave the money to Duke University. I'm not positive because they wouldn't tell us who it was so I'm speculating. It was a woman donor who only wanted to give to women in art, so we we're perfect. So they gave ten

thousand to us and we had to match it by a certain date, so we had the benefit to do that and at the benefit we raised fifteen thousand dollars. We were matching it and the port authority gave us the space for much less than we would have paid, they claimed, I don't know. It was a big, huge, monstrous but wonderful space that overlooked the Hudson River on 325 Spring Street. So, anyway, that's how we started. And we had open houses two times a semester. And we had people like Alice Neal and Louise Bourgeois as guests of honor.

F.R. O.k., so you got this space, now how did you handle this space, how did you move in, how did you set up?

N.A. Well, I took a break.

F.R. Did you want to talk about that a little bit?

N.A. Well, I took a break, it was, March 31st was the benefit and after that I was exhausted. So, I took a break and it was up to Carol Stronghilis and Irene Peslikis to get together to continue to do the summer program.

F.R. Carol Stronghilis

N.A. Irene Peslikis. But they overbooked the program and they couldn't really follow through on it, so it was pretty chaotic in the beginning.

F.R. Do you mean that so many women wanted to partake?

N.A. They had so many workshops that they, people don't know when they start something that you really have to kind of narrow. It's like starting a restaurant with 100 things on the menu, you can't really handle it unless you know you're going to have people who are going to order. And then you have to have it on hand because you can't say we're out of this, you know we're out of 75% of it. So they overbooked the workshops, they had all these women teaching and then they didn't know how to put the students together. We were sort of fledgling. And they had different ways of dealing with each other so they weren't working together. So that was a little chaotic. And Miriam in the meantime had gone out to the Hamptons for the summer, but she was also putting together, I think she had shaped the format of her full-time program, which was a daytime program. Miriam wanted NYFAI to be the Harvard of the Feminist Art Movement. I saw that as something that didn't interest me. I was interested in doing evening classes. I was interested in working with women who were working, who were

artists who wanted to examine their form. And I was interested in giving a spectrum of possibilities, but Miriam didn't want that. So that was already a problem. And then I know Harriet said yesterday that Miriam thought that I was going to be somebody that would just follow along with what she wanted, and she was surprised that I had ideas of my own. So that became problematic. There was not much room for anything else except her ideas. And the idea of the Harvard of the feminist women's movement, well now I can see it as a possibility, but even then it didn't interest me. You know, but I had no problem with Miriam doing it. I had a problem with me having to do it with Miriam rather than have the openness to do my own program. And I thought that also evening programs would develop collectors. From the very beginning I always felt that we needed to collect ourselves. Women needed to learn how to be collectors in a way that was positive to other women. Women that were collectors and gallery dealers collected the men. And I felt that what we needed to do was to begin to develop that base, and I felt that this was a way to do that. So, I had all of my own visions that I really wanted to see. And so Miriam started, but these women would arrive and we were so naïve. We had no place for them to stay, you know, somebody said to me, "O.k. so what's your program?" And I said, "O.k., I start here" and I put my finger down on something and I made it up. Which is what you do, but I made it up. By myself I made up my program, and Miriam made up hers but she had the basis of Women House and she wanted to do more of that in New York. And she called all these people because she was doing lectures around the country. She had all these contacts. She called all of these places and they sent her students. So she had a nucleus, I don't remember for sure, but maybe 15-20 students, who came very excited from all over, but they had no place to stay. They were camping out at NYFAI, it was really, you know, hunt and peck, finding out. During this time, Judy Chicago was coming to the Brooklyn Museum for "The Dinner Party", and Harriet was working at the Borough of Brooklyn, she was the press person for the borough president of Brooklyn so she knew all about the "scoop" about how "The Dinner Party" was getting to the Brooklyn Museum. So Harriet Lyons called me up and said "We gotta get Judy Chicago, she's coming to town, you know, this is ridiculous her split with Mimi." And I said "Well you know how Miriam talks about Judy Chicago." And Harriet said "I'll call her." So Harriet called Miriam Schapiro in the Hamptons and

Miriam didn't want to be bothered, I think she was too busy with her art, whatever. So Harriet says to her "Miriam, I want to invite Judy Chicago." And Miriam says to her "I don't care what you do", and she hung up.

