

NYFAI –

Interview: Melissa Meyer interviewed by Dena Muller

Date: Monday, December 18th, 2007

D.M. It is Monday, December 18th. We are at the studio of Melissa Meyer talking about NYFAI. First question, when did you first become involved with NYFAI?

M.M. I became involved with NYFAI when I was asked by Miriam Shapiro to paste up the original brochure, and I don't remember the year. It's got to be 80s. When did the institute start?

D.M. I think it was probably 1979 or 80 then if it was one of the very first ones. That's exactly what Nancy remembered and asked me to speak to you about. So, Miriam Shapiro at that time was involved as a teacher?

M.M. Right, and maybe one of the founders? Miriam and I had, which is another long story, co-authored "Femmage". It was initially my idea and then she worked on it with me. We had this very interesting, harmonious collaboration. And then I was also involved in designing with other people "Heresies". I think it was the fifth issue. I worked on the design, and paste-up and all that. It was called the "Traditional Arts: The Politics and Aesthetics". We included our "Femmage" piece in it. So Miriam knew that I could do that kind of thing, so she got me involved to do it. She got Elaine Lustig Cohen to design it, and Elaine said "I'll do it but I don't want to paste it up". So they sent me uptown and I pasted it up. This was probably, if it was 1980, maybe it was the spring and that summer . . . the end of that summer I went to Rome because I won the Rome Prize and lived in Rome for eleven months at the American Academy.

D.M. Had you heard of NYFAI before you worked on the paste-up or was that your first knowledge of it?

M.M. I knew there was something brewing. It was really the beginning. It was the first brochure so there must have been meetings and all that but I don't know.

D.M. Did you attend that first gala, do you remember anything about that first celebration?

M.M. No, I might have been out of town already. When was the first gala do you remember?

D.M. It was in those early years, I don't know the exact date. Louise Nevelson was present and it was at the World Trade Center . . . she had a sculpture there.

M.M. It's starting to sound familiar. I might have been there.

D.M. What's actually so interesting about this project is that so much happened in those years and so much has happened since that people can't remember and they remember as we're talking and the details come together.

M.M. It's starting to sound familiar.

D.M. What was the goal of that early piece that you did the paste-up for?

M.M. It was the brochure announcing and describing the school. – and somebody has a copy of it somewhere.

D.M. And it was to interest new students and maybe to be used as a fundraising piece and things like that. It was multiple pages?

M.M. Yeah, it was multiple pages because I pasted it up.

D.M. Was there something about a card for an exhibition as well that you worked on?

Nancy mentioned that there were a couple early graphic pieces that you worked on.

M.M. It sounds familiar but I don't remember.

D.M. I know she has copies of all of that.

M.M. I would like to see that. I was always doing things like that.

D.M. I know she has copies and the Rutgers' Archive of Women Artists has copies as well because Nancy's making sure that materials are going to that collection. It's archived for posterity.

M.M. Great. O.k. Later on, I can't remember how that happened, but I started to teach there.

D.M. What class did you teach?

M.M. I can't remember if it was painting or abstract painting, I don't remember what it was exactly.

D.M. What point were you at in your own career as an artist at that time?

M.M. I was showing, and I had just come back from Rome – I'm pretty sure – so I had a lot going on. I had the first one person survey show at Exit Art. That was a little later. I'd have to get the dates and go over it.

D.M. Exit Art was a relatively new organization at that point?

M.M. It was very new. The first year I was in a group show and then she did this one-person show, and I don't think she does those anymore. I had a lot going on. When I came back from Rome I was also involved with the Women's Caucus for Art. I think the WCA had a bunch of shows and I saw the list and there wasn't any abstract painting and I thought . . . what's the problem with the women's movement and abstract art. So, I was upset about that and helped form the show. That was probably the forerunner for a show I was in later called "Lilith" of abstract women artists who were also Jewish. That was interesting. I did the card for the Women's Caucus of Art on my old typewriter.

D.M. That's such an interesting question, because from what I know about NYFAI, one of the most interesting aspects, was how it was one of the only projects, if not the only project that merged what I see as a West Coast approach to feminist art and feminist processes in the classroom and in the studio with an East Coast philosophy about feminist strategies about approaching the art market and getting women artists no matter what type of art they made more into the art mainstream. So, the issue you're raising about the women's movement, capital "F" feminist art, having an issue with abstraction is an interesting one because I think the East Coast organizations were addressing exactly that question.

M.M. Well I didn't know anything about that. I just noticed the list and saw there was everything but abstract art and thought well, what is this about? I think I said something hostile about it. Is abstract art the nigger of the women's movement. Later on I found out that one of the problems that women had about abstract art was that they felt that it identified too much with the masters or the abstract expressionists.

