

NYFAI-

Interview: Darla Bjork interviewed by Flavia Rando

Date: November 14th, 2005

F.R. So we've had a lot of interviews before so this should be a breeze right?

D.B. I guess so (laughter)

F.R. O.k. now, my first question is, how did you become involved with NYFAI . .

.because I know you're sort of very very critical to NYFAI. You know from the very beginning. That's been my understanding from everyone.

D.B. Well not from the very beginning but. . .

F.R. Well no, not from the talking about it stage but the minute it seemed like it sort of could be a reality. . .

D.B. Right, Nancy Azara, talked me into helping with the benefit. . .that's the first thing I remember. She would talk to me about the meetings they were having before that.

Getting my ear on how things were going and my opinion as to the group dynamics of the original group.

F.R. And I guess I could ask about those group dynamics.

D.B. Well I don't really remember too much of the detail about that because I didn't know the names of the people at that point. But then probably six months before the benefit, when they were starting to do some of the mundane. . .you know really clerical kind of stuff for the benefit, she talked me into helping with this, that, and the other thing. Mailing . . . and the thing most distinct was putting posters up. We had our own advertising campaign. Because I was the only one with a car, we drove around and we put the posters up all totally illegally.

F.R. Yeah, wasn't that the thing to do in those days?

D.B. That was the thing to do then. . . postering the place. I went to the benefit, I remember that.

F.R. Yes, could you describe the benefit because people have very partial memories of the benefit.

D.B. It was the first time I had been in the World Trade Center for one thing, and just walking in, being very impressed . . .of course with Louise Nevelson's sculpture which is

unfortunately no longer with us, but the benefit itself up fifty stories high, wherever it was, in this big, huge space. . . very impressive. All these big name people. . .

F.R. For example. . .

D.B. For example. . .well I think Louise Nevelson was there. And, oh I can't remember. You'll have to get Harriet Lyons with her memory. I'm sure she can rattle off fifty people that were there. But I was just sort of overwhelmed by the whole thing.

F.R. And how many people were there altogether would you say?

D.B. I would say . . . three or four hundred. . . but that was my impression. But it was a large space and it was filled. And most banquet rooms would fill a couple hundred easily. . .so it must have been. It was a really big thing. It was '79. A retrospective of the women's movement was on the decline but we didn't know it really. I don't think.

F.R. Well, I don't really think that was true. I think in a certain way that was one of the heights. . .

D.B. That was the peak?

F.R. . . .of the cultural aspect of the women's movement.

D.B. Yeah, o.k. It felt like that.

F.R. I'd be very loath to say we were on the decline.

D.B. Yeah, it felt exciting. . .it felt like something really new and great was going to be starting with the school. Then the next thing I remember was the opening. The opening for the school.

F.R. So like opening day.

D.B. Nancy talked me into taking Louise Fishman's painting class. Even though at the time I was taking sculpture classes from Nancy. Private classes in her studio, which she gave . . . with Helen Stockton and a few other people.

F.R. So you knew Helen from the very beginning.

D.B. Yeah, yeah, I think.

F.R. I didn't even know that Helen was involved even prior to NYFAI. This is the first time hearing it now.

D.B. I think that's the case but you'll have to double check with Nancy again, because she'll know for sure. But it seems to me she was taking sculpture from Nancy.

F.R. So you already identified yourself at an artist at that point?

D.B. I was beginning to. You know I had, for a couple years, been taking sculpture classes and so this was the next step. Anyway to get back to painting, Nancy had talked me into taking this because she said that I should know something about color. That was her famous line. Clearly, later I decided she was just trying to fill the class. Louise was a wonderful teacher. She started with a very basic set: how to stretch canvas, very meticulous and very obsessive, a very good teacher. So it was a really good way to start. I felt like I was just mixing mud for several classes until suddenly one day I did this abstract thing when suddenly in the corner you could see this landscape. I mean if you looked at it the right way, I could see that you could do something magical with paint. And so I got hooked. And so paint it's been since then.

F.R. After Louise taught you the basics, what was her approach to teaching?

D.B. I remember her saying things like fill the whole canvas. Don't just focus in one area. It was abstract.

F.R. No still life.

D.B. No still-life model kind of thing. Her focus was abstract.

F.R. And what was her sort of emotional approach. How did she mentor people?

