

NYFAI-

Interview: Harriet Lyons interviewed by Flavia Rando

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F.R. When did you become involved with NYFAI?

H.L. In the mid-'70s, when a group of artists organized by sculptor Nancy Azara committed themselves to the creation of an alternate, feminist-driven art education for aspiring women artists. But first the backstory.

In 1970, I joined a consciousness-raising group whose members were mostly art professionals: artists, curators, art historians. As a journalist, I could empathize with these artists who had been shut out of the male-dominated art world. I already had a deep appreciation for fine art and was a gallery and museum habitue. My husband and I were befriending artists and began buying or bartering for (my husband was a very good photographer) their work. A women's collection emerged. I was further blown away by the art being made by my CR sisters. As I visited the studios of Nancy Azara, Pat Steir, Jane Kaufman, Victoria Barr, Joan Snyder and Elke Solomon, I couldn't resist their powerful paintings, sculpture and works on paper. Whether abstract or more figurative, they were exploring imagery and materials specific to their experience as women, and in the process challenging male definitions of subject matter and medium.

The CR group also was becoming more activist. A milestone was a demonstration in the early '70s at the Whitney Museum. While senior curators Marcia Tucker and Elke Solomon sat inside, women circled the museum throwing sanitary napkins at the building to protest the lack of representation of women in the permanent collection, in exhibits and in the very important biennial. The two female Whitney curators needed to be supported by outside demonstration and agitation.

In 1971, I wrote a cover story for the Village Voice about women's sexuality in art — women artists exploring sexual and female imagery. The whole idea and question of a unique female imagery has been posed. This was a time of guerilla tactics and street theater to break down barriers to women's equality. Female artists were talking about where they were coming from and what their work was about. While these discussion could get heated, it never escalated to the behavior I had witnessed among male artists in the '60s, especially at post-openings loft parties. Liquored up, these guys would

invariably come to blows arguing about art (and who was flirting with whose wife or girlfriend). The point is that women, too, had strong theories about art, and in the '70s were finally raising their voices against the male definitions of art and the separation of fine art and craft (any work made by a woman that involved stitchery was "craft"). Women were making huge breakthroughs and expressions in their art specific to women. The whole question of a woman's imagery was hotly debated. Clearly, the time had come to publicly address the male biases in art-making and how artists were educated. To that end, two members of our consciousness-raising group were behind pioneering institutions: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, founded by Marcia Tucker in 1977, and the New York Feminist Art Institute, spearheaded by Nancy Azara and launched in 1979. The latter came out of long, probing discussions of women's experiences in art education and the studio. Those who were trained at the Art Student's League, School of Visual Artists, Parsons, RISD, the Philadelphia School of Art, all had similar experiences about how rigid the sense of what art was, what the techniques were, what the imagery was. They all expressed being very much reined in by this overwhelming male model. They never had female teachers. The only women they saw were models or other female students.

F.R. So, these were the seeds of NYFAI?

H.L. Women artists were breaking away from the mainstream. They formed galleries like A.I.R., SoHo20. As for art education, Nancy Azara was leading the charge. What would art education be if it were focused on women students, embraced a freer, open dialogue about what constituted any kind of formalism in art? Could you redefine fine art, choose your imagery? We saw a lot of art with sexual symbolism. Certainly, everyone was re-evaluating Georgia O'Keefe's work from this perspective. She was in complete denial. When asked whether her flowers represented vaginas..."no way."

F.R. Well, I think she suffered so much from that.

H.L. She did not want her art to be identified with feminism. To some extent Louise Nevelson — in fact, many women artists who had struggled and succeeded in achieving relative parity with their male counterparts — were resistant. Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel, Agnes Martin were exceptions, and Miriam Schapiro decided to throw her cards in with the women's movement and became a very effective leader and lecturer in the late

'60s. She founded the first women's studies program with Judy Chicago in '69 at CalArts. She made a strong feminist statement in the now-famous X and O paintings. Woman House in Los Angeles — a Chicago-Schapiro collaboration — explored traditional women's techniques with the specific idea of redefining them as fine art. And appropriating clichés that women artists had avoided for years. Many women artists appropriated the color pink. Why is there anything wrong with pink? We don't have to shy away from pink because it's become a feminine cliché? We'll take it — and make it art. The establishment's history of diminishing artmaking associated with being female, whether it was hand techniques, fabric work or body imagery, was boldly challenged in painting, sculpture and performance art by feminist artists. This work did not go down without debate. A lot of women countered with, "Why identify yourself with a vagina or perpetuate a stereotype?" The answer: "We are appropriating this, and we are making art from this, and we are reclaiming it."

F.R. Reclaiming it and redefining it.

H.L. Nancy Azara was simply determined to form some sort of educational model for women artists. She was talking about a school from the early '70s. The New York women's art movement didn't gather momentum until the early '70s — a couple of years after the West Coast. In California in the late '60s, there wasn't much of any kind of art scene. Women artists had less to lose proclaiming their feminism. In fact, when Judy Chicago made a visit to New York around 1971, many women artists were resistant to her imagery and proselytizing. They were frightened of losing whatever male acceptance they had fought so hard to gain.

F.R. What did women who had male support in New York, what did that consist of really?

H.L. Well, some found galleries. Jane Kaufmann was with Fishbach, Pat Steir and Joan Snyder were getting attention. Nancy Spero, Joyce Kozloff, Louise Fishman, Barbara Kruger, Miriam Schapiro, Elizabeth Murray, several others, were beginning to show their work to critical acclaim.

F.R. How did the planning of NYFAI proceed through all this?

