

NYFAI

Interview: Harriet Rothauser interviewed by Katie Cercone

Date: Sept 14th, 2008

K.C. This is Katie Cercone interviewing Harriet Rothauser. When did you first become involved with NYFAI? How did you learn about it, from a friend, the newspaper? Why did you become involved and how long were you active?

H.R. It was probably 1980 when I learned about the New York Feminist Art Institute from reading something. I was involved for 2 years. Why was it interesting to me? I had a varied relationship to visual arts. I was taking at the Brooklyn Museum Art School – when I was really young – and then I was at the - - - - on 67th Street. There I found that the teachers were usually men and - - - - one summer when I was really young, I was taking anatomy at The Art Student’s League – or a drawing class – and there was an assistant there 5 days week and the head teacher or whatever he was came in on Mondays and Fridays. So when he looked at my work he said something like “Well, I wouldn’t believe you would do anything like that.” I thought that was pretty hurtful and I had personal troubles in taking visual arts. But when I went to the New York Feminist Art Institute, all the teachers were women and I loved that. It was a very non-traditional atmosphere. I never had the impression that there was a hierarchy the way that you do in traditional art education settings or that you did in the past – I don’t know about now. I felt very comfortable immediately because the people that were teaching were collegial. I felt that I was on their level. I was on a journey and I was exploring my journey and it was not judgmental in a traditional way.

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

H.R. My relationship to art at the time was that I had a very poor self-image about making work and I felt orderless in making visual work. So much so to the fact that as an undergraduate I majored in English because my father didn’t believe in majoring in art. He wouldn’t support me in college. I was pretty young. I was 16 when I was in college.

So, I did that and I minored in Art History. Oddly enough the Art History was a very unusual department for the time – I graduated from college in '68 from the Art Historians at Queens College - which is CUNY – were all women. But I rarely felt comfortable but I was good at art history because I wrote well. That was my minor. When I went back for my masters' degree I said I would do a dual masters in Fine Arts and Art History, it was just too difficult for me so I focused on Art History and I - - - - - My relationship to art at the time was that it was a closed club, a closed male club. All these women were in all these art classes, printmaking . . . I didn't see them being shown in galleries. I didn't see their work being valued and I didn't see my work being valued. We're talking about the late 60s. At the time I married in '75 and I made a decision that I would have a studio at home – that I would just make art at home. It was very lonely and very isolating and I really longed to be in a sort of communal situation – you learn as much from a group as from a teacher and I think that looking at other peoples' ways of solving problems is very helpful for me at the time. When the art institute became a reality – I don't know anything about its beginnings – I said that's for me. Though I lived on Long Island, I made that commute. I got in my car and went over – I think it's the Williamsburg Bridge. It was very exciting to me. It was an experience.

K.C. Describe your experience of art as a woman artist or art student prior to NYFAI. Experience in studio and/or art classroom, exhibitions, publications, writing etc . . .

H.R. Before the art institute was in my life, I made visual art but I was always certain that it wasn't good enough. What you read in the art journals and magazines was pretty useless for me. I didn't relate for example with pop art or minimalism or any of those genres that were prevalent in the 60s. As a woman you had to know that it was a very unwelcoming scene professionally and I certainly felt that the only way to be able to have visual art in my life was to be an art teacher. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be in high school or middle school teaching art because it was part of the curriculum. It was not my intention. I didn't want to go in that direction. I didn't take any ed. classes at that time. Probably a few years before I became involved in the art institute, I began getting a lot of journals, a lot of women's journals about art and literature. In fact one of the things

I did when I had kids, was to remedy my education by reading all the women authors we had never studied in college. I was very obsessive reading women writings in chronological order. I wanted to see how they progressed. So I began getting a lot of avant-garde journals at the time . . . like Heresies and others. They were confusing. I didn't really have a basis for comparison. I thought the journals just came out of nowhere and were pretty helpful in terms of me finding my way. That's also probably how I found about the feminist art institute. Of course I read other things. Art News seems very trashy to me – sort of gossipy. The Art Forum – do you get the Times, do you read the Times?

K.C. A little bit.