D.B. Probably distant, because that's the way she is. I suppose opposite of intrusive . . . as I've seen much later teachers who would step in with a paintbrush and say, "Here, this is how you should do it." She was the opposite. It was more neutral and non-judgmental. . . which was really critical for a beginner. I remember, for instance, there was one man in the class who literally sat on the floor, in the corner. He had canvas on the floor and he was almost doing finger-painting. He didn't stay very long. . . like three or four classes and then decided that it wasn't for him. But she didn't say. . . "Oh, you can't do it that way". . . so it was good. It was a good first experience. After that, I took a class from Harmony Hammond. And of course, Harmony had of course a totally different approach. There we did paint from still-lives. So I learned a little bit of that approach to painting. She was also very good. We would do critiques in her studio. I remember being anxious about that. . . but. . . It was the first time we really did critiques of each other. It was a good experience.

F.R. And how did that go with the non-judgmental quality that afforded you previously?

D.B. It was there. People were positive about it. And if you didn't really like it, you didn't say "Oh what a disgusting painting." (laughter) It was diplomatic. It was a relaxed atmosphere in terms of being able to learn. Low anxiety . . . I think the feminist issue of being able to speak up and say what you thought . . . "Oh, o.k.". Just the other teacher in terms of painting that I had was Jane Kaufman who taught in a totally different approach.

F.R. She wasn't on the list.

D.B. Well she taught there.

F.R. I know but I'm just saying she wasn't on the list unless I just completely blanked out her name.

D.B. She was there.

F.R. I should make a note of that.

D.B. The other class I took was with Elke Solomon, drawing class , and that was a very traditional . . . the way she taught was quite traditional.

F.R. And what does that mean to you?

D.B. Well, the way I would expect it would be in art school. You would have these little drawing exercises, which I didn't particularly care for. I don't have a fondness for drawing so I suppose it wasn't something that I was attracted to . . .but those were the classes I took typically.

F.R. So that was the foundation for your further development as a painter?

D.B. I took Nancy's "Visual Diaries" class, I think I took all of them, and that was interesting from a group dynamics and psychological interplay was interesting. It was good.

F.R. You, as a psychologist must have found that fascinating.

D.B. Yeah, it was. And it was also interesting to participate at a peer level. It was a good experience for me to be on that level with other people, to be accepted . . . another painter, another art student.

F.R. So it allowed you, these classes, in a way allowed you for a moment to rid yourself of you professional identity.

D.B. Oh yeah, absolutely. That was really what was major for me, very important. Since then, for the last 25 years or so, since the beginning of the school it has helped me. Especially when I was working in the hospitals. To be able to paint was very important.

F.R. I just want to get back to this question of. . .Do you think you would have painted and continued to feel like you could have developed your painting if you didn't have NYFAI as a structure? How critical was that to you?

D.B. Yeah, it's hard to say. It's not likely, or I would have floundered for much longer, or seen myself as really just an amateur painter, who might paint on Sundays, or once in a while. Kind of not take it seriously. I think it helped me, in that environment, feel the seriousness of art, to appreciate the importance of it, the value of it. And, it wasn't just a hobby like you would ride horses; it had a value for society beyond oneself that really was important. The feminist aspect of it was very critical. It helped us as women to finally value what we did, to see what we produced as meaningful. As a way of contributing to society from a different point of view, that had been totally, well not totally, but almost completely neglected throughout history.

F.R. Had you identified as a feminist before you worked with NYFAI?

D.B. I was just starting to. I was late in the movement. In the mid-seventies, friends started pointing out the feminist literature that was by then all over. I started reading and changing.

F.R. How important was that in your life?

D.B. Oh, it was very important, it was liberating; the freedom to be able to think. As a physician, I had adapted to the male role very successfully and had cut out the whole feminine aspect of me. And this certainly balanced it. I'm sure it probably helped my role as a physician, but certainly my sense of a person.

F.R. And in NYFAI, this is sort of a question that just occurred, would you say that the feminist and the art teaching very tightly intertwined? How would you relate the two. . .In the atmosphere of the classroom and of the school in a general sense?

D.B. Yeah, it was tight, but it was a given. So it wasn't like an "in your face" kind of thing, it was accepted as this was the way things were now finally.

F.R. Finally. . . so it was a destination in a way, this was like an achievement being there.

D.B. Yeah we had achieved this status. You know, like the question. . .Is this feminist art?. . . wasn't an issue for me. I didn't see that per say, I was more interested in more abstract art anyway. And I didn't sense that with other people.

F.R. Yeah, and of course, that's the next question . . . were there any kind of limitations to feminist art however that might be defined by anyone?

D.B. Not as far as I could see.

F.R. O.k.

