

NYFAI

Interview: Catherine Allen interviewed by Flavia Rando

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K.C. This is Katie Cercone interviewing Catherine Allen on October 5th, 2008. When did you first become involved with NYFAI, how did you first learn about NYFAI (from a friend, a newspaper), why did you become involved and how long were you active?

C.A. I was one of the original people there, though not one of the founders. I had been out of graduate school for maybe a year or so and was living and working in Boston. I had read and heard about Woman House in LA. I was reading a lot about women artists and feminism. I was a charter member of the Women's Caucus for Art of the College Art Association and an initial subscriber to Ms. Magazine. I read that the New York Feminist Art Institute was going to be opening and as it turned out at that time, I was getting ready to move to New York City. I moved to a loft in SoHo and I was excited to contact them almost as soon as I got there to see what I could do to participate. This was before NYFAI even opened. Nancy Azara was one of the first people I met there. I helped and worked to put together events and fundraising and marketing campaigns . . . helping to create publicity as the school was opening. It was an exciting time. I don't think many people realized how much we were able to create on a shoestring budget. I was voted onto the Board of Directors shortly after NYFAI opened.

I was involved for about 10 years until I left New York in the summer of '88. I developed and ran the Special Events Program. I contacted many women who were well known in the feminist art community to see if we could get them to perform or participate in events, panels, and workshops. That also enabled us to garner more publicity, listings, and reviews in the Village Voice and other papers, which in turn helped with fundraising and grants. We got the word out. I ran that for quite a few years, got married and had two children during that time. It's a good thing artists know how to create something out of nothing, and that I had a lot of energy. I was also a faculty member. I'm a painter. Further down the road Linda Hill and I co-chaired a collaborative arts program. We advertised for women artists all over the country. We wrote a grant and got funding from the

National Endowment for the Arts. It was an interesting project and unlike any way that I had ever worked before. I had collaborated with people on a lot of things but not with making art. There was also a lot of time pressure on us as no one had met before the project, and start to finish we had six weeks to complete everything, including the exhibit. We would get together, explore what we wanted to do, how we were going to do it, lots of process, discussions, emotions, not always agreeing, and then were we going to operate by consensus or majority rule. It was a pressure cooker. It can take a lot longer if you want to have consensus on every decision, especially if you are working with artists who are used to pursuing their own vision. Those were the main things that I did.

K.C. How would you describe your relationship to art at the time? An artist, teacher of the visual arts, art student, interested in the arts?

C.A. Artist and art teacher. I was teaching at a college outside of Boston before coming to New York City, and had gotten my M.F.A. at Boston University so I would have a way to support myself and still be able to paint and exhibit.

K.C. What was your experience of art as a woman artist prior to NYFAI? For example, in the studio, or the classroom, exhibitions, publications, writing, etc.?

C.A. It was very evident to me and other people I knew that women were way underrepresented. They weren't taken as seriously as professionals. They didn't have as much written about them, in art history or contemporary reviews, criticism, and biographies. Much of what's available now of feminist art criticism and art history as it pertains to women artists was developing at that time, thanks to many of the women we worked with. I was very interested in all of that. I had a very traditional art school background and experience in terms of how I learned . . . learning from life drawing and all of the classic studio training. I only had a couple of women professors for studio art between undergraduate and graduate school. I did study with Philip Guston and Jim Weeks in grad school, who were great. I remember Jim Weeks walking in while the class was on break, and I had persuaded our model to stick around and let me draw her vagina

close up. A few others were a little freaked out, but he just said “you might want to consider the composition – if everything is right in the center the eye won’t move around the page to create more visual tension and pull...” We would have discussions about why was it OK to have a huge naked statue of David in public, but rarely would you see realistic contemporary paintings and drawings of male genitalia, when naked women were everywhere. Alice Neel and Joan Semmel certainly were considering the issue.

K.C. In what capacities were you involved at NYFAI? Teacher, administrator, student, please describe this experience along with classes you took, programs you were involved in, open houses, panels . . . Did you participate in the annual salon exhibitions at Ceres Gallery?