H.R. Roberta Smith is the art editor right now about visual arts and she wrote a very interesting article about jargon and using words I felt that the Art Forum was filled with abstruse, hermetically sealed language. It was like a code which you couldn't break. Did you ever read the Art Forum?

K.C. Yes, I've read the Art Forum. It's kind of elitist.

H.R. Elitist, snotty, male. I stopped getting it for a while. It's just too difficult for me. Not that I'm stupid but I thought that this is definitely a code that I am not breaking. I can't break this code. Right now I get Art in America. It seems to be more active in looking at all kinds of art. It's very hard in a glossy magazine to talk about performance. I teach Art History right now in a local community college. I do show films of women artists who are working now and who were working then. I think that some of them – since they were working in a kind of vacuum – for example Anne Truitt who is a Washington D.C. artist was close to Kenneth Knowland and did a lot of constructed boxes – minimal boxes – and painted them and so forth. I thought that these women were pretty isolated. I didn't see any general recognition. I don't feel it's that different today but I do feel that women have more opportunities to make work and feel good about themselves.

K.C. How were you involved at NYFAI? Student, teacher, administrator, organizer . . . did you work as an organizer/administrator? Please describe. Which classes did you take, were you involved in other programs, open houses, panels, did you exhibit or participate in the annual salon exhibitions at Ceres Gallery?

H.R. I was never a teacher, organizer or administrator. I did participate in group shows. I took Elke Solomon's class, I took Harmony Hammond's class, and I took Nancy Azara's class. They were all very different people and all very different kinds of classes. I felt very encouraged to use non-traditional materials in my work. In those days I did a lot of work with Polaroids and transfer. This is really at the very beginning – probably you don't remember a time when there were no Xerox machines – but I was using whatever methods I needed to make the work. I felt very empowered to use non-traditional media. That was a big relief.

K.C. Was that something that you had wanted to do in art school but had felt that it would be ill received?

H.R. In a traditional art school? There was things that I wanted to learn that weren't really available at the feminist art institute such as printmaking. I had a printmaking class and I was ok with that. It was very traditional. I really just wanted to learn technique. I didn't know how to do things there. I like the concept of multiples. At the time I was using Polaroids Polaroids were very difficult in some ways . . . the early Polaroid cameras were square format and the square format is very hard to work in. It has many different aspects to it rather than working in a horizontal or vertical rectangle. That was a challenge and that preoccupied me for a long time. I was in group shows. Did you interview Susan Brownell?

K.C. I don't think so, no.

H.R. She was very talented, very gifted. I don't know what she's doing now. I don't even know if she's making visual work but I showed with her in a two person show in a little

gallery on the lower east side – alphabet city. So I was pretty active. I brought my family with me . . . they didn't really understand but that was ok.

K.C. Let's talk about your experiences at NYFAI, in terms of a sense of community and the friendships you developed in the studio and in the classroom.

H.R. I did feel there was a community. The quality of the students in the classes were varied. I developed a really close relationship with Elke Solomon and we're friendly to this day. I felt that that was nurtured there. As opposed to traditional art classes that I had been exposed to where you really didn't know anybody – everybody just did their own thing and then went their own way . . . at the art institute I found that people were very open to continuing a relationship outside.

K.C. Can you describe the visual work and written work you produced at NYFAI?

H.R. I did painting in Harmony Hammond's class . . . so a lot of beginning exercises that I found very helpful. I also used non-traditional material there such as powdered graphite and so forth. I did do journaling for Nancy. I actually made a book in Elke's class and then used my experience in Nancy's class. I guess you would call them books that have non-verbal narrative.

K.C. Visual diaries?

H.R. Yes a visual diary. A diary has the sense of telling a story; it means that you're recording elements of your own life. I thought yes it was a visual diary in the sense that it was very dream like. I really wanted to get down to a place where I could visualize dreams and desires. I wasn't into performance. There were people who did do performance but I wasn't interested in performance. A few years later – in fact probably 10 years ago – I was turning in to do another - - - - - and I had a term from Vermont College in Montpelier which was really exhilarating. It's a short residency program. You

go for 10 days in the winter and 10 days in the summer and then in the in between time you work with a colleague in your area. So everybody came from all over.

K.C. And it is an MFA program?

