

NYFAI – Oral History

Interview: Mari-Claire Charba interviewed by Katie Cercone

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K.C. This is Katie Cercone interviewing Mari-Claire Charba and it is October 9th, 2008. When did you first become involved with NYFAI? When did you learn about it, from a friend, the newspaper, other? Why did you become involved and how long were you there?

M.C. I got involved around 1986. I can't recall exactly how I learned about it. I must have learned about it - - I went to graduate school for art at Hunter . . . I was in the process of creating my own performance pieces which I wrote and created and put on . . . and in those performance pieces I was drawing on my own life so those pieces were coming out of my own life and my background in the theater and then moving into a much more visual . . . moving my visual work with them. So I think I was getting much more in touch with my own consciousness personally and I must have just come across a lecture or something in the paper that was being done at the Feminist Art Institute. Since it's only a few blocks from where I live, I think I went to a lecture one evening. Then they had a whole program. I don't know if it was a brochure or just a pamphlet, a list of classes that they had. I went to many classes. I took drawing classes with Nancy Azara, another one on women and architecture and then there was a survey class on women in art history and painting classes. There were different women down there teaching these classes. Since I had had a very academic background in art – out of the university system – I felt that my preconditioning had a lot to do with intellectual ideas and I felt at the Feminist Art Institute that there was first of all, there was no classroom set-up. We all sat around a big table and I think that that experience also which is so different from so many learning experiences . . . I had taken classes at the Art Student's League and in college and those were much more structured or formal. The setting alone changed the way one works. Just by sitting around a big table . . . we sat around a big table and talked and made artwork. That allowed us to get more in touch with our own consciousness. That was my beginning. That's how I came into going there.

K.C. How long were you active at NYFAI?

M.C. '86 to '88/'89. It would go sometimes so that half I year I didn't take any courses

but it seems I took many classes and it seems there were a lot of classes. I took painting there from someone who I don't even remember . . . I took two painting classes. The first one I took was introduction to portraiture, which I don't even remember who taught it. The last class I took there was a fabulous painting class and that must have been around '88/'89 with Melissa Meyers. It was just fabulous. She was wonderful. And then we actually went to her studio in Tribeca for one of the classes. There was this other exchange. It was a much looser, more informal experience. It went over '86 to '89 but sometimes I was there, sometimes I wasn't. There were so many different classes . . . a lecture series; they had a fabulous lecture series that went on too. Friday nights . . . Pat Steir, Lucy Lippard . . . I mean panels, great things.

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

M.C. Like I said, before that I was always in the arts but most of my experience was in the theater. Then I shifted, I left the theater and I went into visual arts where I got my college degree and I went off to graduate school there. So my experience was in visual arts and when I went to the New York Feminist Art Institute it was more in terms of visual arts. I was limited to the extent that I was much more academic, a much more conceptual thinking . . . I came out of a minimalist period in art which was fine, I liked it but to me, it held me back somehow. Once I had a real breakthrough at the Feminist Art Institute in that I started getting in touch with my own feelings. Rather than making art in relationship to what it appeared to be, it was much more what it felt like. I was always a process artist but this was really my big step into trusting myself in the process. For me, the class that Nancy ran in women's journals was really important for me because I used it . . . my journal was not necessarily a journal; it was a memoir, a visual memoir. I think that I really needed at that time to pull my life together up until that point. I needed to pull my experience together as a woman, as a female, as a daughter, as an actress, as a college student, as an artist . . . I had been married and divorced by that time and I had already been exploring spiritual areas . . . yoga, I got very involved with yoga and eastern philosophy, studying that . . . so the memoir was a fabulous tool to pull all of that together, somehow bring it up to date within me. As I explored that more on a very informal it opened up other areas. It opened up areas into women's consciousness. I

wasn't a part of the women's consciousness movement . . . I was in it because I was doing theater work but I was doing it in terms of acting . . . and I got to the point in acting where I realized that most of all the plays I was doing were by playwrights that I knew and I was creating female characters and then I realized that I was saying and creating these characters that were not me . . . that were not speaking my voice. I wasn't aware of it at the time because I was too young once I got involved in it and when you're acting you're creating these characters but I was using my own life, my own personality to create these characters, but then I got to the point where I could no longer say these words. I could no longer say another person's words. It was a very dark period for me. I had to go through the unknown. I had to leave the theater, which was the only thing I knew. I started acting when I was 14. That's what I identified myself with and to leave everything I knew behind and move on to another area, was a very difficult and painful process because I had no idea where I was going but I knew that I could no longer be that . . . to speak a voice that was not mine.