N.A. So Harriet said, "That's my permission, Miriam doesn't care." So Harriet invited Judy. When Miriam found out that Judy Chicago was coming, she had a conniption, a conniption. But it was too late, it was already in the brochures. She must have read it in the brochure. I don't know, but Harriet says she told her. So that therein started the split between Miriam and me. So before Judy came, Miriam met at Harriet's house with her group, which now included Carol Stronghilis, and it became a camp, who sided with her, Judy Brodsky, and a group of other women who sided with Miriam. And me, and Judith Chiti, who at that time had come on board, Harriet Lyons, Darla, who had come on board, all these women who came up to work on NYFAI from the benefit. They were women who worked very hard on making the benefit a success and that was really a rich way to find women. Catherine Allen had started to come in and work on special events. I can't find her. Art In America just came out, and I'll look again maybe she's in there this year because the name Catherine Allen is so common. So, I mean I'll look again for her, but she was a major figure too. And she did all the performances. She organized all the performances, which were major performances that we had at 325 Spring until she got so exhausted she stopped. But there were huge poetry readings, big performances, they were just so exciting. We had hundreds of people come to those too. So Miriam came with her group to Harriet's for a Saturday morning meeting. I was there with my group, and we tried to reconcile. But Miriam felt betrayed.

F.R. Because. . .Judy was. . .coming?

N.A. I mean partly because of Judy but it was partly because I wasn't really turning out to be the person she thought I was going to be. And at one point she asked me, you know she sort of met with me, we had lunch at some time between the benefit and the meeting and she said to me "you should be the administrator at the school." And I said "Miriam, I want to make art, I don't want to do that." So, I turned it down, but I turned out to do this by default and because I knew how to do it. So we met and now Miriam and I went to a separate room to chitchat, Miriam said she didn't trust who I was. Miriam felt really betrayed, and I'm not sure why exactly. I can't answer that question.

F.R. Did you ever say you were going to be the administrator?

N.A. No, No. But we all did what we had to do. And by that time I wasn't even the administrator, I think, I don't remember, it was sort of hunt and peck, I don't know. Maybe I did, I mean I don't remember but it was all kind of mixed up and unformed.

F.R. Did people do what was necessary?

N.A. Right. And we hired somebody to work in the office. When we had people in the office, I started by calling those people and organizing their day with them, the workers. So I ended up administrating in that way. Miriam felt originally betrayed by Judy and she felt again betrayed by Judy being invited and she felt her program didn't do as well because it really required somebody to handle it and Miriam just wanted to go in there and teach. All those things are things you find out when you're actually doing it. And, Miriam had taught at programs before where she just went in and she taught. You know, she didn't have to do the nitty gritty stuff like that. And we were all truly exhausted from starting this school. I mean, we had done this major thing on no money, on sheer love and hard work. And we weren't able to be as kind to each other. I didn't like the first catalogue that Miriam produced. I hated the picture. It was pink; Miriam loved pink. It was lace imagery. You know it was just so hard to really reconcile all these things and I think partly it was that we didn't have the leisure or the time to really sit and to go over these things. We were really constantly in motion as it was happening, click click click, happening because we had to do this semester, we had to do that semester. And so when Judy came to town, we had this huge event, we introduced Judy, we talked about the Dinner Party. Judy agreed to it as a benefit. . .

F.R. Do you know when that was?

N.A. It must have been early November or October. I think it was the first week of December .

F.R. What year are we in?

N.A. I don't know. '82, might be '82.

F.R. O.k.