H.R. Yes and the teachers were phenomenal. I think Faith Wilding was there and Peter Haller. It was really a lot of people doing very exciting things. I wouldn't have been able to even do that if I hadn't gone to the feminist art institute and if I hadn't been so excited by my experience there, I wouldn't have been able to do it. At the time, I didn't know it, but I really had film in my mind. When I was in Vermont I wanted to make film but when I was at the feminist art institute I was just feeling like I'm just taking baby steps, I'm just validating myself as a visual artist and as a creative person. You have to give yourself permission. I mean I came from a pretty repressed background regarding visual arts. So I had to give myself permission to do what I was doing. I have a lot of things I made still – after all this time I have them. But they weren't made with the view of longevity or preservation. The works I made with fragile materials. They didn't really weather well. My work has changed because I'm much more confident in the things that I want to do. I was young when I started. I was learning. I don't know how I can describe it more than that.

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

H.R. I think the most important aspect was having a community of likeminded women. That was so key for me. I was a kid in the 50s but the 60s were very devastating and very repressive in lots of ways. The feminist art institute filled a void. I'm sorry it doesn't exist anymore. I will say that I think there's still a need for that but recently – this summer when I was in Washington D.C. – the person I was with really wanted me to go to the Women's Museum in Washington D.C. I didn't really want to do and I didn't really enjoy it. They didn't have a lot of first class work. To me it was like the Museum of Natural History in the sense that if women are going to have respect as visual artists, they should be showing with men. That produced different genre of work, Peter Haley or

Jeff Koons for example, but all work doesn't have to look the same. So for women to be accepted I think they would have to be shown together and not in a museum tucked away for just women. I wasn't impressed.

K.C. Did you feel that way when NYFAI would have all women shows or was it more of a beginning step or . . .

H.R. No I didn't feel that way then. Women weren't being shown so I felt that this was a remedy for the redress of practices.

K.C. How would you describe your relationship to feminism at the time? Feminist, radical feminist, lesbian feminist, interested in feminism. Were you a feminist activist and/or activist for women in the arts?

H.R. Most of the time I had been in consciousness raising groups. I considered myself a feminist. I was very unhappy when NOW had all of these problems with gay and straight women. That was a sad thing for me. But I would describe myself as a feminist. I listen to women's music. I had kind of an interior life and an exterior life and they weren't the same. They didn't get integrated until later. I consider myself a feminist.

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

H.R. NYFAI was really important to me as a feminist but I would never describe myself as an activist. I'm not an activist. I wasn't an activist then, I'm not one now.

K.C. Did you feel like the consciousness raising was personal, internal work – you were saying there was this separation between your internal and your external worlds – is that where the activism would have needed to come in to play or did you feel that consciousness raising was activism in a sense.

H.R. You think that consciousness raising was activism?

K.C. I'm just asking you if you feel like that could be construed as activism.

H.R. Possibly. There was a woman's group on Long Island and we all fitted ourselves with cervical caps, at the time they weren't legal. I took my daughter to marches in Washington. That was just part of my life but my life at the Feminist Art Institute was – I had my political life and then I had my art life which was different. They didn't go together.

K.C. The next question kind of goes along those lines How did your experience at NYFAI further your development as an artist?

H.R. It gave me permission to make art for one thing. I got a lot of confidence to keep doing what I was doing. This was a developmental thing. How many years ago was this . . . nearly 30 years ago. Since then I've been on a journey that includes - - - - thinking. I would have to say that NYFAI was a conduit or a door opener for me in terms of what I do in my life.

K.C. That's something that has come up in a lot of interviews. Women said that it gave them permission to make art. - - - -

H.R. It was foundational. It was totally . . . it may be even better in retrospect than it was at the time but it was foundational. It was pivotal. That's clear.

K.C. How do your experiences at NYFAI influence your art and life today? What is your current involvement in the arts? What is your current involvement in feminism?

