

NYFAI -

Interview: Cassandra Langer interviewed by Katie Cercone

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K.C. This is December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Katie Cercone interviewing Cassandra Langer.

C.L. I think it was important for most of us during the early 70s when the movement started up to establish institutions that would be accommodating to the radical new ideas that we had. We rejected the idea of accepting the old roles; of getting married being wives, and mothers . . . I think it's hard for young people to understand that was the life you were groomed for. If you aspired to anything else, you were deemed oddball out , rushed off to a psychoanalyst or worse yet, thrown into a mental institution for readjustment. Establishing the Feminist Art Institute was an extremely revolutionary thing to do at that time. NYFAI provided a safe space for creative women who were trying to break out of those stereotypes. There was the California site that my friend Arlene Raven and others including Mimi Schapiro and Judy Chicago set up within the heart of a traditionally patriarchal art department spawning Woman House and other alternative spaces. Mimi, Nancy and people in New York, set up their own versions to begin with but they evolved into the Feminist Art Institute. For people like myself who were outsider-insiders, because I was teaching in South Carolina in the heart of limitation land and bigotry it was an oasis. The freedom of being able to talk with like-minded people was empowering. Founding the Collage Art Association's Women's Caucus for Art helped a lot. If you were thinking about making a break respecting a toxic work situation and needed positive reinforcement of your feminism, then you turned to either California or New York because nothing else existed. You began to reach out to other feminists. In my case, I got a post-doctoral Smithsonian Grant to do some work on the American Landscape painter, John F. Kensett. After spending a year in D.C., I really didn't want to go back. I hadn't finished my research and the University of South Carolina was impossible when it came to feminism. When I asked for an extended leave they said no, I said "But I objected, "you gave it to the male sculptor for two years! How can you not give me six month of unpaid leave so I can finish my work?" That made my decision. I had tenure at South Carolina but I decided to leave. I had no job prospects and I had a couple of friends in New York City. The only positive reinforcement I got was

from the Feminist Art Institute through correspondence with Nancy and other women like Arlene. I was toying with the idea of putting together an anthology of feminist art criticism. Joanna Frueh and I discussed the idea at CAA and then we approached Arlene. She was enthusiastic so we got together, and worked out a model of feminist cooperation in stark opposition to the competitive modes that we had all been trained in by the patriarchal mainstream. By then I had some hope and the courage to move back to New York City. When I quit my tenured job and people were shocked, “You must be crazy. You’re out of your mind! You have nothing.” Within a month I secured what turned out to be a nightmarish-curatorial job at Brooklyn Collage. I absolutely hated my boss, a woman without credentials who thought she could do everything. She was a political appointment and never got along with the art department. After only three months of trying to do my job I wrote a letter of resignation. It took a few months but the collage finally got rid of her. In the interim, I was offered a job at Grand Central Art Galleries working with my friend Robert Preato who was the head of the American Masters department.. Nonetheless, the Feminist Art Institute was my real home away from home. There I could talk about the ideas that were important to me with other feminists. One semester Arlene had a visiting thing and she asked me if I would teach her courses Nancy was amenable and I thought, “Gee, this is terrific. This is what I wanted all along.” It was great. I think that the women who came at that time and the young people working there were an inspiration. There was Cat, who was an assistant and very helpful. We eventually put together a groundbreaking exhibition. Nancy has the catalog for that. It was called “Beyond Survival.” Survival wasn’t sufficient. I mean survival, what was that? We wanted to forward things. We wanted to build something lasting and we wanted to help women and women younger than us understand something about the challenges that they were facing. We put together a show that was very diverse and multi-cultural We got a grant from NYSCA (New York States Art Council). But we had no catalog; we had nothing. Under the state’s mandate NYSCA couldn’t fund a catalog so we had to think creatively. Why not a journal? We’ll make a catalogue/ journal that they can fund because it is on going. We had to struggle to get the money because we had no money. It all worked out because we cooperated molding a new sort of feminist model—One in which everybody put in what they had to carry out our mission. I think that was one of