Then it was through painting and through writing my own performance pieces, the more in touch I got with myself, the more I was able to use my own voice. I was able to be liberated more through working in a feminist atmosphere – it was very supportive – I can be in one now or not. I could be in a very male system or environment and I don't feel any difference. I feel myself, I feel secure in who I am now. The few years that I was at the Feminist Art Institute, it helped me gain a sense of belief in myself creatively that maybe I had before but I didn't believe it. I had it and I could do it but I wouldn't claim it somehow. It's about claiming it and saying, look there's nothing wrong with pink or lace or there's nothing wrong with . . . and you can use them or not use them but why throw out a whole body of work or of material or of influence for no reason . . . when it's there and it could be used and integrated. I feel much more balanced now because I can draw from a kind of feminine and masculine perspective. I feel clearer in my intellect now because I can draw more easily on a larger body of exploration within myself now than I was able to. It's also – I think we talked about process – to me it's an evolution, one's consciousness has evolved and the institute at that time was very important for me to move through that phase of my life, to help me evolve in a richer, deeper way, artistically, consciously.

K.C. How were you involved at NYFAI? Student, teacher, administrator, organizer, please describe. Which classes did you take? . . . you said a little bit about that . . . Where you involved in other programs for example open houses, panels and did you participate in the annual salon exhibition at the Ceres Gallery?

M.C. I was primarily a student there. That's what I was. I was always a student there. I did participate in the classes. The classes were fabulous. Like I said, there was one on women and architecture, unfortunately I don't remember the names of all of the teachers that did these but the one on architecture was wonderful. It was a Saturday class. We worked creating our own houses and I thought it was a great way of dealing with the thought of architecture or structure. Home, I think it was "what the home means . . ." I still love that, I'd like to go back into that myself again and really look at that . . . that whole investigation of what is home and what is a home. That class was fabulous. We made little models and we drew. It was great. I think it would be good to do it again. There was always more that you could pull from. That was another I felt like when I did my visual memoir . . . I put in my memoir potholders. I was able to use images from . . . who in the world . . . I could talk about my marriage and clip out pictures of mix masters and home appliances and put that in the journal. I could use images of gingham [looking at memoir]

K.C. Here's a potholder.

M.C. . . . with potholders. These are more potted plants, I made potted plants . . . and here's the potholder.

K.C. Domestic items.

M.C. Domestic items. I was so happy and I could say that I was happy married. I could say that I was really happy during that period. And I could bring in those elements. Then of course it ended. That's another phase of the book but I was able to explore those parts of my life . . . I mean how it went on and then I went in to making performance pieces but I was using all of those elements previously from my life. . . . into the performance pieces . . . and then going off to graduate school. So going back to that journal again or that memoir was very important and helpful to pull all of that together. Now I could use lace hankies or things in my work. I just did a box object called "Tullebox" where I used tulle. So it's getting more in touch with my everyday. I like to get down to everyday experience

using more common articles in my work, or objects. That came out of the “Home” workshop, the journal class plus many drawing classes and going to the panels. I was basically a student and an audience member in all of the lectures. I would take one workshop in 6 months so I wasn’t that active, but I took a lot of different classes. They had an open house show that I had two drawings in, I think, and I think we even had our journals on display at that open house. I remember having two drawings put up on the wall. I wasn’t in the Ceres Gallery show, but I was in the open house show. That was probably the last thing I did then . . . maybe it was towards the end of the organization. I think that was the last thing I did there. And I remember my class with Melissa Meyers was the last class I had there and she was just wonderful, really helpful, just excellent. Also the lecture series was fabulous, the women were great . . . and the panels. There was also another panel that I went to that was wonderful. It was at Cooper Union and I remember Allen Ginsburg was one of the panelists on that. I don’t remember what that was about. I’m not sure how NYFAI was involved but it was involved somehow because I think that’s how I went to the . . . and it was wonderful and I remember being very impressed with Allen Ginsburg and his support of women. Basically I was a student there. I learned a lot of things. I was able to get in touch with elements of my own creativity that had I not been there, they would have never happened. It was like here like we’re sitting in my kitchen. It was like that. It was like that kind of experience. When you’re in that kind of environment, other parts of you open up I think. You can access different aspects of your own consciousness that you can’t in a more academic setting. K.C. No intimidation that happens in academic settings.

M.C. No intimidation. And also if you’re sitting somewhere and you’re having someone in front of you, and you’re all here . . . it’s again the proscenium so I’m aware of all that. Rather than a collective where you’re sitting in an atmosphere in which you’re much more relaxed . . . Now that I’m talking about it I’m remembering I went to a private pre-school nursery school and it was in this woman’s new house and . . . we all sat at these tables in her house and then we went to her living room and she played the piano and read to us and things like that. I was part of a little children’s organization called the Jolly Elfs – I think I was about 5 or 6 – where we met in a woman’s basement and we made things for the local hospitals to put on the trays when they were fed their meals in the

hospitals. So we were making little art objects. We were making little baskets and different things. There's something to that I think. Where do we move from a 6 year old making little things in a woman's basement for the community hospital, how can we take that and not change it so much and just be bigger people and making different things in an atmosphere. Now that I say this I would just love to see people working together like that. I would like to see those kinds of situations where artists make art; where things were made in that kind of a setting, where art making was a tool used for the community for - rather than as a product or as a commodity - where it was made to be shared for one another. It would raise the quality of handmade objects. We could make really good stuff. Good dresses and good hats and good coats and mittens and things like that . . . and good ceramics. It would be great to have every plate that you had handmade by a neighbor potter or yourself. Now I'm going off but it comes out of that atmosphere. If you're in that atmosphere with other women . . . maybe it could be broadened . . . maybe guys could join at some point where it would be a community thing, it'd be a really good thing.