D.M. Exactly.

M.M. None of which really interests me.

D.M. I think it's really interesting to make sure that projects like this articulate that there were different ways of approaching the question of feminism in the arts. I think we tend to simplify it in retrospect and talk a lot about the projects that were all about a feminist content in the work itself or feminist studio processes like "Femmage", or like Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" where the content is very clearly feminist social history or feminist political agenda as opposed to the fact that there also were of course, many, many women artists whose content of their work was not that, but they were feminists in

their lives, and needed feminism to help them advance their careers as abstract artists or whatever they were working on.

M.M. Feminism also opened up women artists' eyes to ideas like the glass ceiling or the promise of pricing and salaries, all compared to male artists and the male teachers. So, feminism opened up all that.

D.M. So, the painting course at NYFAI, did you initiate that course or was it a course that had been taught by other people before you, and you took over teaching?

M.M. I don't remember. Either somebody else had it and left and then they asked me to do it, or . . . but I didn't initiate it. We did lots of interesting problems. Since it was down the block from where I live, and my studio, I used to have them come here also at the end of the semester. Then I got the idea to -because it was pretty much the same group- send them to different women artists' studios. . . . abstract painters mostly. That was very successful and I think other people have copied that model.

D.M. Did you find when you were teaching the course, any of that same resistance to abstraction as something appropriate to the question of feminist art?

M.M. No, it never happened.

D.M. You just saw it happening on the outside . . . in exhibitions?

M.M. I only saw it in that – I mean I'd have to think more – but I only really saw it when the Women's Caucus had that series of shows, I was so surprised at that. And, I'd come back from Rome with a lot of energy so I was ready to put that together. They had a great space. If you saw the list, most of the people in that show are still exhibiting.

D.M. So your students were responsive to being taught about abstraction and responsive being in an abstract artist studio.

M.M. Yeah, I think they were a fan of mine and other artists. I took them to Harriet Korman's studio, maybe Katherine Bradford. I'd have to look at the list again, but probably Andrea Belag . . .

D.M. Do you remember talking about that question about whether abstraction was too masculinist in the classroom?

M.M. No. I don't remember talking about that. We were really interested in how to make a painting.

D.M. What you were supposed to be interested in, right? I mean again that's the interesting underpinning to all of this because the goal is to get to a place where we're not always aware of the feminist question.

M.M. And, I would show them anyone's work I wanted to show them. It didn't have to do with whether they were male or female because it was all helpful; it was all something we could learn from.

D.M. So before you started working with NYFAI, what was your relationship with feminism or activism at that time?

M.M. I was part of the Heresies Collective.

D.M. So you already identified as a feminist . . . ?

M.M. Well I'll tell you. My first art history class -- whatever year that was -- in the mid-60s -- I went up to the teacher who was an old German Art Historian. After the first class I went up and said were there any women artists? And, she said, "Ah, feminist". And I said "What's that?"

D.M. Independent invention, you thought of it before . . .

M.M. Well, right away you look and see that it's all . . . I also had another thing I noticed in Art History because I didn't know the New Testament, I only knew the Old Testament. So, I didn't know the iconography. So, that was interesting too, I had to learn all that, but that's what we go to school for.

D.M. Learned all that and said, "Where are the women?"

M.M. And she had trouble thinking of anybody. And then at one point early on, I read Shulameth Firestone's book, "The Dialectic of Sex". I loved that book.

D.M. You and Miriam were already involved in Feminist projects together.

M.M. We only did Femmage. Somebody invited me to this meeting of the fifth issue and it was at Joyce Kozloff's and everybody sat around in a circle and said what they were most interested in. And, I said with my little voice, "I'm interested in why so many women made collages". And at the end, Miriam got up and said, "I'd like to work with you on that". And I got really scared. I said, "Oh know, she's going to eat me up . . . she's going to swallow me up and spit me out". At one point later in our collaboration, she said, "Melissa, do you think you could be quiet for a minute so I can say something?" So I figured we were o.k. I did a lot of the research and we had a lot of discussions. I think

Grace Gluck gave the name “Femmage”. I think Miriam was talking to Grace and that came up, she came up with “Femmage”. Now I know that it’s kind of anthologized and all that. And I had collected scrapbooks. That was one of the things that I saw as a kind of forerunner of collage.

D.M. That’s why so many women make collage. When you got involved with NYFAI as a teacher and were more involved than doing that first project of the paste-up, what do you remember about the feminist philosophies there? Do you remember there being conversations amongst the organizers about it?