the best parts of the experience at NYFAI. Then the backlash against feminism began to affect us. We tried to carry on fighting it and fighting it and fighting it. However, the forces we were up against were too powerful. Nevertheless, it was a tremendous experience. I don't know how to describe it to you because it changed our lives forever, when people say . . . "Oh, we didn't do anything we failed. I ask how has feminist failed?" My question is . . . "How did it not succeed? Look at all of these young women out here doing what they want to do. Getting the attention, fighting the good fight and moving on with their lives. How did we not succeed?" I look at you and I say, "Ah, well it was well worth the effort!" It's hard for people – after "WACK!" and all of that – to really understand what was accomplished because when you look at it today and see the sexism in relation to Hilary . . . you see it all over the place, especially in the museums, you think, "Well, you know we failed."

K.C. Well, maybe the total ideal was never reached, but no one ever . . .

C.L. When is it ever? Look at Alice Paul, and until Betty Friedan kind of revved things up and Kate Millet. . . she probably thought she failed as well even though they got the vote and they moved thing forward, it's miniscule. It's infinitesimal steps and of course, we want it all . . . and at once, if we can get it. We didn't. However, I don't feel in looking at what they are doing at Rutgers' and in looking at the other things, that we failed at all. We may not have accomplished everything we wanted to but we got a good part of the necessary work done and we are still doing it.

K.C. How would you describe your relationship to art at the time . . . it sounds like you were a teacher . . . you consider yourself and artist.

C.L. I was an art major to begin with and I went into criticism because I had to find something that worked for me and art history did. I started writing critiques and criticism. I continued to publish poetry, paint and when I finished graduate school at NYU , I went back to Florida. Since there were no academic jobs available I worked as a newspaper critic . Then I got a full time job at Florida International, which was the new university and I introduced the first women and art courses in the state. That action brought me a host of problems troubled moments and lots of sabotage by the art department and administration which did not take kindly to feminism. I also helped to begin the first Caucus for Women in the Arts there because we had nothing. There was an organization

of women artists, its acronym was W.A.I.T. I said, "I'm tired of waiting. I'm not waiting anymore." I called Judith Brodsky and I said, "Look we've got 50 women here and I want to be connected to the Women's Caucus for Art and so we started that chapter. Nevertheless, I still considered myself an artist. I was still painting also teaching art history and writing criticism. I consider myself a creative person, whether it's my poetry, criticism or my painting, it's all part of the same fabric. My art school experience in the sixties was the old "paint with your penis school of art." Virtually! The male teachers such as Gene Massin said it was action painting. That was it; you, a woman, can't possibly be an artist. This was writ large in the mind of female students with big quotes around it and in bold letters. When several of us were rejected from the student art show because we were doing realistic and expressionist work I organized a Salon de Refusee. We had no female teachers, and there were no women artist role models. When Mimi Schapiro and Judy Chicago got it together for women it was a radical challenge to the male establishment. Prior to that you had to model yourself on some male artist. So you aspired according to masculine models. If you wanted something else you were considered a hobbyist waiting to get married. When I went to graduate school here at NYU, one of my professors said "Well why should we open up a space for you, you're only going to get married." And I turned around to him – at that time I had come into my own sexuality – and I said "Not much chance of that, I'm a lesbian and I'm not about to get married so forget that! Now what's your other excuse?" I finished my degree and I went back to Miami and did all of that other stuff, however, I soon discovered it was still the same old, same old. It was still the action painters, it was still the masculine, it was still the idea of the big brush strokes, and all that's fit to paint is male. Slowly inroads were made. You began to get the Andy Warhol school of outrage, mainly homosexual male outrage. Again, the penis school as far as I was concerned. And women, really good women artists were not being acknowledged for their contributions. If they were married to somebody perhaps they might get a look, like Lee Krasner. When I interviewed her in the late 70s, she said it was hell on earth, that she was just relegated to a back room and that when they came to see work they saw Jackson's work. She was just the wife. Today it's hard to even imagine. In addition, the museums never bothered with women artists. You found them by ferreting around in a corner of the basement somewhere if you were