But also just women . . . we still don't know what women are capable of. We still don't know what they could be making. There are so many brilliant women around. They don't have to be making a painting. They could be making some electronic thing or some chemical thing or whoa . . . the mind . . . working with astronomy and physics and things like that. There's room to grow. Art has room to grow.

K.C. Please describe your experience at NYFAI for example the sense of community and friendships in the studio and classroom.

M.C. Well, that was fabulous. Like I said, I met one of my very best girl friends, Carol Schapiro. I don't know if we met at a drawing class. I think it may have been Nancy's figure drawing class. We became such good friends. It carried way beyond the school. I was ill one time several years later and I stayed at her apartment during the week for a couple of weeks. One summer we went off to Cape Cod together. She was very helpful to me during times when I had some problems. I was there for her. We developed a wonderful female friendship. Unfortunately she passed away a few years ago of breast cancer. She was a lawyer and she was a really brilliant woman. She would come over and look at my paintings and there was no one who could look at my paintings and give her

insight. She had such a mythological insight. She was so smart. She could look at it in terms that no one else could. I don't know if that has to do with her legal mind and her creative mind together or what but she was really brilliant. So that sense of community . . . I remember Melissa Meyers was really helpful in turning me on to a male older teacher who – Leo Manso – taught at the Art Student's League and then he taught a course at the New School and she was his proctor at one time and his protégé. He was very important for her. I went and studied with him after that because of her and had his last year of teaching at the New School. These things carried over but my relationship with Carol was really close. We hung out together, we traveled together, we helped one another. We became very good friends.

Even though I had a very limited experience at NYFAI compared to other women who were very involved with it. It was to a lesser degree but it still had an impact on me in my friendships and in my art making.

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

M.C. It was certainly feminine and it wasn't before. In the theater I was mostly cast in a sexual context as a sexual blonde. I wanted O – a very unflattering character that I created which was very unglamorous so I was able to do those roles as well. But, as a woman as an actress, you're mostly a sex object or sexualized. When I left that because I had had enough of that and went into painting, I was more intellectually oriented. I was minimalist . . . which was important to me because I needed that balance. I had been so on the other end. But then when I came to NYFAI I was able to . . . put potholders in my work, to change it . . . dishes and pots and pans . . . everything. I was able to integrate a household aesthetic into my work. It was in my performance pieces because I had written the performance pieces after I had left the theater and school. I was able to start – when I wrote my own performance pieces – integrate images. I used to a lot of regular things . . . buckets and pans and pots, mops and all of that. I remember when I went to Europe I did a workshop and performance in Brussels for two weeks and one of my performance pieces encompassed one year of my life. It was kind of like a John Cage sort of piece where I just dealt with one year . . . what came through I put out. I wrote about it, photographed it, projected it and did other things. A lot of the images were regular pots and pans . . . whatever was going on in my kitchen, whatever was going on. I did it in

Brussels and after one night of the show, a guy left a note for me to have dinner with him so I went and I met with him and he was a Dutch dealer out of Amsterdam. He said, “I have to tell you, when I first saw your show I walked out.” He said, “I couldn’t believe you were showing those buckets and mops. I could believe . . .” And I had them projected. They were stage size . . . with my bathtub. He said, “I couldn’t believe you used those images. Europeans are so used to beautiful objects. I was so horrified that I walked out. But now I came back to see your show again and I really understand America for the first time.” And I said, well that was an accomplishment. He said, “I can understand the American experience of cars now. I never could understand why those realists painted those Mercury’s or the cars or the hyperrealism . . .” I remember in the 70s and 80s there being a lot of hyperrealism and cars and different things. He said, “I could never understand American art but now I do because of your aesthetic – it’s not that it’s a bad thing – but you’re much more as a country, as a culture, connected to your daily experiences. It’s different in Europe, there’s a long history of culture and museums . . . refined, kings and queens . . .” America doesn’t have that. We’re not used to royalty. We have another aesthetic. I was so happy that that happened. It gave me an insight I hadn’t had, and I knew why I was as an American artist different than a European by using these images, that was in my performance pieces. In my visual work and using it more in my artwork, it came a lot more after I was at NYFAI because I got more of a feeling of security in trusting those images. I’m interested in those images. I wasn’t aware of it so much before, but I’m interested in everyday objects. I’m interested in . . . I wrote a piece about a blue collar worker . . . I’m interested in that aesthetic and raising that aesthetic or looking at the beauty and the spirituality in that life, in that everyday lifestyle. I think I’m more involved in looking. I wasn’t aware of it before and through NYFAI I’ve gotten a sense of belief in myself of using those everyday objects more than I had been before. That came out of working around a table and being with other women that had these experiences. I think we weren’t looking at marketable objects as much, we were looking at what we were experiencing rather than what we were selling or who was showing. People were involved in that, some to a greater degree than others, but it was more about the process. I am a process artist and to me art is about process. Totally . . . that’s what it is. It’s not about object making although you make objects in the process . . .

