

NYFAI

Interview: Lynn Northrup interviewed by Dena Muller (2nd Interview).

Date: February 1st, 2007

D.M. It's February 1st. We are at the apartment of Lynn Northrup, re-recording an interview about her experiences as a student at NYFAI in the early 80s. When did you first become involved in NYFAI, and how?

L.N. I think it was about 1981. I was with a friend, it was on a weekend, and we went to some kind of open house. I think it must have been a NYFAI open house. We were walking along the street and noticed it and went in. It was a great open house because all of the teachers, the faculty were present and they were talking about the different courses they offered. I started talking with Nancy Azara and learned about the Visual Diaries Class. As she was explaining, it seemed like such a good class, something really fun to do, and really interesting because there would be the combination of talking about Feminist issues and also being able to do some artwork in a way that was very open. You could do whatever you wanted. I guess the idea of a visual diary was also very interesting. That was the first time that I had really heard of a visual diary as opposed to a written diary.

D.M. And you hadn't heard about NYFAI before, you just happened to be in the neighborhood and saw the sign up?

L.N. Yes.

D.M. You hadn't seen advertisements or fliers.

L.N. I don't think so. No, I don't remember knowing about it.

D.M. What was your relationship to art-making at the time that you discovered the school?

L.N. I really had no relationship, so that was interesting. I'd done needlework when I was young, some drawing, but not very much. Especially in the last 20 years, I really hadn't done much at all.

D.M. Was the friend you were with an artist?

L.N. No. She wasn't and she didn't take a class.

D.M. Do you remember any of the other instructors that day? Were there other people that you met right in the beginning that you made you interested in the school?

L.N. No. It's funny. Nancy really made the impression. I remember there being other people there but Nancy was the one who really made an impression on me.

D.M. Did you enroll right away that day or did you take information home?

L.N. I think I enrolled right away that day but I don't really remember.

D.M. For the Visual Diaries . . .

L.N. Yes, yes.

D.M. And then you started taking it that semester?

L.N. I think so.

D.M. What are the main things you remember about that course? Are there any assignments that stick out in your mind or the tone of the classroom?

L.N. What I remember about it was that there were assignments. There were topics that we - that weren't burdensome - because I was working.

D.M. Where were you working?

L.N. I was working at that time at the Fortune Society. Because it wasn't for credit that was reassuring to me. It wasn't a degree program. So really the homework was to do some thinking about topics that we would discuss the following week. It remember that one topic was "Creativity, Do you think of yourself as creative?" Can you think about that for the next week? But, there wasn't a lot of homework. It was really what we did in the class. You could do as much outside the class as you wanted to.

D.M. What was the structure of the average class? Do you remember it being more teacher oriented, or more discussion oriented, a balance?

L.N. It wasn't teaching, I mean that's what I like about it. Everybody would arrive - we could bring any artistic materials that we wanted - . . .

D.M. Any?

L.N. Any! It could be crayons, it could be pencils . . . I don't think anybody brought oil paint because that was too cumbersome. We knew we would be sitting and talking. As I remember, we were sort of around a table so we could all see each other. The set up was that each person would have a chance to talk. So that's really how the class was structured. There was a designated topic, and then we each would take time to speak about that topic and how it related to our lives. At the very end of the class we could share what we had done in our visual diaries if we wanted to.

D.M. People could choose not to share?

L.N. People could choose not to share, so it had a very open, encouraging participation but not directly asking.

D.M. Do you remember Nancy giving critical reviews the way a teacher would, or if she was more part of the discussion.

L.N. No, she was really part of the discussion and one of the participants. She talked about her own experience with visual diaries.

D.M. Was she making one at the same time?

L.N. Yeah, I think she was. And, she did show us her visual diaries, and I remember thinking how beautiful they were. And I remember her talking about how she started doing them, but I actually can't remember the details of it. But I think it was an evolution for her. So that was really nice.

The thing was that there really wasn't criticism; it really wasn't part of the class. It was more expressing yourself. So that was really fun because you really saw how everybody's visual diaries were different. I remember later talking -- some of the people who did participate were artists and they felt they were blocked - so coming to the class freed them up a little bit because they were playing a little bit more. There had been so much emphasis on the critical, that this was the chance to loosen up.

D.M. Taking them back to the essential motivations in art-making.

L.N. A sort of joy . . .

D.M. And making it personal.

L.N. Yeah.

D.M. What was your relationship with Feminism at the time?