lucky . . . Again Mimi and Judy did the heavy lifting with the help of dedicated feminists art historians and their students providing a lost history. Now women had ground to stand on a place they could identify. All at once you knew that what you were trying to do was worthwhile. You knew it was not crap, simply because it wasn't what the men were doing. Then there was that whole period of discovery when art historians and feminist critics beginning providing the tools of women's liberation. I began to work on Romaine Brooks who I am still working on some 30 odd years later and finally only 3 chapters away from finishing the book I am doing on her. It's almost unthinkable for anybody who didn't experience the feminist art revolution to wrap their heads around this movement. Setting up the institutions, fighting the good fight, getting stabbed in the back by more ambitious women who wanted to climb into the mainstream, fighting to try to establish magazines which never really got established in the way that we desired . . . I consider that a major failure of our efforts in that we could not establish any real alternatives that challenged the mainstream because the women artists themselves sabotaged themselves – by constantly courting and supporting the mainstream instead of being the mainstream. I mean, Obama said that, “Be the change you want to see.” They couldn't. I don't know whether it was just that we were disabled by the incredible prejudice and sexism or that there was just no way to do it within the social indoctrination we suffered.. I'm not sure to this day. We never have enough money. We never have enough sustained backing. Look at Ms. Magazine, for a while yes, and now it's on a sidecar. We had the Women's Art Journal, which Elsa founded. I was one of the original founding board members until I got too revolutionary. It now continues in an academic venue. I'm happy it still survives but it is hardly mainstream in the way that Arts Magazine or Art in America are. I would love to see an American magazine that regularly reviews women artists. However, it's probably not going to happen, particularly in this economy. It just isn't. In addition, I would love to see more training in feminist art criticism but we were displaced by the English formulation, it was safer then dealing with what Arlene Joanna and I were forging as feminist art criticism at that time. Then they were in fights with the art historians accusing us . . . “of not really being art historians because we're doing criticism.” You figure it out. I couldn't. I just continue writing art criticism albeit on gays and lesbian since I am part of that heritage.. I feel passionate about these writings because

I don't take kindly to seeing people like Susan Sontag diminished as a public intellectual. I am currently reading these diaries with my partner. Her revelations about her sexuality, her acute discomfort, her fear of being out and that she couldn't be herself because then she wouldn't be regarded as an intellectual equal of the men who were being published. Today, what women intellectual can hold a candle to her? Sontag essays on Camp, Fascinating Fascism and Illness are seminal works in critical thinking equal to Walter Benjamin. It's a shame we don't study her as much as we once did—we are missing a lot.

K.C. How were you involved at NYFAI: student, teacher, administrator, organizer? Did you work as an organizer? Please describe: which classes did you take? Were you involved in other programs for example: open houses, panels? Did you participate in the annual salon exhibitions at the Ceres Gallery?

C.L. As I explained a little earlier, I came in as a kind of outsider-insider looking for a home. I found a home where I could teach classes there -in feminist art and art criticism, in restoring our lost her story which I enjoyed enormously. I also participated in fundraising and archival work as well as putting together exhibitions that defied the usual model that excluded women, did not include women of color, and were not mindful of diversity . That is essentially my connection with NYFAI.

K.C. Please describe your experiences at NYFAI for example: the sense of community, friendships in the studio and classroom.

C.L. That's probably one of the strongest aspects of NYFAI as a community because it was diverse women coming together and opening up a completely different kind of communication than had existed before. There was the non competitive aspect which was a revelation because women of our generation competed with women for men and whatever small pieces of the pie they could get .The whole idea of this kind of interaction was new and it gave us a phenomenal feeling of empowerment. Finally being able to put all of your energies into the project rather than all this other collateral static going on around you. You all worked for the same goals and for your self and each other. It is the old Tibetan mantra about "benefits to yourself and others." It works that way. Moreover, it worked very well for all of us. We supported each other's projects, we supported our own ambitions and dreams and it was a tremendous change of climate from what we had experienced growing up.

K.C. Can you describe the visual work and written work you produced at NYFAI and if you were an instructor, how did the experience influence your work?