D.B. In the sense that it was more the atmosphere of the classroom were being redefined. Just as we were going from "he" to "she" s/he, a change in the language was really like the change in the classroom atmosphere. I was very sensitive to it going through medical school. There were any number of classrooms or seminars I had taken where I would be the only woman.

F.R. Really.

D.B. Oh yeah, I mean it was almost a given.

F.R. I thought that by the time you had gone to college it would have changed a little.

D.B. No, no.

F.R. Well actually you were there in the fifties?

D.B. In the sixties, there was a 10 percent quota for women and then each decade since then . . .

F.R. Well actually the fifties were sort of a desperately awful decade. . . in my personal opinion.

D.B. Yes it certainly was. Most of the professors of course were male. So to be in a setting where all of the teachers were women, feminists, many of us were lesbians, "out" lesbians, which was very important to me . . .you know Louise, Harmony, Nancy . . .

F.R. Would you say that was very important help in terms of the atmosphere of the school and in terms of your own permission to be both and artist, a feminist and to be "out"?

D.B. Well it was the first setting I had ever been in where all three were there. And it presumed to be a natural. You know, I was left-handed, I was a lesbian, it was just sort of . . . one of your forms of identification . . . matter of fact.

F.R. The classes, were they a full semester? These are just a couple of practical kinds of questions.

D.B. Yeah, roughly. The fall semester, then there'd be a winter break, then the spring semester. Then there'd be summer classes.

F.R. And about how many students were studying at the time. . . or what was your perception?

D.B. Usually in the classes I was in, there were usually maybe 8 to 10. Nancy's class would go up to 15, the diaries class was very popular. There'd be a larger circle of women there for that but the classes tended to be around 8 or 10. It was a nice size, very intimate.

F.R. And about how many classes ran at the same time. . . do you remember?

D.B. Well these were evening classes, well when we were still over on Spring Street, there would be 3 or 4 classes at night because it was a fairly large space.

F.R. Were there ever more than that?

D.B. Well, probably. . .

F.R. You know, I just wondered because I've never really gotten that information.

D.B. Probably. . .I'm trying to remember. I was more impressed with the small size because then again coming from lecture halls where there'd be a thousand, not a thousand, but a couple hundred people in the lecture room . . . the professor standing down just feeding us information . . .

F.R. So this was an opportunity for you to sort of embrace the knowledge you needed rather than being force-fed.

D.B. Yeah, yeah.

F.R. Did you do any writing at that time for NYFAI?

D.B. I don't think so.

F.R. When NYFAI moved here to Franklin Street you all sort of expanded in order to keep NYFAI alive.

D.B. Yeah, well when I got the place here. . .

F.R. Could you talk a little about why that transition was necessary and how it worked?

D.B. Transition. . .

F.R. Well Spring Street to Franklin. . .

D.B. We moved from Spring Street to Franklin Street because I was able to purchase this part of a building on Franklin Street and donated the second floor to the school so that the rent from a practical point of view went from a couple thousand dollars a month to zero. So that was quite a benefit for the school. And, shortly after. . .

F.R. When was that?

D.B. It was in Eighty-four.

F.R. So after about 5 years. . .

D.B. Yeah, the lease may have been expiring . . . well probably the lease was expiring I imagine at that point and it would have been upping the writing as landlords do, so it was a matter of trying to find cheaper rent and this was a good way to do it. At first we thought we would use both the first and second floor, but it then became unrealistic for me to eventually do that. We: Nancy, myself, Ronda Schaller and Polly Lai came up with the creative idea of forming Ceres Gallery which was on the first floor, and did pay rent

F.R. That was the beginning of Ceres Gallery.

D.B. That was the beginning of Ceres Gallery and they paid rent so that offset my financial burden for the building.

F.R. Right and . . .but you continued to support NYFAI by providing the space for how many years?

D.B. Well it was from '84 to, it closed in '89. Five years.

F.R. Do you think NYFAI could have survived without that?

D.B. No. Because I was also the treasurer so I know.

F.R. You know of that you speak.

D.B. Yes, I think I became the treasurer when we were still over at Spring Street, I'm pretty sure.

F.R. Why did you take on that?

D.B. Somebody talked me into it. . . Nancy.

F.R. Did you feel that you were skilled in that, or comfortable with that sort of a responsibility?

D.B. Oh yeah, I could do that. Discomfort came from the fact that we never had enough money.

F.R. I see, is that because you kept the tuition really low?

D.B. Oh yeah. I mean we did that, but the tuition probably wouldn't have paid, I mean we thought it would but it really wouldn't pay for the cost of the school.

F.R. And what kind of grants did you get?