. it's not what it's about. It's about the process and how one grows and develops and experiences the world around them. To me that is what art has always been . . . a creative process of self-discovery and I think this is what my memoir said in the beginning. I wrote that in here. . . I think I said that and I was surprised when I went back to look at it. . . . It's that looking into the figure, a storybook, a story of self-discovery and the creative process. . . . I think that's what it's about for me; I can only speak about myself. For me, it's that journey and if we make objects, we do as we're going along. It's nice to make objects and it's nice to make things.

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

M.C. I think it was getting in touch with that imagery. Getting in touch with the womanly aspect of myself, the homemaking aspect of myself. Somehow integrating myself as an artist and as an everyday person. Not making that such a shift. I remember – I guess for all artists – you start out and you're an artist and you make your art and then you're who you are. You're making a living, you're getting by and then on the side you're making your art. I'm so interested in integrating the two and having my art making be just an extension of who I am. Not having that self divide of shifting . . . making art and then making life. I think NYFAI offered that . . . offered at least a step into that realm to start the integrative process. And that is what I think it's about for women artists. Your generation [younger generation] probably doesn't have that experience to the degree that my generation or the generations before me had. I remember hearing about women who had children and marriages and they would have to lock themselves off in a bathroom somewhere to write or to do something and could never talk about it. There were hidden artists. They had to do it under the radar somehow and they had to split themselves off. Like I told you before when I was in acting I could never tell anybody – except my friends, people who knew me – that I was an actress. If I went out for a job I could never mention that I was an actress or that I was an artist. That's a very male world. Now it's a little better – maybe or maybe not – especially in New York - - well, New York is easier than in other places where you can be an artist and also work as a secretary or work as a word processor or doing something in an office or a corporation. Being able to be an artist and talking about it and being able to put it out into the world . . . I think getting in touch with my more female aspects of my life everybody has a different experience

or a different road that they are on . . . so for me it was getting in touch with my everyday life; getting in touch with my everyday objects, getting in touch with my house and my life in a deeper way. I was on that road but I was never on it visually before. By creating pieces and by doing artwork in a female atmosphere gave me more comfort in drawing on those ideas or those impulses. It was that integrative process . . . integrating art and being a woman that was really important. I think a regular art school of academic is excellent but I think for women now – maybe not in the future – but as long as it's needed and before academia is more feminized, having a place to go to explore those things is still important for women because we don't know what women are capable of yet. We need to have groups of women come together and support one another and explore their selves and their capabilities in other than a male atmosphere and then go into the male atmosphere and have more confidence in themselves about what that is. I think that the world has to be more feminized . . . a feminized consciousness. We have to get away from killing each other and wars. How are we going to do that? Also through a love of nature, women . . . of course there are a lot of men who are very connected to ecology but having a much more feminine consciousness in world politics . . . now if we can have more art . . . art and politics, art and social change, if there could be no departmentalization . . . if we could somehow integrate this more as part of a whole . . . not put a politician here, an artist here, a doctor here, a lawyer over here, a shoemaker over here, a baker here . . . and I think through women, women's experience of raising families, and keeping people together, that consciousness could help our world politic. In that way it's a political experience. They say the personal is political . . . right there I said it, I wasn't aware that I was making that. When you just go into feeling it out and thinking it out, you say well, this is this and this is that, art and female consciousness could come more into the political stream or the social consciousness rather. Words are so bad now . . . politics but social consciousness where our world is more feminized not in terms of looks but in terms of consciousness and awareness and feeling. NYFAI, see how that helps? It helps when women come together in conjunction with everything else . . . not isolated necessarily. I personally like to see things put together. I like to see the balance, the yin and the yang because then you get the best of the mind and the best of the heart. When those two come together, we can all live together.

K.C. Maybe.

MC. Maybe. I think we're in for a shift. It's so weird that we have this political experience with Obama. I really feel it's almost like destiny. He definitely came out of the universe, out of the consciousness somewhere. This is not for real. This is something that has come out of another realm. To so coincide with a point in our countries history that we haven't had, it just not politics, it's the whole thing. It's just so uncanny that they happened at the same time. Yes, we're in for a shift and I'm for all of the young people and the whole environmental movement. I personally believe that we should just retool the whole country into a green economy. I think that it would create jobs; it would do a lot of things differently. But . . . every generation is like that. My parent's generation had the great depression and war and all of this other stuff. Every generation has its battles.