L.N. I wasn't a political person, but Feminism was important to me because I did some reading about Feminism and I felt, for me, it meant a lot because it seemed like I was growing up in a time where often the woman's value was connected to her relationship with her husband. Women got married. If they weren't married, what was their life without a husband? So there was this slogan, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." I remember really liking that. For me, Feminism meant that women were important too. They had their own goals that they could achieve and work towards, and that that was valid. That was a lot actually.

D.M. Did you find that sense of Feminism that was important to you at the time - that that was discoverable at NYFAI? That it was expanded upon?

L.N. Oh yes. Definitely, because in the Visual Diary classes I remember talking about our role as women in different ways. We talked about our identity as a woman. So we were specifically talking about ourselves as women. I had really never been at a place where that was talked about in a serious way.

D.M. So it was consciousness raising.

L.N. It really was consciousness raising. I hadn't participated in any pure "consciousness raising" so this was my first introduction to it.

D.M. Did you feel in the classroom like there were different levels of politicization about it?

L.N. You know it's interesting because . . . probably. We didn't talk about the "Feminist Movement" it was really more like we were talking about ourselves. So I was aware that it was a Feminist thing to do but we really didn't talk about larger issues.

D.M. And you weren't planning activism or . . .

L.N. No, we really weren't. For me, it felt like more of an internal thing. -- Trying to figure out for yourself and also appreciate yourself as a valuable person who has ideas -- I guess just by listening to each other sort of gave it solidity. Like we really had something to say to each other that was unique to being a woman and doing art as well.

D.M. How many years were you involved in the school?

L.N. It was about three years, I think. Actually, I think it was more because I was looking at my visual diaries and I think it was 1981 - 1985. So it may have been 4 1/2 or 4 originally. It was longer than I thought. That was interesting.

D.M. Thinking back on it, it ended up being more years than you remembered. Did you take other courses besides Visual Diaries courses?

L.N. I did. I took 1 or 2 drawing classes with Nancy, and I did take any oil painting class. But, I didn't continue on from there. Although, I like doing drawing, I didn't think of myself as an artist with a capitol A. I didn't have enough of a desire or drive to pursue artwork further at that point.

D.M. So the more personal aspects, more consciousness raising aspects of the Visual Diaries was much more impactful.

L.N. I think I loved doing the drawing as well, it's just that I didn't know where to go from there. I remember taking this oil class and thinking, I don't really know what I'm doing here. I think I felt that I could have used more direction at that time, but I think I also could have looked for it too. At that time, that was enough art that I was really capable of doing, or interested in doing. But I think both aspects meant a lot to me.

D.M. Is that part of why you stopped taking classes in '85?

L.N. I think it was the idea that I was working at the time and I realized that the women who identified themselves as artists were putting a lot more energy and time into it than I was. I think I just lost interest. What is interesting is that twenty years later after I stopped working, I am now taking drawing classes. So there was that interest there, it just wasn't compelling enough to

D.M. For you to take it on as a redirection of your professional life.

L.N. Oh, definitely not. No.

D.M. When you stopped taking classes, did you stop making work at home? You're saying there was sort of a twenty year hiatus from making art?

L.N. Yeah. I really didn't. I think I've always been interested in drawing and painting but I wasn't making it. I was putting my energies into my job and actually going back to school. So that really used up all my energy.

D.M. What did you study when you went back?

L.N. I was actually getting an undergraduate degree at Fordham University. I didn't know what kind of degree I was getting, I thought it would probably end up being literature.

D.M. You had left college when you were younger . . .

L.N. I was 18, I dropped out of college after a year.

D.M. We talked about that a little bit before. I remember it was about being frustrated with the traditional education model, feeling like you were

L.N. Yeah, I think there was some of that and I also think my preparation wasn't terrific and I wasn't sure why I was there. I had a really difficult class that I couldn't complete so I doubted myself. I both doubted my ability to do academic work and doubted the value of it at some point. It seemed it didn't relate to me.

D.M. Would you say that your positive experience at NYFAI had anything to do with your being ready to go back to school after that because the educational environment at

NYFAI was more . . .

L.N. Mmmm. I wouldn't say that. My job actually suggested that I go back to school because if I wanted to continue teaching I should probably have a degree which made a lot of sense. It still was a positive experience for me, and I think we talked about this a little bit in the first interview. It may have given me another model for learning as opposed to the traditional, hierarchical way.

D.M. The one you found so alienating as a young person. NYFAI showed a different model that was more inclusive and open.

L.N. Yes. Yes . . . participatory and open. At my job fortunately they were open to different academic models too, which was great. It was kind of a continuation, a subtle building up.

D.M. So you said there were twenty years there where you weren't making art, but did it change the way that you saw art in your world? Did it turn you into a connoisseur or a collector in any way?