D.B. We got the Ford Foundation. When it first opened, there was a grant, and I forget the name of that grant. Nancy would know. And I think those were the only two grants we got.

F.R. When was the Ford Foundation one?

D.B. Ford Foundation, I believe that was still when we were over at Spring Street, so that was probably around '82 or '83 I would think. But after that, that's when we started having trouble getting grants because we fell between the cracks because we weren't an art school per say, we weren't a feminist school per say. At least that was their reasoning for not giving us a grant. So the money dried up.

F.R. Even when Ceres became a part of it you couldn't use it for the grants for a non-profit exhibit space?

D.B. That's where you should interview Ronda because she was into that. She worked for MOMA and she knew grants. So she probably might have gotten something but it wasn't enough. If we did get anything, it was never enough; never enough money. Especially for advertising because people would say "Oh, I don't know about the school, why don't I know about the school?" Well, you need a relatively large amount of money to advertise anything and people never understood that.

F.R. Were ads run in Ms. Magazine?

D.B. Yeah.

F.R. Did Harriet do that?

D.B. Yeah, Harriet did that. And they were probably donated, I think. But other than that, there were probably a few other places but it was not the kind of thing that. . .

Parsons or something like. . . that you could really run ads.

F.R. How many students do you think that you had on average?

D.B. Fifty to a hundred, it varied.

F.R. Well that's a good amount.

D.B. . . involved in different ways because NYFAI wasn't just the traditional classrooms . . . there would be evening workshops, weekend workshops . . . other kinds of . . .

F.R. Could you talk a little bit about that? Did you attend workshops?

D.B. Well, I gave workshops.

F.R. Oh, well now let's discuss that.

D.B. I found at least 4 or 5 workshops that I gave, based on a psychiatric or medical slant. One was a workshop on menopause . . ." Menopause, truth or myth" which was usually 6 to 8 women. One on women's life cycles, one on "Women, Self-Esteem, Sanity" which had to do with our struggle for self-esteem and sanity. One was "Separation, Loss and Anxiety".

F.R. I think I could use that one.

D.B. One was "Anger and/or Depression".

F.R. So were these purely from a medical/ psychiatric perspective, or did you include art making in these workshops?

D.B. No they were just discussions. There was no art making in them per say.

F.R. And was it a one evening event, or a one-day event?

D.B. It was usually on a Saturday afternoon from 2:00 to 5:00 PM.

F.R. What was your purpose and how did you come to give these workshops?

D.B. The purpose of the workshops was to help women's' struggle with some of these issues. For instance, back in the sixties, women were under diagnosed for depression, in my profession.

F.R. You mean they weren't diagnosed enough?

D.B. No, they were often misdiagnosed as being schizophrenic or thrown in a mental hospital.

F.R. Rather than just say "Oh you're depressed, here's some medication", or say, "What's wrong in your life"?

D.B. Right. What could possibly make you depressed?

F.R. So in a way women were over diagnosed. I mean actually from a layperson's point of view they were diagnosed with these terrible problems.

D.B. Right, right. And with menopause a lot of people had misinformation or fears. So it was to try to help women, or enable women to discuss some of these issues. It was more of a discussion format. We sat around in a circle and shared ideas. I would give a little 5 – 10 minute spiel at the beginning and then we would sit there in more discussion.

F.R. Do you feel that you gave these discussions from a feminist perspective?

D.B. Yeah.

F.R. Do you think you could have done that without NYFAI? Or were you growing into that?

D.B. I was moving into it, but NYFAI was certainly a catalyst that pulled me into it much faster. I probably wouldn't have given the workshops anywhere else.

F.R. Yeah, because it seems to me to be not the model that you had learned . . . workshop, discussion.

D.B. All of the other settings I was in, nobody was interested, or asked me to do a workshop on these kinds of issues. Looking back it certainly would have been a good idea. For staff in a hospital it would have been a great idea to pull together 5 or 10 women during lunch hour to have little discussion groups. I hope they are getting together now in various settings.

F.R. Do you think prior to the feminist movement that you were so imbued with the male model that you were over-diagnosing women?

D.B. Yeah, to begin with. . . Well, it's hard to say because in the seventies was when they started realizing. I started reading articles, probably written by other feminists in terms of pointing this out.

F.R. When did you actually start practicing medicine?

D.B. I started practicing in '69.

F.R. Oh, pretty close.

D.B. Yeah, there were parallels there. So it took 5, 8, 10 years, for some of these things to catch up. We didn't have internet then, or computers.

F.R. Did you feel comfortable in these workshops? Did the feminist atmosphere make you comfortable in being self-revealing as well as facilitating?