M.M. No. I never met anybody. I just went to the loft and did the class – it was an evening class.

D.M. And it wasn’t necessarily content in the classroom, it wasn’t things that the students brought up.

M.M. It wasn’t like that. We were all women, we all wanted to be painters, we all wanted to be visible in the world. Maybe all those ideas came up but it wasn’t really part of the class, it was the class in a way.

D.M. I remember hearing on a panel discussion that was given at CAA, it was actually the Women’s Caucus for Art panel at CAA where NYFAI was the topic. The people on the panel were talking a lot about feminist approaches to the classroom and the breaking down of hierarchies between student and teacher; more collaborative learning structures. Do remember applying that to the classroom, is that something you thought about in the way you taught the classes?

M.M. I would never formulate it in that way but I remembered my experiences as a student and there were some things that I didn’t think were necessary.

D.M. Like what?

M.M. Like extreme criticisms, unsupportive kind of criticism. I’d like to say in my own way I’m pretty nurturing. At the same time I’d like to be honest. I guess that would be my approach.

D.M. Did you do sort of traditional studio-classroom critiques, or how did you handle the critique issue? - - - One of the students I interviewed talked about the fact that the teacher was part of the critique with the other students and that it didn’t feel so much like

the teacher was critiquing and the other students were listening in probably horrified, suspended silence.

M.M. It probably was like that because we were all pretty close in age. And, I don't think that I have a particularly authoritarian personality.

D.M. So naturally there was less sense hierarchy.

M.M. Yeah, but I wasn't looking to accomplish that. I think if they didn't want a teacher, they wouldn't have had a teacher.

D.M. Right. So you talked about adding the visiting artists studios component to your classes. Are there any other particular projects or lesson that stick out in your mind that students seemed responsive to?

M.M. I don't remember exactly what we did. I know I one point, I gave them a poem to see what they could do with literature. I don't remember the assignments. It might be very similar to what I do now in my beginning painting class. I think you should talk to Margie Mellman. . .

D.M. I'll ask Nancy.

M.M. She would get her friends to come in and join the class.

D.M. She was a student.

M.M. Yeah. I think it would be interesting to interview some of those people.

D.M. The last interview I did was with a student and I found it really interesting to hear the other side of it. Did you ever take any classes, were you ever a student?

M.M. No.

D.M. So we talked about Feminism and you work as an artist. Do feel like your own work changed while you were teaching at NYFAI? Was there anything that you then applied to your own studio practice from your experience there?

M.M. I'd have to look at the dates, but my work is always kind of an open bottle. I learn from my students. I remember one student started to be influenced by my work and I was surprised by that because I didn't feel like I was pushing that. That was kind of shocking to see. But it's o.k.

D.M. That probably happens in any studio environment.

M.M. It was flattering too.

D.M. Flattering and disconcerting at the same time, right?

M.M. I felt like that's not what I wanted that student to be doing. But I think she got it out of her system.

D.M. I'm not an artist as we said before but one I know of it is so much of it seems to be a problem solving process where some things just have to be gone through to get to the real thing. Giving an artist time and space to get through the stuff that is not resolved is necessary.

M.M. One of my models has always been Arshile Gorky who learned how to paint by being with Picasso and being with Miro and being with Cezanne and looking like them before he got to look like Gorky.

D.M. You were already friends/colleagues with Miriam Schapiro before being involved, are there any other friendships or important professional relationships that developed out of teaching at NYFAI? Did you feel like it helped galvanize your professional community at all?

M.M. I don't know how to answer that but always like to see Nancy.

D.M. And you met her through NYFAI?

M.M. Pretty much.

D.M. That question is just geared toward trying to document whether there was a higher sense of collegiality. One of the feminist principles that I think was intended was this idea – like we said already – of less hierarchy and more of a chance for friendly networking or relationships that would then help peoples' professional lives into the future. Do feel like that was in the school?

M.M. I don't know. But I know that women artists have been very kind and generous and thoughtful to me, women like Joyce Kozloff, Joan Snyder, and Joan Semmel, and I'm probably leaving out others. I think I remember that Amy Sillman recommended me to a woman architect for the Art on the Beach Project.

D.M. I'm interested to hear people say that, particularly about NYFAI, because in other cases my experience with the established projects of the women's art movement is that there tended to be quite a bit of competition and interpersonal conflict.

M.M. Oh yeah. I have stories.

D.M. . . . that is unfortunately one of the downsides of the feminist movements, is being able to espouse a feminist value of collaboration without being able to embody it effectively . . . which is the human condition . . . we could strive for our values.