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 an activist for women in the arts?

M.C. At the time I wasn't. I was none of that. I had one teacher in graduate school – a sculptor who was part of the women's consciousness movement – who talked about going on demonstrations and marching, taking off your bra and throwing it . . . she was part of that. I was not part of that whole thing at all. I was part of the theater movement. I was touring a lot in theaters through Europe in the late 60s and then I got married and I had come out of the theater so bewildered. I just wanted to regain a normal life so I wasn't fighting against anything. I was just trying to maintain a relationship and a home and getting my bearings straight. I wasn't even conscious of my own feminine consciousness and I think I probably had less of a journey to make in that because being an actress I was only doing women's roles so I was very conscious of women. I was conscious because I was portraying women all of the time. But then I was conscious to the point of . . . I couldn't do it because it wasn't me . . . so it was my own internal hurdle that I was going over. I had a certain awareness of feminism but in my own way because I was internalized through my own experience. And I wasn't aware. I was much more in the anti-war movement and the peace movement. The women's consciousness movement wasn't so evolved but I didn't really think I had a problem with that at that time. I wasn't aware of a problem.

When I came to NYFAI – and I think that was after a lot of the radical ness and also of the women’s movement and lesbianism . . . I grew up in the theater practically with gay people so it was never an issue with me. In fact the people that I was with never seemed to have an issue. They were all actors – mostly men – and I wasn’t aware of lesbianism as much but I knew two girls that were involved that were in our group here off and on that were gay but it was never an issue because so many people were gay. I had no problem with them. I was just going on my own dates. I had my own life to lead. That was never an issue with me but what happened is that it became more of a consciousness of just my own self as a woman and when I got to NYFAI, getting in touch of the deeper aspects of my own femininity, of my own life as a woman rather than thinking about art in an intellectual way, I got into experiencing my own life and how that was and drawing from that everyday experience. That basically was what I got out of NYFAI. More support in the belief in accessing. I was never [?] Not that anything was wrong with it but I just never felt that personally. I felt that what I was doing . . . I wasn’t against anything or for anything . . . I was just into doing it. I was for doing it. I was just basically out there just to do it. The support that was gotten and that atmosphere was just so great. That was important as a balance because there wasn’t anywhere else. That was the thing. It wasn’t in any university system, except in graduate school I had one class on women and that was so great to have in such a male department. I think it is much more feminized now . . . there are more women there teaching. I had no women teachers at all. Art history maybe, but no studio classes except in graduate school . . . but minimal. And the men were good. I mean they were great; I had no problem with them. And I would say they were very supportive so I didn’t have that much of a problem with it but I just wasn’t reaching into it. I wasn’t having access to that consciousness until NYFAI. I already was working in that but I didn’t feel encouraged until there. That there were other women doing it. I was aware of materials. I was aware of using more feminine materials in my work than before. I was using much more industrial materials then. I started using – but not until I got to NYFAI was I more in touch with that.

K.C. How did your experience at NYFAI further your development as an artist?

M.C. It gave me more access. It gave me a tool. It gave me access to an aspect of myself that I hadn’t had previously. It gave me access to a dormant consciousness and belief in

myself in my everyday woman's life. . . that I could draw from it unapologetically and that I could continue to draw from it. I think that doing those environmental garden pieces after NYFAI was an extension of that. I got very involved in the ecological movement – now there was a movement that I was very involved with – the environmental movement and helping gardens get established in the city as places for people to come together in. Then I was really using feminine materials, dresses and hats and flowers and parasols.

K.C. That's a type of feminist activism too. It kind of evolved out of your art and theater.
M.C. Right. I could have never done that before. I would have people come to my work that knew me as an actress – male playwrights – they never got what I was doing, they never related. Except for my friend Victor who came from my experience in the theater and who was supportive of me all along and who was gay but he was my long, dear wonderful friend forever until the day he died of AIDS unfortunately. He was with me all the way from the time we were 19 until the end. Other than that, my theater world was totally separate. They never got my artwork ever, ever, ever,. They never got it. So, those pieces in the garden were always pooh-poohed away. I think to me were very important for my development. It put me into nature. I was using nature as a stage. This is a big trip for me because as I said, I was 14 and I only knew the stage and I knew what was not real and I was always trying to make what was not real “real” through the act of acting.

Trying to bring from my own emotions and character, characters to life and trying to make something that was manufactured sets or environment real to the audience. Moving from that, it was a big trip for me to get to those gardens where I could use no actors. I had this thing about not using any actors; I could only use the gardeners and the children. I used the garden as the platform. Unbeknownst to anybody but me – and now telling you – that was never discussed but that was so feminine and such a feminized event also with the children and everything . . . using all of those elements, and using the garden . . . I mean every element in there was feminine, from the female consciousness. That was my way just by doing it. Everybody loved it . . . everybody who was involved loved it. The art world . . . it was like it didn't exist. In my mind I was thinking of pastoral painting coming to life, rolling hills, beautiful Monet flowers. I was thinking of putting people in these settings that were growing, that were natural. To me they were living pastorals. And

when I said that to the guy, it just never made it into the paper . . . he was like what? “What are you talking about, living pastorals?” I was doing it in my own little way. It feminized that context. And to all of the people involved. The people that were really changed by it I think were the people that were involved in it. They weren’t characters, so they weren’t actors. The fact that I had to become a gardener to even do it . . . It was no fooling around.