D.B. Not at first, but yeah.

F.R. That was a huge shift.

D.B. Oh yeah. And I could see, especially with other women who were revealing things about themselves how important it was. In Nancy's Visual Diaries class, it was easiest to see because women were able to come in touch with really deep issues, in a format that was non-threatening and really supportive and healing. They tapped into really loaded issues . . . incest, in the drawings it would come up . . . other kinds of abuse . . . alcohol would come up. Other things were dealt with in a totally different kind of way than I was used to; of course coming from the medical model.

F.R. It seems that those Visual Diary workshops were the key to all of NYFAI, would you say that?

D.B. They were really pivotal. We would run into women who took workshops twenty years ago and who talk about them as though it was yesterday. Vividly remembering some pivotal moment, so it is very striking.

F.R. Do you think that today women would be as forthcoming as they were then. . . was that also part of the moment?

D.B. I don't know. Well, I think younger women are very forthcoming because they just take it for granted but they don't, I think, understand the significance of . . . I mean just as they don't think about abortion, they don't understand or know what it was like pre- Roe vs. Wade. You know, hopefully they'll become enlightened.

F.R. I guess that does bring us to the younger generation. That's o.k., I'm not quite through with our generation but. . . If you were going to bring some of the models that NYFAI set up to the younger generation, both young artists and young women, young lesbians sort of struggling. . .

D.B. That's a tricky one because I'm not sure what they have now. In your setting as a teacher, you're probably more acquainted with where they are.

F.R. Well I think that we are now looking at a group of 18 – 28 year olds who really have never known a progressive atmosphere. It sort of ended or went underground just as they became aware. And then the Clinton administration, but that was made such a mockery of that many of them just remember that in some vague kind of way. And they are very, very concerned about how they can live their lives now. So I think there's almost a renewal of the need.

D.B. Yeah, well and I think if Bush and his regime keep going in the direction they're going, especially with the Supreme Court, and Roe vs. Wade get thrown out, they'll very harshly find out what it was like. I can give you my anecdote from 1965. . .

F.R. Please.

D.B. . . .from when I was an intern straight from Minnesota - very naïve - out to Brooklyn, King's County, was in cultural shock for a couple of years, I didn't realize it. One of my rotations was on the emergency room. We had what was called a "Women's Room", it was really OBGYN, many women would come in with vaginal bleeding and say they missed their period or they were having heavy bleeding and wanted help. It took me quite some time to realize that they were having botched abortions. I was so naïve until I finally saw a fetus coming out of the vagina of one young woman. They were afraid, they couldn't tell because this was all illegal. I'm sure they all thought they'd get arrested, so they wouldn't say "I just had someone ram a coat hanger up my vagina to try and abort me", they would just say, "I'm bleeding heavily, I don't know why."

F.R. And you were an intern?

D.B. I was an intern.

F.R. That there's so little knowledge that you were naïve as an intern . . . That's a remarkable statement.

D.B. Well yeah, and the resident who oriented me to this, didn't tell me . . ."listen, they're coming in with abortions" . . . he said, "If the os, which is the opening in the cervix, is a certain width, then you admit them, otherwise you send them home." He was very crass and could care less. And the seriousness of this was if you sent them home, they could bleed to death. He didn't seem to care about this. He had too many of these women in, they should know better and they got themselves into trouble anyway. . . that was the attitude. It took me awhile to suddenly realize that he was giving me misinformation deliberately. He knew perfectly well what was happening. He probably assumed I knew but. . .

F.R. Well, I think there was this willful misinformation because he hated women, or he felt these strong women weren't worth anything . . .but there was also the fact that someone could go all through medical school . . . there were many young women,

especially women who were working class or poor were desperate not to have children, and there was no way.

D.B. Yeah, well, you could do that much easier in Minnesota where it was even more hidden. I'm sure there, oh god only knows what happened to those poor women who had illegal abortions. They probably didn't dare go to an emergency room. I mean the mores there were even more severe, in a different kind of way. But it was harsh. And it may come to that again. I've told very sophisticated women our age about my experience at King's County and they're astonished. So maybe history can teach other people, women a lesson, in terms of what can happen potentially.

F.R. What about the atmosphere of NYFAI, the communal atmosphere, do you think. . . I think that it's something that I work very hard to foster in my classrooms but that young people do not take it for granted. That communal, supportive, feminist. . .

D.B. Take it for granted. . .

F.R. In their lives, they don't even know they should have this in their lives.

D.B. But it's there and they just assume. . .