C.L. I think that Joanna, Arlene, and I had already forged a kind of working framework of feminist art criticism. I know that we worked out many of the kinks through the courses and through the feedback that we got from the students. I believe that the mutuality of that experience was particularly important to me in learning about audiences and understanding how different people interpreted your words. That was crucial in forwarding my own agenda which was to review as many women artists as I possibly could . . . artists who were contemporary and who might be reviewed or seen unless I did the legwork. In that sense, I learned a tremendous amount about the contemporary art scene and the different issues that feminist were engaged in at that time issues that were almost entirely ignored by the mainstream that gave me a very important working model that I refer to in my later publications as “Prismatic Criticism.” A form of criticism that works like a prism in that if you flash a light through one section you see one view, if you shine it in another direction you look at another facet of the work. This is what criticism should be, a growing and evolving life form I mean, you come back to look at something and you see it differently out of your experience and your growth. In that sense, it was very important for the critic to remain open.

K.C. What was the most important aspect for you of your experience at NYFAI?

C.L. It was the camaraderie and of working with intelligent, ambitious women who weren't just looking for some man to take care of them. Women who were forging their own destinies, making their own adventures, and meeting their own challenges. That was golden in a sense because it helped you support your own adventurous spirit . . . and encouraged you to defy whatever was trying to keep you down . . . There was many obstacles, museums who refused to show women, galleries that wouldn't even look at your work and institutions who never hired women for important positions.. The guerilla girls really made a concentrated attack on all of that and they did with biting wit. Together each one in her way, contributing her little piece put together a much stronger challenge to the white mainstream patriarchy. . . and we are still effectively demanding change as our first African American president takes office.

K.C. How long were you involved at NYFAI?

C.L. I think four or five years before I had to get on with making a living and forging a life I put a good deal of time. When I left Nancy was very concerned about the archives and Cat was working on that but she needed to make a living. I got her a job at the gallery with my friend Bob and things kind of dissipated and the backlash against feminism was very, very vicious. I don't think you can even imagine how they went after anything that we had established and it just faded into the background . . . . the pendulum swung back not all of the way, but definitely to the right. This was followed by some resurgence with "WACK!" Some of the younger women picked up the slack but the white male establishment slapped us back down and we kept fighting back. That's really how it goes . . . two steps forward, a step and a half backwards sometimes three steps back and you go at it again. You just have to keep trying because if you don't, what's the sense for any future at all? So what's happening with the Rutgers project is very hopeful. It is a tremendous undertaking as far as preserving a feminist art legacy for younger people to be able to look back on and be inspired by. Moreover, establishing galleries of our own was a major achievement. Even with the relocation we are still here. That makes a big difference. Well, you're in Brooklyn so you're a beneficiary of that move. There's a lot going on here in Queens but they don't see Queens as anything but an Archie Bunker borough, which is ridiculous because it is a very lively place and there is a lot going on here. The Queens Museum is doing some interesting shows and is much more open than some of the other museums. Brooklyn – under Arnold, I don't know what's going on. He used to be in Miami so I know him from years ago before he went to Baltimore and then to Brooklyn. As far as I'm concerned, the energy is somewhat anemic, although he is viable because of Elizabeth's making some kind of feminist venue there with the Dinner Party. However, I doubt if she hadn't been instrumental in promoting the project, there would be anything much going on.

K.C. You talked a little bit about this but how would you describe your relationship to feminism at the time? Did you identify as: feminist, radical feminist, lesbian feminist, activist or activist for women in the arts?

C.L. All of the above. Radical, lesbian, feminist . . . and an advocate for women and women's art. I did a lot of reviewing and publishing in Women Artist's News and in Women's Art Journal, New Directions for Women, any place I could get in and that was

before the joys of the internet and blogging and everything that you can now do. You kids are so lucky. Even if they shut the doors, you still have outlets. For us it was like if we didn't get it in print, there wasn't anything. I was lucky because Richard Martin was the editor at Arts Magazine and he was very open to feminism. He fought with Milton Esterow for reviewing space and to publish our articles. So we were able to accomplish some of our objectives viz. the mainstream. You have to give these men credit. Laurence Alloway was another one. He was married to Sylvia Sleigh and he became - I think - a good feminist in his own way although he had standards and he measured you by them so you had to reach a pretty high bar. I liked Larry he was terrific. He was a real mentor to me.

K.C. Did NYFAI contribute to your development as a feminist and/or art activist? Please describe.