N.A. We can look it up, magic. But Judy Chicago came on a Friday night and did an open lecture and discussion about her work. Rutgers has gorgeous pictures in their archive. Then on Saturday she did a weekend workshop as a donation. It was about

giving birth. I have slides of this. And I was a student, Darla was a student, Leila Daw was a student, Helen Stockton was a student. It was on the birth projects because that was what she was working on. Linda Hill, I mean there were all these women who were students for that weekend. And Judy didn't quite do consciousness-raising, she had the women who gave birth talk about the experience of birthing. And the ones who didn't stayed silent, which didn't make people like Darla too thrilled. So there was a lot of imbalance like that. But Judy was working on the birth project and she wanted to know about it. She didn't focus on the whole group and their feelings. And she divided us into groups and we all did this group project on birth. And we saved it, it might still be in the subbasement here, in what condition I don't know, but we have pictures. And Helen Stockton, I remember, talked about giving birth or being born in Oklahoma and what it was like when it was a territory. Because Helen Stockton just died, she must have been my mother's age so she must have been born in 1913. She was our oldest student. She had retired and gone back to art school. She was our full-time student at NYFAI. She took every class possible and she went to my sculpture class at my studio and she carved in wood. So Helen was the oldest, I think the youngest was sometimes like 16 years old, I had a 16 year old who was still in high school. A couple of them who were still in high school, who were very precocious. One of them ended up working for Sotheby's, her name was Nancy but I don't remember what happened to her. So the consciousness-raising group I did had women of different ages, different life experiences, etc. And so that was the weekend that Judy Chicago did her birth project at NYFAI. And we made these pieces and we talked about them and that was a great weekend workshop. But Judy was very upset because I had a party after Judy's Friday talk at my house and she kept saying, "Where's Mimi, where's Mimi?" And I said Mimi didn't want to come, she actually resigned, I think I told her, or I think I either told her directly or implied Mimi resigned because she was so angry that we had asked you. So Judy was kind of upset because Judy was always hoping for reconciliation and Miriam was not interested. That was a problem. So then the school went on. And we applied for grants. And I think in 1981 we, Judy Chiti has this mind like a steel trap so I'm sure she'll remember the dates. I can also do some looking up before you leave. But Judy Chiti and I worked all the time on grants. Judy Chiti was a dynamite person with grants. She was working as a

freelance person for grants or for a grants organization and eventually she worked at one of the community colleges, I think she worked at the one in Long Island City. She'll tell you when she sees you. And so, she was a major grants person, so she and I would meet. We spent our weekends writing grants. And so we wrote to FYPSI, which was a government foundation. We wrote for grants from Washington, from the government, and we wrote for one at the Ford Foundation. And then we started to have a relationship with a woman named Gail Counts. C-O-U-N-T-S. Who changed to Gail Morgan eventually. So her name was I guess Gail Morgan Counts but she was called Gail Counts at the time. And she was in charge of the arts program, she was the associate in charge of the arts program at Ford. There was a boss above her, a man.

F.R. At?

N.A. Ford. So we met at Ford, with her many times. We had long discussions. We met with Susan Beresford who was also in charge of some part of the Ford Foundation, she's now the head of it, but she was sort of in charge of that. I think it was before Franklin Thomas but Franklin Thomas was just coming in. He was the head, I don't know if you know who he is. Well anyway, so, but the Ford Foundation was changing, it was getting more involved in Grass Roots things, and Franklin Thomas was a black man involved in community stuff. O.k., so Susan Beresford. We met for hours with her, and then she gave us to Gail Counts, I think that's how it worked. My memory is not terrific but Judy may remember. And with Gail Counts, we met for hours and days, we had lunches, we wrote a proposal for them. And she verbally told us that it looked very good and it was going to happen, or we met for lunch with her boss and her boss told us, but he was a bit of a drinker. But whatever, and we were going broke. I mean we had the whole semester predicated on this money from the Ford Foundation.

F.R. And why were you going broke? Did you charge tuition?

N.A. We charged tuition but tuition never pays for schools. And we didn't have any grants. We had this first benefit and we were hoping to get money. And then we were meeting with the Ford Foundation and they were promising us this money, which was then eventually turned down after the promise. So Kris Glenn, I don't know if you know who she is, but Kristin Booth Glenn was this lawyer, a feminist lawyer, who became very well known for saving one of the radio stations. She was going to be a judge in the fall.