F.R. No, it's not there.

D.B. So they don't even know its potential.

F.R. Right.

D.B. Well, we should certainly convey to them that it's possible. If we could do it in the seventies, and early eighties at NYFAI, really with very little money, just a lot of motivated women, it can be done again. . . in various settings. There it happened to be focused on art, but it could be focused on any number of other kinds of topics. You're teaching just Feminist Theory. . . Studies.

F.R. Yeah, Feminist Theory. That's very important because so many young women feel they can't do anything, they feel absolutely powerless.

D.B. Well that's how we felt in the fifties.

F.R. Yes, I think we're back to that. Even though they feel more entitled, they're going to get some job where they can earn a living, or that's their hope, expectation, ideal, goal, but they still feel. . . underneath it there's this layer of powerlessness that really paralyses them from acting on their own behalf.

F.R. How would you describe the legacy of NYFAI in terms of yourself and in terms of your art? I'd like to hear a few more words about that.

D.B. In terms of the legacy, it was for me, pivotal. I mean, I'm sure I wouldn't be a painter the way I identify myself as a painter now. It gave me a very solid foundation in just techniques but also in what we had just been talking about. . .the community, the community of artists that are there. I've seen it in different formats in other studies, in other areas, in other countries. . . the value of it. The value of being able to learn and share in that kind of a giving, neutral setting, issues of tolerance, can so quickly be wiped away. But the flip side is as quickly as they can be wiped away, they can also be resurrected. It's possible, in spite of this political storm, it's possible that things can change again.

F.R. Yes, that's my belief. Speaking of political storm, on another level, it wasn't always easy to run NYFAI, I am sure.

D.B. Yeah.

F.R. But the way you're speaking about it, that didn't really intrude upon the learning experience.

D.B. Oh no. In a sense I was both in on the faculty and the administration certainly and a student. There were administrative conflicts, as I'm sure there are in any administration. Well, I know because I worked for both city and the state in hospital settings where there was just as much backbiting. But the students weren't affected in general by that.

F.R. And the atmosphere in the classroom wasn't affected at all?

D.B. No, I didn't see it. I've never heard it from other people.

F.R. No, neither have I.

D.B. I'm trying to think . . .people might not come up and tell me, but people were open enough that they would have been very clear. The criticism I continually got was that we didn't advertise enough. "Why didn't I know about this sooner? Why didn't you tell us? Why are you closing?"

F.R. There was a great need that NYFAI couldn't fill because it didn't have enough resources.

D.B. That was the resentment. They resented the fact that we weren't big enough or that we didn't let them know soon enough. That was the only thing that really stands out.

F.R. You were a member of Ceres for early on?

D.B. Yes, I was a founding member of Ceres.

F.R. Could you talk a little bit about Ceres?

D.B. Ceres was interestingly adopted, we took by-laws from the existing women's galleries, SOHO 20 and A.I.R. – the women's cooperative galleries, and picked and chose what we wanted from them, and formed a gallery that was about 5 years on the first floor, on 91 Franklin Street . . . with rotating slots. We renovated the space ourselves. Helen Stockton and I took sledgehammers and knocked down an old wall that had plaster lathing in it that took us forever. One of my fond memories of renovation, Carol Goble, was in charge of the renovation, painted and got the place in shape and . . . we opened. One of the things that was very interesting was that between Ceres and NYFAI there were some major group shows (I think you got the pamphlets), major people like: Louise Bourgeois. I still see a piece of hers for 500 dollars that I still remember, and other work . . . really good work. I bought some of this work by new women; they were really good artists. Well-known artists. . . plus I was in shows with people like that.

F.R. And what was that experience like?

D.B. It was nice. It was very. . . what would be the word. . . proud. It gave you a confidence or recognition, the acknowledgement, recognition on that level. These well-known women were willing to put their work in a show like this, you know perfectly well they wouldn't just do it in any gallery, it would ruin their reputation. So acknowledging NYFAI and Ceres by doing that.

F.R. And were these juried shows?

D.B. I know that at least one of them was just open.

F.R. To all the students?

D.B. Yeah, to all the students. That was the sense; I don't think that very many of them would have been juried at that time because the implication was that that was judgmental. Going through all the history of being judged by men in the first place. . . usually judges would have been men in the political or arts setting at the time. So, there was a deliberate

focus away from juried shows. A couple other things that I remember from my having a car, were the open houses. We would have very famous women come.

F.R. Such as . . .

D.B. Such as Louise Bourgeois. I went with Harriet, who I think would have talked her into it in the first place, to her studio in Brooklyn, and got a tour of the studio. That was one of the highlights of my life.