L.N. That's an interesting question. What I noticed was, with this good friend -- we would love to go to craft fairs and where you would see people making things and that to me seemed really fun, I think I like that. So, I can't say that it made this huge change.

D.M. It just continued it.

L.N. It continued it.

D.M. We've skirted around it a bit already, in the first interview we talked a lot about the model of teaching, the ideas of teaching, is there any more you can say about --- my understanding about one of the fundamental aspects of NYFAI as an experimental institution is about using feminist principles and feminist practice in the classroom. --- Is there anything else that sticks out in your memory as a new experience or a really enriching experience about the feminist practice in the classroom? The breakdown of those traditional, hierarchical classroom styles?

L.N. I think that it's a process that other groups can use as well or have used. That your experience is valid. That it's not just from the top down. That you can build from your experience. I think that's really valuable. Maybe we touched on it the last time we spoke, but when I was teaching at the Fortune Society and later after the NYFAI workshops, I was aware of an education where there was more of a process orientation towards

learning where you would read something and then you would comment on it. This was even in the elementary schools like you would respond to it. It wasn't just the teacher telling you what to remember or that you just had to memorize. I thought, yeah, that makes a lot of sense that there is the input of the individual into the whole process. I think sometimes you absorb those things without even realizing that it's a really important aspect of education. I worked with students who were African American, so that was a further learning experience for me, in teaching and valuing the experiences of your students. And realizing that I couldn't really teach them, or I didn't have their experience, so I couldn't really address that experience in some way.

D.M. And that was after your NYFAI experience was when you had that teaching experience.

L.N. Yes.

D.M. And do you feel like seeing that model at work in classrooms at NYFAI was in some way influential to using it yourself?

L.N. Possibly, although I didn't consciously think of it. I think it was encouraged at the Fortune Society.

D.M. Because the conversation was in the culture at the time to be questioning traditional educational models.

L.N. Yes. Definitely.

D.M. Any social justice work started to take on those issues.

L.N. Yes, I think so. It was in the air. I think I mentioned that when I was at Barnes and Noble – further back – how there were these book sections when I first started working there back in 1960. There were no women's studies section, there were no minorities studies section, no black studies. Then as I worked there through 1978, I just saw these sections grow.

D.M. A burgeoning of social justice in culture.

L.N. Yes.

D.M. We talked a little bit about the camaraderie or collegial attitude in the classroom before, were there important friendships? You said the friend that you found the school with was not an artist, but are there friendships that were forged out of the school?

L.N. Not for me, which is kind of interesting. I had a tentative friendship with one

woman and that didn't continue for a very long time after the class. So it's an interesting thing because I could have made a friend, but it was valuable to me nevertheless even though I didn't make any new friendships.

D.M. Well in some ways that goes to show what a personal process it was too. Maybe it wasn't so much about connecting with other people as it was about the internal process of the visual diary.

L.N. Yes.

D.M. And so that might have been enough.

L.N. It was enough. Because I felt that it was valuable while I was there, and often in other places I have made friends but I didn't feel like I had to make friends who were other women in the class in order for it to be valuable to me. I think there was quite a diversity of women in terms of age, in terms of interests, but we all came together in the area of wanting to express ourselves and talk about these issues.

D.M. Have you been in touch with Nancy a bit? I mean you're involved in this project. . .

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L.N. Yeah, I really haven't staying involved with Nancy. We ran into each other a few years ago – where I had decided to go back to drawing – and it was really nice to run into her. And she asked me to write a little excerpt for the book that she was writing. It was very nice.

D.M. Which is the book “Spirit Taking Form” which is definitely in direct lineage with the Visual Diaries courses.

L.N. So I value what she is doing, but I haven't really been in touch.

D.M. But was it because you ran into each other that you were contacted about the oral history? I was given a list of everyone that should be interviewed for this project, so maybe it's because you had reconnected in that way, that she thought that you would be person that would have an interesting perspective on it.

L.N. I think so, definitely.

D.M. Do you remember any things going on at NYFAI other than classes? Were you ever involved in exhibitions or evening events or discussions. There was a big gala, that was probably before you got involved though.

L.N. They did have open houses at the beginning of the semester where often they would

have artists come. I can remember one open house and having my work up, or having something up and being disappointed that the one they picked to hang wasn't one I liked particularly. So I remember going to some of those open houses and enjoying them, but I don't have a detailed memory of even who the artists were – even though I know there were some famous ones.

So that is interesting.

D.M. Well, that is interesting because that's also part of the intention, is breaking down that idea of fame and one person being more important than another just because of being known in the art world or art market. Do you remember there being any discussion in the classroom of the professionalization of art-making, were there discussions about the art market or galleries or how to build your career?