She taught in a law school, I can't remember which one. So she was going to be a judge in the fall and she had been our advisor all along. And she actually collected my work. She really is someone who is extremely supportive of women in art. She had got us our 501C3. So we called her up. I had gone to Morocco and when I came back I found out we had been rejected. Judy Chiti and I and Darla, Darla was running a program for the state, Darla had a hundred employees under her. She really knew how to do that kind of administrative stuff. And, Judy, Darla, myself and the whole board, all strategized. And Judy was dynamite in strategizing in that way because she had that kind of a mind. So Judy and myself and Darla, who is also very good with strategy, we all got together, Linda Hill, Catherine Allen, the whole board got together and we decided what to do. And we called, got Kris Glenn involved and we had a meeting at the Ford Foundation. Because we said, what we intimated was, we were going to publicize what they did.

F.R. Why did they turn you down?

N.A. Someone else may remember, Judy may remember, but we even spoke to Franklin Thomas, I mean someone even spoke to him, but they turned us down. We weren't, I guess we weren't that high a priority, I mean I don't really know why. See if Judy has a speculation on it. So they turned us down and we had this meeting. I remember Darla bought a pair of shoes, we had the suits, we had the clothes, we got there with Kris Glenn. It was the most beautiful boardroom I had ever seen. A big huge walnut table, Susan Beresford, Gail Counts I think was there and everybody was around this table, and Kris Glenn said to them, and they all knew who she was because she was this major feminist lawyer, and she said, I guess you know what I'm going to be doing in the Fall. So I can't handle their case any more after that. So, we got the money. And Judy negotiated it. But they wouldn't give it to us in a way that wasn't punitive. So we got a hundred thousand dollar matching grant, we had a year to match a hundred thousand dollars. We killed ourselves. We had a political weekend where we had Elizabeth Holtzmann, and Geraldine Ferraro, I think I showed you the brochure. With that political weekend, we did an art expo where we had this large show with a catalogue. All of those have the dates in it. I think it was '81 because we did the political weekend, I think it was all '81. So you can imagine, in '79 we had this huge benefit. We opened the school. We tried to raise money so we could continue. And we were running the school which had a

semester when every time you have to have a new set of things going together, right? And we had a group of women who just wanted to talk about philosophy and didn't care about the nitty-gritty; about sustaining the school. We had a semester coming up and they didn't care about making that happen, they wanted to talk about philosophy. I like philosophy, but we couldn't do it without doing the other stuff. We had to hire the teachers, we had to do all this other stuff, we had to do a brochure. We had Cindy Sisler design the brochures. She was a very prominent designer in the feminist movement at the time. An architect as her architectural designs come up in the early brochures. We did all these things, I mean we were just basket cases.

F.R. And how many of you did this work?

N.A. Five, six? So it was Darla and I, Darla and I every semester used to go out in Darla's car, and Darla would be shaking in her boots because Darla does the physician, the chief of service, deputy director of a hospital would be in her car, and I'd be hanging posters. All over. We went to Lincoln Center, the kiosks, we went up town, we went all the way downtown, in her car. So she'd sit in her car and I'd go out. So I said to her one day, just tell them I'm your patient. (laughter)

F.R. (laughter)

N.A. We also used to sit on West Broadway, on 420 West Broadway on Saturdays, and we had a table set up and we used to sit there with the brochures and hand them out. We used to meet people. Darla would occasionally see her colleagues or patients and she'd sort of be shrinking, but she got accustomed to it. And that's how we made it happen, because we didn't have the money to advertise. We did a few radio programs, you know, we did as many as we could. WBAI we did a lot, and we did some horrible radio programs, all they were interested in was erotica. The feminists, "what they do". And I'd keep going back, you know, sometimes it'd be like eleven o'clock at night or midnight and I'm a morning person and I'd be like, and I'd be coming back at them with. . . ."oh yes, that's very interesting but you know our program starts again in September. We have all these things." And I'd be reading from the brochure. And the guy would go back again to some sex stuff, . . . "and now you feminists what are you doing, you know, why do you hate men?" I mean that was the time in the early 80's. So we would have to deal with that. But we did everything we could to really get as many women as possible

there. And a lot of women never heard of us. You know, people would always be saying, oh my god I never heard of this place, I'm so happy I found it. Why haven't you advertised more, you know. It was a big spectrum of people who felt that we had failed them because we didn't advertise more. You know these women didn't understand how hard it was to do it. And people were so excited to find us, women who would say, you know women like Susan Brownell, who's wonderful, who was like our office administrator person. She said she expected all these women to be in combat boots so she was terrified about coming to NYFAI. She was so happy that it wasn't like that. So we had all of these different kinds of things going on.