F.R. I can imagine.

D.B. She was in good form that day, she went through and showed us all these huge in-process works. . . room after room. . . I mean it was just unbelievable. We went to Alice Neal's apartment. She lived on the upper west side. She had rooms of stretchers of all her different work that nobody wanted at the time. . . (laughter of disbelief) . .

.unbelievable. And drove her down the West-side highway, I remember her talking a mile a minute as we drove down to the school. We picked up a few other women on their way, I was the chauffeur.

F.R. Anyone else you remember?

D.B. I'm trying to think.

F.R. Did you ever transport Louise Nevelson . . . for the original?

D.B. No, no. That I wasn't in on. I'm sure she got a real chauffeur for the benefit. . Elaine DeKoenig. I must have probably driven her there. I remember going out to lunch with her. She gave a collage workshop, it was a very good collage workshop.

F.R. I would imagine that has had quite an influence on your work ever since.

D.B. I hate collages but. . .

F.R. But you have a certain collage aesthetic. I mean in a certain way with the flaring and. . .

D.B. Now I can I see it, now that you point that out . . . thank you, Flavia. Another person I remember picking up was Faith Ringgold in her apartment up in Harlem.

F.R. And that was for . . . not for a workshop which she gave . . . to be honored . . . ?

D.B. She gave a workshop I took also but I can't remember . . . probably both. I was up there a few times because I remember the second time remembering where her apartment was. So things like that that were really the fun parts of NYFAI.

F.R. It was also a great testament to both the need and the success of NYFAI that women who were finally coming into their recognition at that caliber; many of these women were in the final, or certainly the full blossoming of their careers. . .what was possible for women artists at that time. And they were supportive of NYFAI

D.B. Yes, they were. So that it was very valuable for women.

F.R. The sort of learning, becoming artists.

D.B. Yeah.

F.R. But it also seems to me that these women, not only were they being generous and supportive, but they needed the support themselves, and the recognition, the acknowledgement of what they had contributed.

D.B. Yeah, they were honored and pleased to be honored by us. Looking back on it, it seemed like it was a token thing, but they seemed very genuine about it.

F.R. Oh, I would think so.

D.B. It was meaningful to them.

F.R. I haven't really heard too much about that. I would think that you are the one that would have the most insider information about this aspect of NYFAI.

D.B. Yeah maybe.

F.R. You might want to think about that a little more, you might add a bit, write on that subject, because I think that's something that will be important to sort of bridge that idea that these women were always over there stars and nothing to do with the feminist movement, or very little. And we sort of recognize them after, but to really dispute that idea and say these women were involved and needed the support, and were supported. So I think that's really important for us to be clear on.

D.B. Yeah.

F.R. Of course the personal memories are also very interesting.

D.B. Well that Harriet and Nancy, maybe the three of us could come up with . . .

F.R. Well, maybe the three of you could all get together.

D.B. Because one or the other of them, probably Harriet, would have had the contacts through Ms. Magazine to approach these women.

F.R. Ahh, is that how they were approached.

D.B. I think so; it was Harriet or Gloria Steinem.

F.R. Harriet was really laying the groundwork and she has a very fabulous memory for the beginning so we didn't really get to this part.

D.B. Well she could probably fill you in on the detail of how it happened. But I think it was probably Harriet, through Gloria Steinem, who would pick up the phone and call somebody.

F.R. Was Gloria Steinem, herself, personally involved in any way?

D.B. I don't think so.

F.R. So she wasn't directly involved.

D.B. I don't remember her being directly involved.

F.R. Were any non-arts related feminists directly involved?

D.B. Well actually, you probably haven't been able to interview Judy Chiti . . .

F.R. No, she hasn't answered my. . .

D.B. There was a political weekend. That you've got to get the details of.

F.R. Judy, is she the one to . . .

D.B. Well, Nancy could fill you in also but. . .Geraldine Ferrara was one of the keynote speakers. That was a political weekend over on Spring Street. That had a lot of other women, all the big women at the time.

F.R. When you say political, you mean literally in politics.

D.B. Yeah, in politics, or not art based. That's why when you say Gloria, I'm not sure if she was involved then or. . .

F.R. Oh that's very interesting. I haven't really got too much information on that at all.

D.B. I wasn't really involved in that per say.

F.R. So was that to support Geraldine Ferrara's candidacy?

D.B. No, no, no, no. It had nothing to do with that. It was prior to that. It was a couple of years before she was nominated.