C.A. I was in several women’s shows . . . some of them I put together, and some of them other people did. I was exhibiting at SoHo20 on a regular basis. I think when they started Ceres - - I think it was just being formed - - - I was in one. AIR, SoHo20, and Ceres Galleries were all formed and run by women in response to the lack of opportunities for women to exhibit. At NYFAI I was a teacher and a board member. I was a student a couple of times. I took some of the courses. I took the visual diaries course that Nancy Azara taught on Consciousness Raising and Art . . . things that were totally different from what I had learned in art school. I was interested in finding out more about the process and how it could contribute to my work. I was also an administrator. I ran some of the programs. I had been on panels, I had organized shows. I was pretty much in every one of those categories.

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

C.A. Community was a big reason why I sought NYFAI out when I moved to New York. I had close friends in art school, mainly women. We would talk about our work and give each other feedback. Experiences that I had as an art teacher with a college art curriculum compared with this were also different. At NYFAI students could be at different levels of

development in one class. It was interesting to see how all that worked or didn't work together. It gave me a lot of ideas for my art and teaching studio art after that. I don't usually work collaboratively in the studio, but I got a lot of ideas and inspiration from examining different processes and materials, reading a lot of different things, being exposed to a lot of other artists that were on the same wavelength as I was contributed a lot to what I did. I remember that in one of the classes we did some life castings from our bodies – that was pretty cool and something I had never done before. It was great to have a sense of community, fertile growth; especially since I had moved there from Boston and I didn't really know anybody except the guy that I moved in with (my future husband) and a couple of his friends. I didn't know anybody in New York. I felt connected pretty fast that way. I had a whole community of artists and a life very quickly. I was fed, and I felt we were doing something worthwhile, that I was passionate about. Sometimes it was frustrating but that was more on the administrative end of things, rather than the participating in art making, teaching, and the discussions. .

K.C. Can you describe some of the visual and written work that you produced at NYFAI. And, you said that you were an instructor, so how did the experience influence your work?

C.A. I had a lot of art history classes and background and in fact taught that at the college level, but most of it had a pretty Western slant. I was interested in a lot of other areas. I've studied Tribal and Far Eastern art and philosophy. There was a lot of literature and discussion coming out about feminist criticism, were there essential similarities in women's art, and what feminist art meant, and if you were a woman artist did that automatically mean that you were a feminist artist? Heresies and Chrysalis were important journals for discourse. Lucy Lippard was writing brilliantly on many subjects. I wrote some for catalogues and exhibits. I never felt there was a huge division. I'm a feminist, I'm an artist. Sometimes you can see evidence of that in my work and sometimes you couldn't. My work is fairly abstract, and it's related to landscape. I tried a lot of different things, a lot of different materials that I had never used before. A lot of

different things besides just straight painting on a canvas . . . collage, working with other people. Ideas were percolating all around me and inside me.

K.C. Was that the first time that you had tried those new methods?

C.A. Yes. And also reading a lot about other women artists, and feminists and what they were doing, the type of imagery they were using and some of their inspirations. From there, I did a lot of reading and experimenting with goddess imagery, incorporating it in landscape references. I was looking at art books focused on prehistoric art and feminist interpretations of it. I took some of that experimentation also into the classroom when I was teaching there and then other teaching jobs that I had.

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

C.A. It was a confluence of several things. I felt like I was at an important intersection of history and changes that were going on in the world. I loved being in the center of that, contributing to issues and changes I thought were important. I was growing as an artist, I had a community. Those things were all important, to me as an artist and as a person, a citizen of the world.

K.C. How would you describe your relationship to feminism at the time: feminist, radical feminist, lesbian feminist? Were you involved in feminist activism, in activism for women in the arts?

C.A. Yes I was. I was an ardent feminist although that wasn't one of the categories. I'd been – and especially in my undergraduate days – very involved in demonstrations and political actions. To somehow take that into the artworld wasn't something I had anticipated, but there I was. I remember as an undergrad, a professor told me if I wanted to graduate I had to decide whether I was going to be an artist or keep missing classes for political purposes.

K.C. Can you describe some of the activism that you were involved with?