K.C. You had to earn you stripes . . .

M.C. I had to earn it. The art was secondary. That was to me activism that way. I devoted myself to that. It was like art social work. It was a combination of social work and being an artist because I had to go into a community and I respected their awareness. What do they . . . they didn’t need me. The garden wouldn’t be helped if we didn’t do an event that would bring it into the public eye so it would be saved. But in their minds I don’t think they ever thought there was any problem with the gardens not being saved. They were just into doing it. They never thought that there was anything coming down the pike . . . that the city would close these gardens if they weren’t activated or if they weren’t shown to have some sort of social grace. That was a political move in that respect. . . committing myself to 4 years, almost 5 years. That was a haul. Also, becoming very involved with that community. That was it, you’re right. I got really involved with the people, the relationships. I even went back there and did a yoga class for them. I taught yoga in the garden. I became so close with Howard who went back to South Africa and his daughter who got married recently. And he just died. He went back to South Africa and had a garden there. He was like an industrial agriculturalist for the state I think. I got involved in ways with politics. It was very political . . . very low-key but very political in its way of bringing communities together, of dealing with different nationalities and different ethnicities. But then when I did the ethnic pageants in Pennsylvania, it was the first time I brought . . . we’re talking about racism in Southwestern Pennsylvania. For that event, I staged – basically my grandparents immigrated to the real working class area in Pennsylvania with the Catholic churches. I had it staged between two churches and coming over a bridge – and I had the two church bells ringing to bring in the people. It was a great event but it was so ethnic. It was Eastern European, Polish, Irish, Croatia, Italian, all of these nationalities and so cut off from the black population. I had a woman

who was black and involved in a daycare center. I had her come and open it with her African outfit . . . the whole thing . . . the hat, the blouse, her little daughter. I think it was first time where I had this big parade and people came and they brought lawn chairs to watch the pageant. The local community . . . because it was all open. And people came with their folding chairs . . . it was right on the street. This group came up and they had their costumes on. It was the first time that I had seen African Americans running around the streets there and not being run after and not being run out of town. That to me, that moment, - I've got to find that picture –

[Referencing photograph] I forgot about this. Look at this. I took all the people from the garden; we did an environmental piece in Union Square. There they are in Union Square. Here's Carol – this is NYFAI. I've recycled my people and my costumes. [Another picture] This is right here on Houston Street. [Another picture] This is down Broadway. That's pretty political isn't it? [Another picture] This is on the Lower Eastside. . . . Then, I did a woman's mass. I got involved with a women's spiritual group called. . . . it started with a group of nuns in Holland but then came here. They are women activists but totally religious. They had a 50th anniversary and they did a mass right here at the Peace Church here at Washington Square. They asked me to create visuals for their mass. They had a Catholic mass at this Catholic Church with a Jesuit priest and I had these women coming up the aisles in these outfits. Look at this. This is in the church with the parasol. This was out of site. Here are pictures of the pope and everything. This was honoring women and the whole nature . . . this is coming through the church. They had a pageant through the church. This is from the garden. I integrated all of the garden costumes from the garden and the people. Again, that's Maria Lina from . . . and here was the priest giving the mass. This was in the church. That's coming out of the church. That's a procession and then out. That's Washington Square Park right around here.

Then I did a Mayday at Brooklyn Botanic Gardens for the same woman's group. I had again the costumes. This is an all women's thing. This was after NYFAI. This was '92 so this was after I used all of this stuff through processions through the garden. And then I did a procession through 42nd Street with "Artists Against the Contract" Newt Gingrich in '96 . . . had a contract on America. I did a whole other event there on 42nd Street with visuals. See I don't think of these terms as political or not political . . .

K.C. And then putting it all together.

M.C. I don't think in terms of . . .

K.C. Art in public spaces?

M.C. Yes, "really" art in public spaces. I do it. You opened that up for me, thank you. I never thought of it as that. I never thought of that, it was just what I did. I never thought of it as a separation and that's kind of good because that's what I'm after. I'm after the natural integration of art and politics, community, having that flow between all of that in a positive way, in an integrative way. . . because we do need more art in this country. We really need more art, more cultural aesthetic, more understanding of art and literature. We need to be culturalized, we're industrialized. This is an industrial country. We need to have every child reading all of this fabulous literature, world literature. There is such a body of things around that children should be exposed to . . . that our country – instead of talking about guns and things – should be talking about literature and painting and different things. That's a feminine consciousness. We just need more women in those realms. We need more artists, more creative women. We need not to be thinking so much about the difference between politics and art but we need to have creative women living and doing things in these other realms. We need to reculturalize and women do that, it's women's role. Women are domesticators. The country needs to be domesticated – culturalized.