L.N. No. I would say – because I just took a few art courses – and the visual diaries class was mostly what I did – in those classes we weren't talking about those issues because it wasn't geared so much towards your art in the world. It was really more like personal expression. I'm sure they addressed those concerns in other aspects, or other classes.

D.M. We talked about how your sense of yourself as a creative person or an artist continued after NYFAI and how you rediscovered that today. Is there anything else you could say about feminism or social justice? Did your sense of Feminism change since your experience at NYAI – did you find yourself more receptive to participation with Feminist questions afterwards? How has Feminism been part of your life in the last 20 years and did NYFAI impact that in any way?

L.N. It was a way of validating the sense. It was saying Feminism is important, women are important. It just made me - - - again I would say it was gradual – it wasn't like a big left turn – when I went to NYFAI but it was like “Oh yeah, here's a good place to be. They're addressing concerns that are important.”

D.M. I remember in our first conversation you were talking a bit about how at the time that you took the Visual Diaries course, you were in a place in your life where you were choosing what felt like an untraditional choice at the time. – To not be married, to pursue your career, to be single in New York and you were feeling a little

L.N. Really those questions had been plaguing me since I was in my twenties. So I would say, I was really struggling with those issues because I wasn't following in the usual

format. I wasn't getting married, I wasn't having children. I really was having trouble making my way in the world – like “who was I?” I guess what I seemed to envy in some people was they seemed to have an assurance I didn't have, or they had a career or they seemed to know what they wanted. For me, I was struggling a bit. I was looking for things that would feel right. Taking the Visual Diaries class felt really good.

D.M. Did it help you to feel more comfortable with alternative choices?

L.N. I think so. Yeah.

D.M. Did you find that people in the class were also going through some of the same questioning or same process of finding their right place in the world?

L.N. Yes. Yes. And I think that that was what was so valuable for me. I was hearing that other people were struggling with issues also.

D.M. And that it gave license to build your life in this different way.

L.N. Yeah, it was sort of saying, “We too are struggling with different issues, and it's o.k. to be doing that.” In fact, it's a part of life. So, that was really good, to know that that was going on . . . again, because maybe – growing up in the fifties, it seemed often that things were set. You did this then everything should be fine.

D.M. Very scripted, age specific decisions that you were supposed to make.

L.N. Very scripted, not questioning. Yes. I remember there was a film that came out, “The Mad Housewife”, or something like that, which was the same thing . . . that things are not what they seem. And it's o.k. to be talking about troublesome things, or feelings that you're having. That was really valuable.

D.M. So you found that forum in the Visual Diaries class.

L.N. Yeah.

D.M. And it helped you work through some of those questions.

L.N. Yes. Definitely. And it was kind of subtle in a way. There was no degree program, it was two hours a week, but it was great. So I can feel myself remembering that aspect and how valuable it was to me without even really – at the time saying “wow, this is a really fabulous class”, -- but it was!

D.M. It was somehow subtly part of the process of getting centered around what you really wanted to do with your life and letting go of that conscripted schedule and expectation.

L.N. And I had been in therapy, so therapy was also helpful. There were a number of things sort of fitting together.

D.M. In closing, I know one of the main intentions of this project is not only to document the whole range of experiences – we’re interviewing students and teachers and people who were involved administratively, or in the funding process, so this whole range of experiences – but also to try distill out of the conversations if people feel like there is something essential that is a legacy of a project like this . . . something that this kind of project has to communicate today; an ongoing legacy. Is there anything – thinking about your own experience – that you could distill out as the essential message of NYFAI that you got as a person and that you think would be important for others to understand about it.

L.N. My thought is, can NYFAI be happening again in some other form because

D.M. . . . it was short-lived, relatively short-lived.

L.N. . . . or has the spirit that was there been . . .

D.M. I think in our first conversation, and we’ve probably already touched on it again in this interview, I remember you talking about that general issue of adding process and experiential knowledge, valuing the individual into a more mainstream educational environment and that has happened and maybe NYFAI is one of the many factors; an experiment like this was part of the broader cultures process of bringing these ideas mainstream.

L.N. I think so. I definitely think so.

D.M. And as a teacher that’s been your experience in the years since then. You don’t feel like you have to force people to think in that way; there’s a responsiveness.

L.N. I think that’s absolutely true.

D.M. Where did you go to undergrad again, the first time?

L.N. Wellesley College.

D.M. Do you think it’s true at Wellesley?