C.A. I had been demonstrating against the Vietnam War and supporting Civil Rights actions. As a member of the student senate, I was agitating for equal curfew rules and restrictions in the dorms, more freedom for women students. In New York I wrote articles, I helped put on some shows that were only women, women artists that I felt were important and were often not given much credit. I contributed paintings for fundraising auctions and exhibits. Many of the Special Events I directed were overtly feminist and political. I co-curated an art historical show at the Coliseum Art Expo. I think that was the first or second year that they were in New York. I made political art. I was a charter subscriber to Ms, Magazine and the Women's Caucus for Art. I donated work to political benefits. I agitated for change throughout my life. I loved what the Guerilla Girls were out there doing, and was excited to be working with so many women artists who thought the same as I did.

K.C. Can you describe how NYFAI contributed to your development as a feminist and/or art activist?

C.A. I was already a feminist, and always felt that I was open-minded and experimental in my creativity but I think that it opened up other directions, more information and imagery – fodder for my art. I think NYFAI was very instrumental there. I had a community of other artists to talk with about art and about what was going on in our lives and our own art. It was important to me.

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 and what is your current involvement in feminism?

C.A. I am a feminist. I'm a professional artist. I show my work and sell it. I teach periodically. A lot of trusting my unconscious or subconscious . . . about things that

come up . . . to go just with that and see what happens. I think some of that came out of the visual diaries and working with that format.

K.C. So trusting your subconscious . . . not being as critical?

C.A. Not editing so much. Right. To just trust that if I was working on something, I didn't have to force it. At times I would think about connections between paintings and images before going to sleep or daydreaming . . . to not try and force things intellectually. I might start with an idea or image, but then it took on a life of its own - where it would go from there. I would trust that just in the act of painting that something would come out of it that would carry it further. I think I already did that, but became more conscious of the process. I remember when we were working with body casts at NYFAI I had a dream one night that I was on fire, but not in pain. My whole body was a torch. I jumped out of bed, ran in my studio, and rolled red paint all over my body, then lay down on 5 foot sheets of black paper like a stamp, and made body prints. Right now if a painting is not working, I can be working on six at once. I can put something aside and because a year later I had worked on six other ones, something will happen and I will go "Oh, that's what I need to go do over there in that one that I left a year ago." Things just come to me. The act of creating can be a spiritual process.

K.C. How would you describe the relationship between art and feminism in your life and work?

C.A. I've always been a feminist and I've always been an artist. It was interesting to learn about feminist art and to try and make art consciously with that as a message. Usually they were two separate things and they would feed each other, but it was never very didactic or had to be an either/or thing. They would both contribute to the process. What do you do with your art?

K.C. I do installation and mixed media assemblage. My senior thesis in college was actually 1970s feminist art movement so that's what led me to doing these interviews.

C.A. One of the things that I do is that I used mixed media in my work now a lot more freely. I have been using photo-transfer prints on bare wood combined with painting and drawing. That might have been partially an outcome of the things I experimented with, although the initial impetus was the sheer strength and impact of the all the media images of L.A. burning down around me. I made a whole series of paintings on that.

K.C. You've explained your experience of community when you were at NYFAI, do you have anything similar in your life today or since then that was comparable? It sounds like it was very comfortable for you to be with other like minds.

C.A. I don't know that it was comfortable. I felt like I was out of my comfort zone at least half the time I was there, but yes, I know what you mean. I was active – not so much now – when I first moved out to California in the Women's Caucus for Art. I would go to meetings and exhibits. I was teaching at Cal State Long Beach and had a supportive art community there. In fact, one of the women artists that I had met through NYFAI was instrumental in helping get the job at Cal State Long Beach because she had moved out here too. As I began to be in Los Angeles shows I met more artists and that had somewhat of a community aspect. It's different from New York. I felt that when I had my loft downtown that I could walk outside and be in a neighborhood full of art and artists, and the intellectual stimulation related to it. L.A. is pretty much all suburbs. The downtown that they do have with lofts, there's no way that I would want to live there. And I've got kids so it makes it a little harder to have that time to seek that out right now. Plus, I can't just hop on the subway and see 10 galleries in one afternoon. It takes half a day to go anywhere or do anything here – twice as long in rush hour(s). But I feel that all of the times that I have had it that I carry that with me. And I see shows and talk to other artists, writers, and curators, have friends to swap studio visits with.

K.C. Was there a particular reason why you left New York?