C.L. Of course. NYFAI was supportive. It was a safe house so to speak. It provided stimulation and exchange. Peer review of sorts where you could discuss basic issues and ideas you had about how to proceed particularly after setbacks when you needed that kind of reinforcement. I think we formed some strong friendships and a strong support system. I met everybody who was anybody. Even when I was coming in intermittently, meeting people like Charlotte Bunche and Harmony Hammond. It was a terrific networking opportunity for those of us who were slogging in out in the hinterlands and doing what we could do out there. Yes, absolutely.

K.C. How do your experiences at NYFAI influence your art and life today? What is your current involvement in the arts? Do you consider yourself a professional artist? What is your current involvement in feminism?

C.L. I would say that writing this book is certainly part of my current involvement. I'm reviewing quite regularly. I'm a contributing editor to the Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review and in terms of my two sites. . I have a site for Romaine Brooks where I update for people who are interested in her work and her art and I have my own writing site which I am working on for my poetry and some of my watercolors which I'm doing now because I have no space for other painting projects..

K.C. What is the Brooks Project?

C.L. Romaine Brooks the lesbian ex-patriot artist. That book is ongoing and I want to put

together a collection of my poetry, which I haven't had a chance to do because of that book. Once it's over I'll be able to turn to other things. I have two novels that I'm working on and that I want to get out as soon as Brooks is finished. She's holding me captive for the next six months. After 30 some odd years, I really would like to be through with her having satisfied myself that she is getting her just due as an artist rather than just as a lesbian artist. I don't agree that her portraits are heroic for the reasons that have been given. I don't consider them anything other than a cover for her vulnerability but I'll put that in the book and get my ass kicked in for it as usual. It's just the way it is if you go against the grain.

K.C. The reviewers of your book?

C.L. In general. Those who have established some kind of myth about Romaine Brooks and haven't really dug into her art in what I consider a meaningful and in-depth way. I wrote probably the first or second article on Brooks in the United States. I think Arlene may have done something earlier My article was published in Art Criticism and since then there have been other people who have published on her Joe Luccasi wrote a very interesting essay in the Amazons in the Drawing Room catalog that came out in 2000 but since then very little has been done. The show travel to California the main concentration was on her lesbian identity, not about her painting. To me, that's like foregrounding your sexuality instead of your art and this goes on often with gays and lesbians. Rather than talking about their art, they talk about their sexuality, which is only a part of who they are. That's why Sontag didn't want to be identified by her sexuality, she wanted to be known for her work, for her intellect, for her contributions, not because she was a lesbian, bi-sexual or with this one, that one or finally with Annie Liebowitz. It's very difficult. There are many, many struggles and challenges that one has to go through and meet head on. They are daunting, they can destroy people, and they do destroy people. In Brooks' case, I think she stopped painting for a number of reasons that I'm going to put forward in the book. People fault her for it. They accuse her of being a recluse but again, I think there are many reasons for that given the climate and her own decisions right and wrong around that including her sympathy for Fascism in the second World War which people don't talk about because she is a big lesbian icon. Warts and all, she is still admirable.

K.C. Is there something that you'd like to share with the younger generation about your

experience and the legacy of NYFAI?

C.L. I think for the younger generation, they have to be the change they want to see. They can't expect to fall back on the kinds of solutions we came up with for the kinds of challenges we had. They have their own challenges and they need to come up with their own solutions. That's going to take a lot of hard work and a tremendous outlay of energy. They are living in daunting times given everything that's going on now I think they have to also learn to take their lumps in terms of the disillusionment with friends and colleagues in the movement. I believe that a lot of people moved away from feminism because of that, because they felt betrayed by people in the movement and went off on their own and weren't able to be as effective. I would caution younger women to be able to take it with a grain of salt and stick to their goals rather than abandoning them because one or two individuals betray them in some way or another. More importantly, have a good time. Have fun. Enjoy what you're doing. The other thing I would say is try not to get dogmatic and doctrinaire. The kinds of things that are being said up at Rutgers' and at places like this with a particular group in charge are not the end all and the be all of everything. They are not the authority. Be very suspicious of authorities and how they set themselves up and of institutions. I think they can be very dangerous.

K.C. Thank you.

C.L. You're very welcome.