K.C. Today, what is your involvement in the arts? Do you consider yourself a professional artist? What is your current involvement in feminism?

M.C. I'm always making art so to me I consider myself an artist. I'm trying now to integrate – I'm thinking now of working more with books – making visual books or . . . I'm working out an idea of making more visual books, poetry, and also I'm working now totally with nature – it's a very Zen practice where I put myself in a context where I sit in a natural setting and I write about it and I draw or create from it. So I am trying to integrate myself more deeply in nature. That's my trip, integration with the natural world. The work I'm doing now has to do with being connected to the natural world and drawing from it, writing from it, and creating from it spontaneously. I work on the seasons. I usually do something every year that has to do with the turn of the seasons. I think of myself as an artist but my art is very under the radar. I'm not interested in putting

pictures on the internet. I'm not interested in showing . . . I'm interested in creating something. I'm more interested in surprising myself. It's the process. What comes of it comes of it. I want to work on this project "The Mommy Project" where there is some connection between daughter to mother and their artwork . . . how the daughter as artist, how their work is informed by their mother's work . . . whatever their mother did . . . their housewife duties or their daily duties. How the daughter then took that information. That relationship, the relationship of daughter to mother. If that's not feminine. I guess if I never went to NYFAI I would think . . . Oh that, oh I can't do that. I would have never been to the point where I'm at right now. I wouldn't be thinking of doing a project of daughters and mothers. The seeds keep going. I wouldn't have thought of that coming out of Hunter, out of graduate school. I might have but I don't think so. I would have never done the woman's mass had I not gone to NYFAI. I wouldn't have been confident to think that I could create a woman's mass. I guess I really am a feminist artist in that respect. I don't think of myself in those terms but . . . I think all my artwork . . . I just created a box for the box project upstate for Woodstock at their museum there and I actually have it up there now. They wanted artists to create boxes for this auction for the museum. I created a box but I used a recycled box from the health food store, a cheese box and lacquered it and it's filled with tulle. I have that and I have a picture of Isadora Duncan coming out of the box . . . totally feminist. I guess I am. I don't think of myself as one but look all my materials are very female . . . and my projects, nature and my imagery. I guess I am without thinking about it but I guess that's the way to be. That's the goal for all of us isn't it? Not to think in terms of one or the other, just doing it. Also you have more of a resource of yourself. It's believing in yourself. You could tap into these things that you're experiencing personally and not separate it from being an artist. I think that's the key. And I think a lot of women earlier on, because they were so frustrated, and cut off because a lot of the work was angry . . . a lot of the work has lots of angst in it and I think it's because they were trapped in the duality of . . . trapped in the self and not expressing themselves to the outside world in a fluid way. The thing is to get that entrapment over with . . . get them unentrapped. Let women be experiencing being a woman and not make such a big deal out of it. But we're not there yet I guess. We have to feminize the consciousness more. That's our trip. That's really where I think the world

has to become more feminized, the consciousness of the world. As the consciousness of the world becomes more feminized, women artists . . . it bounces all around. It starts with each individual woman trusting that. Having a place to go like NYFAI. Having a support group. You always need a support until these things take off on their own. Then they become mainstream. You don't need a support group anymore. Some other issue will come up. There will be another something under the carpet that has to come out. Until this feminine consciousness becomes mainstream, we won't know what the problem is. We just have to raise the consciousness up . . . maybe we can't deal with these problems until it becomes more feminized. The other problems need a much more feminine consciousness to be dealt with. It's a big trip we're on. I think people should look at it more like that. It's so much like life and death. It's a journey of the self, of our consciousness, of our being. It's a process in itself.

K.C. The final question is how would you describe the legacy of NYFAI? And is there something that you'd like to share with the younger generation about your experience there?

M.C. I think the gift of NYFAI was the support system. First of all the acknowledgement of women artists and of NYFAI – way before I went there - having seminars and educational programs exploring women of the past. I never knew there was someone painting in 14 or 1500. I never knew this was going on. They delved into the research and found all these things. You look at the tradition of women in the arts and they were very helpful in opening that gate, that door for us to look at and start piecing together and then start experiencing ourselves as women artists. To my extent I had always felt of myself as an artist, but I was more of a theater artist. Being in that environment, experiencing yourself as a visual artist, as a mixed media artist, and also having the belief in yourself that you could draw from your own personal feminine experiences; you didn't have to hide them away. You could bring them out and make art out of your female life. That process of bringing that out needs to be brought out more. It helped me in the respect that it gave me a sense of trust in my own exploration into my/the feminine world. Of course, this is only speaking to me, I really think that it should be taken out into the consciousness and that art is a tool to bring that forward and as women artists have more faith in themselves and feel more comfortable with themselves as artists and don't have