C.A. My husband was working on Wall Street. He started out as a writer; he was in sales on Wall Street and he wanted to see if he could find a way that he could be able to be a writer and make money and not have to let go of that part of his life because he had a family. We sold everything in New York and moved to Mexico for two years. I painted, he wrote, our kids went to bilingual nursery and kindergarten schools. I won a National Endowment for the Arts individual fellowship during that period. I really didn't want to leave New York, but I did it for him. I thought we were actually going to go back to New York after that but he wanted to move to L.A. and pursue writing here. Now we're divorced so

K.C. When you look back it's different.

C.A. Well, I'm still on a path. I hope to be back in New York again somehow. Partly here, partly there, because my kids have grown up here and I don't think they'd want to move back to the East coast. I'm looking at ways I might be able to work that out.

K.C. How would you describe the legacy of NYFAI? Is there something that you would like to share with the younger generation about your experience there?

C.A. I feel like it was a big contribution to the acknowledgement and the advancement of women in the arts, along with other women's art organizations and publications then. A lot of that was definitely in the air, but NYFAI was a hotbed. I feel like it brought a lot of issues out – not that they weren't out in the open – but more loudly out in the open. It was a force for change for women artists. For younger women who may think that they have all of the opportunity in the world now, I would say it's improved greatly from when I was just starting out as an artist, but I still don't think there's parity or equality in terms of how seriously people (as a whole) see women artists If you look at who gets shown and where, what gets written about, what prices art sells for, and how all that happens, I still see a big difference, not as big as before, though. Women artists are more visible now, both in galleries and as art school professors. Women who are working to accomplish something in the world feel more empowered and validated now from what I

see. There are visibly more women lawyers, doctors, scientists, business owners, as well as artists. I would say that we helped, but there is still more to do. Don't think everything is all fine now. It's better but it's not all better.

K.C. Is there anything else that you would like to add about NYFAI?

C.A. One thing that I really did appreciate was that I was in a position to meet and talk with artists and writers that I had read about and admired . . . Feminist writers, art critics, art historians. That can be a powerful force to know that what you want is attainable, because you've seen other women accomplish it.

K.C. Were they teaching classes at the institute at the time?

C.A. Sometimes. Sometimes they came in for special events. Sometimes they contributed something to a fundraiser. A lot of times just seeking them out to ask them for help with the programs I ran forged a lot of bridges for me.

K.C. I know you're not currently teaching, but post NYFAI when you went out as a teacher, how much did you incorporate feminism into your classes and if you did, how did the students really respond to that?

C.A. The process was a little bit more open. There is a syllabus and things you're supposed to cover. Within that, I think experimental ways of looking and drawing things . . . especially if it was a life drawing class – I used different kinds of exercises that aren't just photographically copying the subject. That surprised many students – to see how the brain works and controls what we see or don't see. Have you ever read Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain?

K.C. No.

C.A. In some of the exercises you're not drawing the object, you're drawing the space around it or you're drawing things that are upside down, so it keeps you from letting your mind lock in on what you think it is. It allows you to actually draw more of what you physically perceive. I usually had probably as many women students as male students and I would say I didn't treat them any differently in terms of my expectations or the way I was teaching them. I was doing that anyway no matter what I taught or where I taught. The way I ran the critiques were a little more democratic. I would get input from other students, not just espousing my opinion. I think that also helps students think and articulate more consciously what they are doing and trying to create. The process can be mysterious, when you're not talking about technical issues, and I want students to think about ideas they want to incorporate in art. I didn't sit down in the middle of Cal State and do consciousness raising. I didn't do that because it wouldn't have worked in that situation, but a lot of things that I experimented with and learned and used carried over into studio teaching. When I taught art history I definitely had tons of women artists in the slides I showed. I told my students all about them, which was new information for most. That made a big difference. I went out of my way to get the slides for those, if we didn't have them in the library there. I'd have to go get them some other way.

K.C. Well hopefully sometime a teacher will be teaching this oral history and that it will be in the library. It will be accessible to young scholars.

C.A. You look at what we did at NYFAI and what Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro and the artists they worked with did at Woman House.... There were a lot of things that went out into the whole arena of teaching and the art world from those places and times. A confluence of art and feminism in a very political time. . . . Although, like I said, I don't see them as separated in me, or as an either or thing.