F.R. So how did the faculty come to be. Were they selected, did the board look at their proposals? Or how was that done?

N.A. I think it was all of those things. I mean people would come and say they wanted to teach. Eventually it got into a routine. Regina Tierney was working at the school as the administrator, she would filter through the people that seemed most interesting for what we were doing, and talk to them and then talk to me about it. That's how we had Judith Cameron teach at NYFAI. She even gives credit to NYFAI, and I think she mentions me in some of her books too, for having begun some of the things. So lots of women came like that. Harriet Lyons would suggest people. People would suggest people and work together. And every semester I would call people. I would call tons of people to get ideas, to see who was interested.

F.R. How many semester courses a year did you offer?

N.A. Ah three. Two big ones and a little summer program. But two big ones you had to have. And we had an open house with guests of honor like Alice Neel, Elaine DeKoonig, Lenore Tawny, Louise Bourgeois, we had all of these at open houses. And they would often be people who would act out. You know Louise Bourgeosie the night before said she wasn't coming. So Darla had to go to her studio and pick her up in Brooklyn. Darla still remembers what a wonderful experience it was. And Louise Bourgeois came in a trench coat because she had been working she didn't want anybody to see what she was wearing. But she called up the night before when Darla and I had gone to the Philharmonic. I came home and there was this message. . . "Nancy, this is Louise Bourgeois, I am too busy, I cannot come tomorrow." So I called her up and I said

"Louise, how can you do this to us?" You know, Louise always liked me. Sometimes you just never know why and you don't try to figure it out. She's an amazing person anyway, but not easy. So I told her people were coming, and people were, they were coming from all over the United States to see Louise Bourgeois at the Open House. So I talked her into it. But she had to be picked up. So Darla drove to Brooklyn and saw her workshop. Darla came back, she was just glowing with the joy of seeing Louise's studio. And so that was how Louise got there. Alice Neel came, you know, Elaine DeKoonig came and got so excited about the school that she offered to teach as a gesture and as a benefit a collage workshop the next semester. So we had one whole day workshop with Elaine DeKoonig.

F.R. That must have been very successful.

N.A. It was very successful, very exciting. We all clapped toward the end of it. The thing about NYFAI that Leila Daw and everybody mentions that was so special, was that the students were also the teachers and often, the teachers were also the students. The board members took classes. I took Elaine's workshop, Darla took Elaine's workshop. Faith Ringgold was a guest of honor. She was at her open house. She taught a wonderful mask-making workshop. I was there. You know, Darla was there. May Stevens taught a wonderful workshop, a political workshop. Arlene Raven taught, Lucy Lippard, we were all interchanging with each other. So the feminist idea that the system, the teacher all of those things were really broken down in those classes. And that was so exciting because that was really what we wanted to do.

F.R. So tell me a little bit about the shape of the open houses.

N.A. Well the open houses were modeled on the Brooklyn Museum School open houses, which were the ones, I knew because I taught there. And what they did was they would have an afternoon that'd be open to the community. Anybody could come. People could talk to the instructors. There would be artwork on the wall. So people would get a sense of being comfortable with the environment. And so, this seemed like a really good idea to have. But we also wanted to honor women, and we had, we began to have poetry workshops and you know the one thing I didn't mention here, and I didn't even mention the other stuff, you know there's so many things that I forgot, Judith Chiti was teaching workshops on philosophy and art and deduction and analysis and art and all of that from