M.M. Well there's a story that I heard about Louise Bourgeois going to Washington for a Women's Group to get a show and come back. She went to get a show for the group and came back with a show for herself. And, the group was really very annoyed with her and she didn't really understand why they were annoyed.

D.M. Especially in the art world it's complicated because the art world is structured around the individual artist being recognized for their individual talent so collaborating in a group context can be especially complicated to promote the group. But it's interesting how many people say that they did in general find that more supportive, friendlier, open, non-competitive environment at NYFAI.

M.M. I can't really say I was part of that community other than teaching this one class there that I appreciated doing.

D.M. Did you teach it multiple semesters?

M.M. I think I did it a couple of times and then I passed it on to where the group went to these other studios. I think they even started to go to exhibitions too. We used to meet here. I think I would send them to different studios and then they would bring their work here, and we would do a group critique here. I don't remember the exact structure of it. I might have a record of it somewhere.

D.M. So you stopped teaching at the school well before it closed, is that right?

M.M. Probably, and maybe I had other commitments. I was too busy.

D.M. Do you remember hearing about the school closing? When and why?

M.M. I don't remember anything about it.

D.M. Most people say that, it's good, or it's just interesting. Thinking about it in the context of other projects of the women's art movement, the WCA is still an organization today, A.I.R. Gallery is still open, Soho20 is still open etc. so it is one of the frustrations, or why this project is necessary is that it's a project that closed, a project that ended.

M.M. Well, why did it close?

D.M. Nancy explains that there were financial questions around the I.R.S. auditing their books, maybe two years in a row, but to the point that it was scrutiny that wasn't

survivable. Of course the general funding issues . . . there's a really interesting story about the first pretty large Ford Foundation grant that NYFAI got. I heard a good story about that whole process. They had offered the money, there was a soft confirmation that this grant was coming and then Ford was pulling back on it and the people involved at the time really insisted. Put on suits and went to a meeting and insisted that the grant be given and were successful. But then funding after, that was hard enough, and it was never easier.

M.M. There were lots of stories of different . . . like the Heresies Collective had a chance to buy their office for \$5,000.00 dollars and certain people involved didn't want to do it because they didn't want to become capitalists. So they ended up having to pay high rents. I think it was a 5,000 dollar office on Franklin Street. I mean I saw things like that that just seemed stupid.

D.M. It just made me think of A.I.R.'s history and they did buy their space on Crosby Street in the early 80s but then it became so difficult to manage as a group, the idea of the corporation that owned the space being separate from the gallery and when people left the gallery they wanted their money back out of the corporation and things got really complicated there so they ended up selling that space. And, they're back in the same place you're talking about, paying ridiculous high rents to keep space in Chelsea. Sometimes the philosophy or the infrastructure of these organizations end up being the downfall.

M.M. Working against them. It's sad to see. That was an eye-opener for me to see how you could have certain standards and morals in everything and that could work against you in this culture.

D.M. The closing question is a broad one about how you would describe the legacy of NYFAI. If you see that there is a broader impact on the women's movement or a message in it to a younger generation of women artists, or male artists for that matter.

M.M. One thing I've learned is that there's certain things that are ahead of their time and for one reason or another can't survive. Either the technology isn't there. -- I knew somebody who was working on some kind of museum-gallery project where people could see the shows if you lived out of town. But the technology just wasn't there. Now you could see it on "you-tube". It didn't happen. I think Horace Solomon, Holly's ex-

husband, was involved in that. It just didn't happen because the idea was ahead of what could be done.

D.M. It's like Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, better materials make his designs last longer today, at the time his designs were ahead of the materials that could make them work forever.

M.M. I think that maybe NYFAI was ahead of its time as a kind of school. Now of course all of the schools have feminist studies. I think you can even have a minor or major.

D.M. And all the schools use all kinds of alternative pedagogy in the classroom, all kinds of different ways of building the student body and openness to adult education and people reentering different fields at later points in their life.

M.M. So this in a way was ahead of its time, that's why it couldn't survive. That's the current good news/ bad news.

D.M. Do you feel comfortable talking about the question of feminism today? Based on all of your work in the women's movement over the years, what do you feel is the current challenge for feminist questions in the art world? That's sort of getting at the message to the people coming out of grad-school now - young women starting their careers.

M.M. I still think that the American art world has the most visible women artists who have real careers of any place else in the world. There must be something right about what's going on with the women's movement.

D.M. Something productive about it.