F.R. So in a certain way what you're saying, by this, is that feminist institutions, even something like NYFAI which really struggled with funding etc. were much more mainstream and much more accepted into the mainstream –or part of the national vocabulary than they are now. That's what that suggests to me. Because no one said to Geraldine Ferrara, "Don't go to NYFAI or you'll never be nominated to be vice president." Or, "You know you're going to mess up your chances."

D.B. No, nobody would have even thought that.

F.R. So now, politicians have to think before they even say feminism.

D.B. Yeah, then feminism was a good word.

F.R. See I think that's very important for the story.

D.B. Yeah, I hadn't thought about that. Then it wasn't . . . the only time it was a problem was in funding because then it went into the old school of. . . "What do you mean, feminist art school, what is that?" And at one point people even wanted us to change the name so there was a time when it was "Women's" rather than "Feminist" . . . that was later on.

F.R. So we were talking about the funding . . . that that was where the conservative, or backlash . . .

D.B. Yeah, they would wonder what a feminist art school was . . . the credentialing . . . and they would get into all the stuff that we had set aside. There wasn't funding for what we had. So at one point it was called the "NYFAI/ Women's Center For Learning."

F.R. But that's already a step back.

D.B. Right. Well that was, we could find an exact date. . but it was around '86. .'87. . somewhere where it was the beginning of the end because there just wasn't money. We couldn't pay the salaries of the teachers.

F.R. How much did the teachers make?

D.B. Oh, I don't remember. . .

F.R. About? Because I think that would be an important element too.

D.B. Nancy might remember, or we could figure it out, or look back.

F.R. Something to think about.

D.B. Well, all the records and stuff are at Rutgers's so literally someone could figure it out.

F.R. Did that help you get funding, changing the name?

D.B. I don't think so, no.

F.R. I have been impressed with the quality of the artwork of all of the artists interviewed and. . . I guess there's no real question here, it's just a comment.

D.B. Oh, o.k.

F.R. Because I think you really answered the question of how NYFAI contributed to . . . both thinking of yourself as an artist and developing your art. So, I guess the question would be. . . it has been my impression, although we're only partway through the project, that most of the women who studied at NYFAI continued to be serious artists.

D.B. I think it would be hard to know how many, but I think a significant proportion relative to . . .

F.R. How many in the world go to art school.

D.B. Women were taken seriously as women, and therefore what they did, which was make art, was taken seriously. There was a value that was implicit that hadn't been acknowledged before. The thing is that now, 20 or 30 years later, it sort of, like these other things we've been talking about, before when it wasn't there.

F.R. Right, well actually, I still have, according to the way in which a particular art department, who's still hanging on as a teacher. . .

D.B. The old school.

F.R. And there are still young women who are not taken seriously just because they are women.

D.B. Oh, I'm sure it still happens.

F.R. When I was at Purdue, students were told that they could not put art with a feminist slant into their senior show. That's remarkable.

Do you still consider yourself to be an activist in any way? Because this certainly was activism. . .

D.B. Not as much as I should be, and I feel guilty about that. I'm marching again and doing the candlelight vigils up in Woodstock, expecting that in the next year or two there will be more of that. Of course with Iraq, I saw the parallels to Vietnam, from the beginning, I don't know why it was so difficult to see . . . the quagmire and all that. In terms of the political scene. . .

F.R. Do you think that not being as much of an activist is part of the life cycle. . . or do you think it's part of the political climate. . . or how would you look at that?

D.B. Probably a little of both. The life cycle at this point in time. . . I've got a lot of things I'm trying to get done.

F.R. Guilt

D.B. Guilt. Activism, life cycle, guilt . . . that's about it.

F.R. Do you have anything else that we haven't covered that you'd like to add Darla?

D.B. I don't think so, but I'll keep some of these things in mind and get back to you.

F.R. There were many difficulties keeping NYFAI alive, many struggles but it was still worth it. And since you were a key person in its existence you never just said. . . well, it's not worth it anymore. . . you kept it alive for a decade.

D.B. And I think that's what doing this oral history is helping us to see . . .helping us to reassess and really come to appreciate that struggle in a different way than we would have otherwise . . . but of course otherwise it would have just been totally lost anyway . .

F.R. I think that in a way, that's one of the major struggles, to really value what we did, and to see how extraordinary it was, because it was. I've been thinking about that a lot. It was a lot fun and often very difficult and maddening. But, it kept us alive. I don't think any of us would be the people we are now without that. . .I mean if we had just passively said oh yeah, things are a little better for women and then just. . . we wouldn't be who we are. I guess I have a very idealistic mindset.