the very beginning. And those were really dynamic. And we had women who never thought about these things. Susanne Langer, she was one of the textbooks. So that was all there too. We had women come from all over to, just to see what it was like. And we had food donated from this Mexican restaurant, from a student of Judy's. Judy Sukolof, who I still see from time to time at various places. And we should talk about her probably if we can. But we don't have enough time, enough people, we don't have enough time I'm sure. But Judy Sukolof would donate chips and salsa and that kind of stuff. We'd get cheese and we'd have wine, and we'd have seltzer. And we'd have poetry readings Ntozake Shange would bring her class and read some poetry as would Jewel Gomez. I mean it was extremely exciting and people would come and they'd all stand around, and we'd give the guest of honor flowers. And, you know, it was part of the same idea, students, faculty, everybody was together. When we moved here to 91 Franklin in '83, it must have been '83. Darla bought the building. We helped Darla buy the building, Rhonda Schaller and myself. We helped Darla find this building. We worked with a real-estate agent. She found this building, and then Darla put a down payment on it. This was all during the time when we were trying to raise money, I don't know how we did it. I think about it now. And then we had to sell off the fourth floor and the third floor in order to pay for the whole thing. And the people we met who bought the third floor were really nice. They came, a young married couple and they were really interested, and he had his own money, and he put his money down. So we had one. The fourth floor, we couldn't sell for anything. We had one couple that decided to buy it and then turned it down. We didn't sell that floor until February. And I think the closing was March. And the price of these buildings was going up so the owner offered to buy it back from us. And we said no, and so finally we sold the fourth floor. And that was the money we used, plus Darla is who sold her building in Brooklyn to pay for the building. Then how do we support it? So we rented out the ground floor to what became the Ceres Gallery, which would pay us rent.

F.R. And who worked there?

N.A. Ceres Gallery was founded by members of the NYFAI community. It was my idea with Polly Lai, Rhonda Schaller and Darla Bjork. Those were the three women who made it happen. Lai, she was Asian, Chinese and Ronda Schaller, (Polly and Rhonda

were lovers at the time) and Darla Bjork. And you know, I had, it had always been my dream. And I remember the moment we were talking about how it had been my dream. And so, you know, we all decided it was our dream. And then they really went about finding women to be members for that gallery. And that's how Ceres Gallery got started. And paying in money to be a member of that gallery really supported NYFAI. So there was that money. And then we rented out the basement for storage. And then we rented out studio spaces, so when there weren't classes we had maybe fifteen or twenty women come and paint. And the agreement was when there were no classes they could paint. So certainly they painted all day Sunday. I mean and even if there were classes we had everything all divided with these dividers that moved all around. So they could open them up, or close them down. So people could have their classes and they could go paint in the back. And it was all kind of something. We were all really supportive of each other. Essentially all that worked like a charm. I mean there is always a problem on occasion, but basically it was beautiful. And, so the front part here where Darla's studio is now was the office. And, then we had three classes sometimes going on at the same time in the back. And when there weren't any classes women would come in and use them as studios. Some of the women like Barbara Pollock who's now an arts writer, she was a lawyer and was trying to become more involved in art and become an artist. And so she had it as a studio space too. She was very dynamic and involved and I think she taught workshops here at some time about art and law or she did somewhere else. I mean it was like that. And so, the storage in the basement got really, you know, filled with women who needed space, men too, I think, but mostly women who needed space to store their work and we had this really dry basement. We also rented out the back of the basement to this place that sold Asian Art, you know, artifacts. So it was just like that, managing that.

F.R. So you just used the ground floor. . .

N.A. The ground floor was Ceres Gallery, Darla had her psychiatrist office in the back of Ceres Gallery. People had to walk through the gallery to get to Darla's psychiatrist's office. And it looked like this office but bigger. It was a real standard looking staid psychiatrist's office behind this art gallery. Did you ever see it?

F.R. So,

N.A. So, Darla and her studio, it was sort of more rustic than it is now. Anything else? We've done a

lot. So if you want to stop. We've already covered a lot.

F.R. We've covered a lot of territory.

N.A. Right we have.

F.R. I think maybe we should do this as split interview too, and then I can ask you questions about. . .

N.A. What comes up from the others maybe.

F.R. Right and also a little bit more of your subjective impression, because this is like a timeline sort of thing.

N.A. You mean from now back?

F.R. From now back. . .well. . .

N.E. You'll think it out. O.k.