to apologize for the fact that they're artists and don't have to hide what they are making and say, oh that's not art . . . have more faith in what they are making is art, that that will bring it out into the public more and out into society more. It's very much like a mother daughter relationships. The mother opening up the possibilities and nurturing the daughter. Basically for the younger generation my thing is the same, to encourage that exploration, to encourage the belief in oneself that what you're experiencing is valid and its valid in the world of art. That what you see, and how you see it and what you feel and how you feel it is valid. That making things from that, as an artist is as valid as any other art making is. To have a sense of belief in that. First of all being exposed to it . . . I think there should be more little groups of women getting together, helping one another out and encouraging them. Because there's a realm that we don't know yet. We don't know what's there. We still have so far to go. This can open up into so many possibilities. Any woman that's an artist and feels marginalized should not. Any woman that feels that what they're making that people don't understand should not feel that way. They should feel that they can bring out whatever they're making and look at it in rational terms. If you're hiding it you're not going to be able to be balanced in judging it . . . you're not going to be able to . . . what is it that I want to say, am I saying it with this? That was the great part of having this group because you have other people look at it and give you their impression to help you articulate your own vision. That support system is needed for the younger generation. I encourage the younger women to get together and create groups to get together on their own. If there's not an institute make it in your own houses, make it at your own kitchen tables, make little groups . . . but get together and start making little communities. Instead of women getting together to knit and sew, you can get together and make art work and write about it and research. That's another important thing. Find out what other women have done. That is so valuable. I am always amazed. Like Mary Heilmann is having a show at The New Museum in two weeks. She was painting in the 60s and 70s. I was never aware of her at that time. I'm so happy to see her work now. I saw a retrospective from the 70s that was done last year up at the National Museum around 90th Street and there were paintings of hers from 1972 or something and there was an abstract painting of men's ties in a drawer. It was so fabulous and that was 1972. I was so blown away by it. I was not aware of it. If I had been aware of her doing that at that

time I would have been making things that I was as happy about. I was doing some things but not to the degree if I knew there were other women artists . . . maybe at that time I wouldn't have thought of it in the same way . . . looking at it 30 years later it looks different . . . at the time I might have said, what are you doing? I probably wouldn't have thought much of it. So, it's important to go back and look at what other women . . . I see a lot of women artists now. I'm seeing many more women showing in retrospectives and galleries now than I've ever seen before. First of all, knowing women's art history is number one. Then, supporting other women in small groups to create their work in another. It's important to have encouragement from older women. That's the role of older women artists to mentor and encourage younger women. The first thing I do say, is all younger women know your art history, know about women through the ages and what they've made and be in small groups where you get encouragement from your peers, other girls, women around you, and share information.

It should still be in existence. There should definitely still be an institute for women artists. Even if it's a rolling one on wheels . . . if it rolls around the country, it's still needed. Until culture becomes feminized and the consciousness becomes feminized, we need as many women making art as possible, we need as many women being encouraged in their art making so we have a diversity of imagery. We have to see what's going on in all these women. They're like little lock boxes. You don't know. I didn't know it was in me. I didn't know I was going to pull out little mops and potholders and all kinds of things. I didn't know what I was seeing around me. I didn't know what I was going to come up with. We don't know but we need to have the place, a secure protected place where we feel safe in exploring these things. They do cross. I forgot about those other events . . . it was such a natural flow. But I would have never done those women's events . . . I didn't even think of them as women's . . . they are but I didn't think of them in those terms. To me it was an art event. Had I not had that experience, I would have never done those garden events then without getting in touch with this. I had to go through all of this – and this was all done at NYFAI. I had to somehow consolidate my experience so I would be able to move on to the next. I wrote this all in a matter of a couple of months but it ends with “I forgot everything I ever knew.” And then these pages keep flipping . . . “I forgot” . . . “I forgot” . . . “I forgot” . . . and then it says “I began making a new art.”

And then this is the last page that goes to a little abstract that you can tear out. I did move into the garden project after this so it was prophetic in that respect. I didn't know where I was going and I had integrated everything and then I forgot it all and then I went through this Zen process of somehow clearing and it was through that process that I was going to move on. The following year I went to Denmark because I had a residency there, just painting. [Referencing photo] I lived at this estate and this was the original estate. And this was the carriage house and I had my studio up in here. I went there and I made paint out of oil. I got the old renaissance recipe for walnut oil paint and I just started making these paintings. I went out . . . all these Madonna and child. When you think about it, very female oriented. I went out in nature and I mixed paint and pigments. The colors in landscape and then I just made all these paintings and they're all with handmade paint. That came after this and I had landscape at the very end and 2 years later I'm here [Denmark] in this landscape.

K.C. And then you were physically in the garden.

M.C. I came back and within 6 months I was on the Lower Eastside, Art and Ecology. It just happened spontaneously. And then I did the garden, and then I did the women's mass, and then I did the women's environmental pieces.