H.R. I make art but I make it sort of by myself. I work slowly and in a very disjointed way because I have other jobs that support me. I have been teaching for the last 10 years. I teach art history and I used to teach art appreciation which are both academic classes at

a local community college which gives me access to a lot of media that I wouldn't have otherwise. I get books sent to me, examination copies and stuff like that. It's very provincial here. That's a kind of money making and also I love talking to students. I love being with that age group. A lot of the way that the teachers were at NYFAI is the way that I hope to be in my own teaching. I have taught a lot. - - - the program in the museum has an art school where I went for a while and made different kind of work. I learned other techniques that helped me and opened up ways of visual work. I'm not making a living from visual art. It's not supporting me and I don't think it would ever support me and that's not why I do it anyway. I think about why a person is visual or verbal or both and I think you're born a certain way. If you have the permission to follow that path, that becomes what you do.

K.C. It makes sense that you're a teacher. You're very articulate about all of these questions even on the spot.

H.R. When you're teaching it's like acting. You're up in front of the class, they don't know you from a hole in the wall, you can reinvent yourself every damn time. You could talk about Artemisia Gentileschi for example they don't know this person. When I talk about it I talk about it in the same way as Rubens for example. For them it's all equal. It's all the same. I actually showed Boticelli's "Birth of Venus" in my art history II class and there were 6 people who had never seen that image in my room. It's kind of provincial here.

K.C. I think that's one of the differences to be made is not having those – the white male history presented to them as truth. You can play a really active role in that. The second part of the question – and it sounds like what your teaching style is - what is your current involvement in feminism? Even if it's just in the classroom, certainly it is not the case that all teachers present male and female artists as equal in art history.

H.R. My involvement with feminism is that I'm a feminist and that's the way I live my life. It happens in the classroom that I present Gentileschi the same way that I present

Caravaggio – on the same level. To the students that I teach, they're blank slates so I'm happy doing that. I don't have anybody standing up and saying Caravaggio was better. They don't know. That's the way I think about visual art. I'm not angry at 50% of the population or whatever they are but people in power tend to stay in power. They like it. You don't see anybody stepping aside and saying now it's your turn. Hillary was not chosen by the powers that be. The lesson in the presidential election – whatever's going on now – a black man is preferable with no experience or little experience is preferable to a brilliant, accomplished white woman. Don't even get me started on Sarah Palin.

K.C. How would you describe the legacy of the New York Feminist Art Institute? Is there something you would like to share with the younger generation about your experience there?

H.R. Yes. The legacy of NYFAI – I don't know a lot about the other women who attended but for me it was a real transformational time in my life. What I find about younger women today – teaching that age group – a lot of the attitude is that . . . we don't need feminism anymore we have everything we want. To me that's a horrible way of approaching the world, especially from a woman's point of view. - - - They don't see a problem. NYFAI is really part of who I am now in terms of the vision of what is possible for women. The women in my classroom are way brighter than the guys and I encourage honors projects and so forth. The younger generation needs to be shaken up a little bit. They're a little bit like the younger generation in the 50s. There's more sexual freedom now but they're not as confrontational or standing up for their rights as they should be. I want to say one thing . . . this is just a philosophical point of view . . . feminism is an unfortunate term because the term really should be humanism because men have to change too. We don't have to change them but men should be included in that expletive.

K.C. It gives them a responsibility.

H.R. That's part of the discussion, yes. I'm glad that you got me on the phone. All this time that I've been talking to you about those days . . . I have three kids. My youngest is 24 and I have a 29 year old and a 32 year old.

K.C. You were raising them while you were making your art.

H.R. Yes. It's really hard to do it all. It's very, very hard. My children got a lot of political stuff that they might not have gotten from another type of mother. By the way, all my kids live in New York. I'm coming up for Thanksgiving. My son lives in Brooklyn. He teaches science in the lower east side somewhere. He plays the banjo and the fiddle and he's a beekeeper and he's a member of an experimental theater group. My oldest daughter is a social worker in the south Bronx and my youngest daughter is just going back to graduate school at Bank Street. Bank Street College education, it's by Columbia.

K.C. Is that for teaching?

H.R. Yes. Bank Street is a teachers college. So they're all building lives for themselves in a broader world than they could have in Florida.

K.C. Yes. It sounds like they've all taken progressive routes too. You made an impression.

H.R. Yes. I guess I did. All the years that I did yoga, my oldest daughter just went on a week long yoga retreat this summer. It was fun talking to you. Thank you for asking me all of those questions.

K.C. Sure. It was fun for me too.