L.N. That’s a good question. (laughter) I haven’t been back. I thought I’d like to go back for a reunion. I think they’ve changed things. I mean, just like all the schools have changed.

D.M. Absolutely.

L.N. You can go part-time, I wish I could speak more about that.

D.M. There's maybe more women teaching.

L.N. Yes.

D.M. A rebalancing of . . .

L.N. Yeah, I think there's more co-ed, there's . . . but I really can't speak about Wellsley, but I know there has been change.

D.M. I was just speculating.

L.N. No me too! I've often thought it would be fun to go back and sit in a classroom. I have a god-daughter, she's in fifth grade right now, and I can see from her school work. They do writing and I can see that it's different from when I was a child in school. So there have been changes, good changes. It's an interesting thing to think about. I guess you as a younger person have seen changes also, in your education and experiences in the art world.

D.M. And knowing that this school, and so many other projects like it in the same time frame, demanded across the board change that then is sort of spreading and has institutionalized itself in a way that you couldn't do it any other way at this point. It would be shocking to try to have a more traditional environment .

L.N. Yes. There was a thing in today's *Times* about Judy Chicago's . . .

D.M. The re-installation of "The Dinner Party."

L.N. Yes.

D.M. Today's *Times*? It wasn't the Holland Cotter article about the Feminist Futures at MoMA, was it? Was it Sunday's paper?

L.N. I don't think so, I missed that.

D.M. O.k. more about Judy Chicago in *The Times*, yay! Yeah, because what's happening is that "The Dinner Party" is being installed permanently. It was funded by Elizabeth Sackler, it's called the Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

L.N. And it's going to be at Brooklyn.

D.M. And it will at the Brooklyn Museum. They are opening the re-installation of "The Dinner Party" along with an exhibition called "Global Feminisms" that is looking at Trans-national Feminism; younger women artists and women from all over the world. Yes, Feminism is afoot right now. We'll see, a lot of it is exactly this kind of project

where it's about trying to make sure that the history is documented properly and that we're not constantly in the situation of reinventing the wheel of people thinking that this stuff has never been done before, never been thought about before; and making sure that there's a really accurate telling of the history by the people who were there instead of the rest of us trying to speculate about it; and then there's this questioning going on about – which the question that I just asked you – what next, or what does any of this have to bare on a Feminist Future.

L.N. Going forward . . .

D.M. Yeah. What are the applications of these ideas or what's the current situation for women, does any of this articulation in the 60s and 70s apply to the situation for women today and how does that feminist articulation also apply to strategies addressing whatever the situation is. There is a lot of conversations going on in different fields about this issue.

L.N. Yeah, I hadn't realized it.

D.M. This project is part of this whole effort to get the history right and talk about the future at the same time.

L.N. It's worthy, it's good.

D.M. Is there anything else just in closing, any other anecdotes, or any other noteworthy things? I'm trying to remember from our earlier conversation if there were other – did we talk about any of the assignments in the Visual Diaries class?

L.N. There were things, for some reason the creativity comes to mind. We had topics every week that we discussed.

D.M. You did talk about using any materials you wanted, that was interesting.

L.N. They were good topics. I think they could have been things like . . . loneliness, independence, very human topics doing art work as a woman, do you remember female members of your family doing art work? We had to bring in a piece of artwork that our grandmothers or mothers had done.

D.M. Something that they had made?

L.N. Yes. And I had never thought of that as being art.

D.M. Right. What did you bring in, do you remember?

L.N. My grandmother did embroidery work, and she made these silk lingerie cases. She

did really beautiful embroidery.

D.M. And you brought one in.

L.N. Yeah. I never thought of it as artwork. I mean, hello!

D.M. You showed it to the class, each person presented the thing that they brought in and you talked about why it was art.

L.N. Yes.

D.M. Interesting. I know one other thing that we had talked about before and I wanted to discuss again -- you kept all of your visual diaries.

L.N. I did.

D.M. You have them. Do you refer back to them from time to time – is it something that’s interesting, to see it as a snapshot of your thinking at the time or your sense of self at the time?

L.N. I definitely kept them. It’s interesting because you know, they’re not diaries like written diaries.

D.M. Right.

L.N. And they’re done kind of on the spot, but they seem valuable to me. I want to hold onto them. I don’t want to throw them out. I do look at them from time to time; not often, but every couple of years maybe. In one of the Visual Diaries classes, I did some pencil drawings of people and some of the things that they said and it was sort of fun to look back at those. You know, just partially remembering some of the people in the class.

D.M. . . . really substantive snapshots of the time because there’s content there as well, interesting.

L.N. Yeah.

D.M. Thank you for your time.