H.L. It took a couple of years of meetings before it became feasible to proceed with a school. There was much theoretical psychodrama. What what would be a feminist

curriculum? Where would a student body come from? Believe me, there was fierce discussion.

F.R. What was the issue?

H.L. Miriam Schapiro had been invited to join Nancy as co-founder. The two were makers of art, they were teachers of art. And, they weren't always coming from the same place. Miriam had already gained the moniker, "Mother of the Women's Art Movement." Clearly, she earned it, having gone out on a limb before anybody else. She had big-gallery representation, she was making acceptable art, and then suddenly, she turned on the hand that fed her. She's criticizing all these men — and they cut her out.

Of course, Miriam felt that nothing could happen in the movement that was New York-related that didn't respect her sacrifice. She was a piece of work. She was known among friends as Mimi, and it was an apt nickname. It was invariably "me, me" in how NYFAI was to be structured and shaped. But, there's no denying the woman is a brilliant and successful artist, and she lent her power to women. I give Nancy Azara credit. She had to finesse and placate Mimi and make sure credit was given to her ideas. I think Nancy deferred and gave her the focal position in the initial couple of years, the very important launch years, because Miriam's name was quite a draw. She lectured all over the country, she was well exhibited.

F.R. Do you think it could have happened without her?

H.L. I think it might have been a harder sell in getting funding or attracting students. At Ms. magazine, I was known as the editor best equipped to sell the magazine on the newsstand with "a "celebrity we can live with." In a way, NYFAI had to live with Mimi Schapiro's ego to get off the ground.

F.R. When did NYFAI sort itself out and actually open?

H.L. In 1979, after years of planning, the New York Feminist Art Institute was ready to launch. "Where are we going to get a space we can afford?" "Where are we going to get promotion?" "How are we going to kick this off?"

I had many connections through my position at Ms. I worked with Ronnie Eldridge, the inaugural director of the Ms. Foundation for Women, who had moved on to the position of community relations director for the Port Authority, which owned the World Trade Center. The Port Authority had a record of commissioning and collecting modern and

contemporary art. (The loss of this blue-chip collection on 9/11 was barely reported.) The Port Authority also owned all kinds of space around the city. Ronnie rolled up her sleeves and located a Port Authority-owned, vacant and affordable space in a loft building on Spring Street. Next, was to create a "happening" to announce NYFAI. Ronnie had no trouble booking (pro bono) the incredible Sky Lobby, an employee cafeteria, on the 44th floor of the World Trade Center as the venue. With Gloria Steinem, Marlo Thomas and Eleanor Holmes Norton hosting the March 30, 1979 benefit gala and Louise Nevelson as guest of honor, NYFAI received a rip-roaring launch. Yes, by this time, Nevelson was available. She was no longer resistant to be appropriated, included, recognized and honored as a foremother of the women's art movement.

F.R. Even though women were sort of scaled to the margins of the art world, women were able to pull together all this power to make this happen?

H.L. Absolutely.

F.R. It's an interesting sort of contrast.

H.L. Yes, because this was an idea whose time had come. A few women gallerists had broken through — Barbara Gladstone, Holly Solomon, Nancy Hoffman, Alice Cooper, Mary Boone. They weren't exclusively showing women, but they were much more open. The women art collectives had formed and were making some impact. There were continual pressures on all the museums to acquire more art by women, to show more women, particularly in survey shows. The agit-prop of the Guerilla Girls was very effective. Their street theater, demonstrations and protest posters attracted the media. And a good number of women artists and art professionals rallied around Judy Chicago after "The Dinner Party" opened in 1979 in San Francisco, only to be followed by its cancellation in New York by the Whitney Museum, which actually called the show "pornographic." A group of feminist activists formed, myself included, and eventually we convinced the Brooklyn Museum to take the show. The attendance was phenomenal. The art world was becoming more and more pluralistic. It wasn't as dominated by one school of art. Minimalism was being rejected, and I think the energy, the uppityness of the women's art movement and its content-oriented art were irresistible. Just like fashion had become pluralistic. After the failure of the mini and the maxi, you had lots of choices. But to get there, we went through year after year of one look, one hemline. Well,

this is what the art world was like. And its dictates were being weakened not just by women, but by African Americans and other “out” groups.

F.R. Did you have a position with NYFAI?

H.L. I was on the Board of Advisers, one of the movers and shakers. The Board of Advisers included Alice Neel, Louise Bourgeois, Judith Brodsky, Rita Mae Brown, Ann Sutherland Harris, Florence Howe, Lucy Lippard, Kate Millet, Robin Morgan, Cynthia Navaretta, Gloria Steinem, among others.

By 1981, Miriam Schapiro was gone. I was pretty much responsible for the “last straw.” When “The Dinner Party” was accepted by the Brooklyn Museum, I insisted Judy be recognized and invited to NYFAI as a guest speaker. Mimi, whose collaboration with Judy had ended in a bitter estrangement in the mid-‘70s, resigned. NYFAI wasn’t big enough for both of them — even for one day.

F.R. Did you ever take a course?

H.L. I took a weekend workshop — Women's Visual Diaries — with Nancy.

F.R. How was it to be a student at a workshop.

H.L. Oh, it was wonderful. Nancy's just a superb workshop leader. Hands-on — very interactive, intimate, experience-sharing. Nancy is a true, superb teacher. When I was in the consciousness-raising group, I joined one of her wood-carving sculpture classes. She is a total self-starter. She made her own way — with the school, through collective galleries, writing a book. She put her art out there, traveled it. She’s one of the most enterprising, amazingly determined art makers. Having established NYFAI and hanging on through thick and thin — all the “diva” episodes — I can't say enough about Nancy's stamina and diplomacy. Though NYFAI had to close its doors in 1990, it made its mark.