M.M. There's still a glass ceiling but there's still people like me who can make a living from selling their work. I show regularly and all that kind of thing, and I'm collected. I think that's something you don't see that much in Europe, although, now more than ever, but not like in New York. I also know that there are certain very successful women artists in the U.S. that for a lot of reasons don't translate very well in Europe – because they're behind. As far as the younger generation . . . I have a lot of younger friends because I taught at Skowhegan and I teach at RISD, and SVA and Cooper and I'm so busy teaching them about painting that I don't really know what their ideas are about feminism. I know one student this semester asked me if I knew any women artists that had children that she could interview because she's doing something for her sociology class. I had a hard time coming up with people, first who would talk to her and then also, there just wasn't a lot

of names. I found a couple people. So, I guess that's in the air. When I was a student, we didn't write or think about things like that in school.

D.M. For some reason that just reminded me – one of the first interviews I did was with Joan Arbeiter, and she talked about that issue at NYFAI. She was one of the few students who had children and was coming in to the city from New Jersey from a suburban, traditional life raising children, and there was at times that very complicated question of . . . can you be a serious artist with children? She remembered a workshop in Nancy's "Visual Diaries" class where the question came up . . . which is more important to you, your art or your family life? And really pushing that question of having to think through those issues. That's interesting that it was a very complicated, painful issue for people a generation ago but today probably still a question. I know for sure from my peer group, how much people are balancing this work and life question all the time.

M.M. I think it's always about money . . . and energy.

D.M. The original question was the general issue about applications of feminism today. Like the MoMA panel that we talked about, the MoMA symposium was called "Feminist Futures" and this idea that right now is a time where all of these important organizations of the women's art movement are hitting landmark anniversaries . . . 35 years for everything that was founded in '72, and NYFAI is approaching an anniversary of when it was founded, the National Museum for Women in the Arts is having their 20th anniversary next year. There's all these sort of landmark anniversaries and the question of what is the status of women in the art world? Can you make a general statement about the current status, and then what are the future applications?

M.M. When they call it "futures" is that sort of like a stock, or a wine? Are they using that word as a pun?

D.M. We'll find out when the reports of the symposium come out.

M.M. From what I can tell, I've never been to the museum in Washington, but it doesn't seem like a particularly – maybe it's more – what you would think is a feminist organization.

D.M. I think you're right, I think historically because like so many museums, that museum was founded on one private collection that became the core of the museum collection and that family was the original funder for the museum. That its start focused

on their interest and their focus which was much more art historical and the feminist kernel in it was the same thing that you discovered when you were taking art history classes – where are the women artists in art history? But their collection is built around trying to find the missing people from art history. I think the current staff -- Susan Fisher Sterling is the curator there – they are very interested in trying to grow the collection in the direction of contemporary art and to do more exhibitions that address that question as well. It is meant to be an overview, survey sort of museum of all women artists and also look at current feminist questions.

M.M. I don't think anybody there has ever looked at my work. I don't know what is in that question exactly. But the next time I go to Washington I'm going to go there. It would be interesting to see.

D.M. So that was just the general question. Since all of these feminist philosophies, concerns, groups organizing around this unstoppable need to address the question of women in the art world, the issues are resurfacing now. It's just that question of what you see as the issues from now forward if feminism still has a relevance. You already answered the question by saying that it's not something that really comes up in the classroom very often . . .

M.M. It comes up but not . . .

D.M. Your students are busy learning about art and it's not the driving question that it was 20 or 30 years ago.

M.M. I had an interesting thing this semester at RISD. I always have the junior students give a report on an artist that either they choose and I approve of or I suggest because I think that it would be relevant to what they're interested in. One male student had this idea about some photographer, I don't know, he didn't do it. And then he came in with two catalogues, one of Joan Snyder and one of Pat Steer. And he did a talk about them. Out of twelve students, maybe 2 reported on women artists, and he was one of them. That was interesting.

D.M. Yeah, that's a very interesting story because I think it gets at what I feel is the issue for right now is that every bad news comes with good news encapsulated in it and every good news comes with some bad news. That's great how interesting that a man is

responsive to women's work and not necessarily over thinking – it is just the working he responded to and wanted to talk about.

M.M. I don't know if he was trying to please me, but I don't care.

D.M. And, also men can be feminists and if you want to use the 2nd wave, 3rd wave terminology, that's a very 3rd wave approach to the question. We need to broaden all of this out to think about gender instead of women's issues and think about trans-gender questions because that whole thing is percolating under the surface and race issues and class issues and international global capitalism questions. – like all this stuff is the same issue, the same social justice issue that needs to be addressed generally. I think that's interesting to hear that story. But then the bad news in it is that only two of your students were interested in women artists. So that's what is so difficult I think.

M.M. But that also has to do with what they're exposed to at the RISD Museum since they live up there.

D.M. Right. The bad news in it is that we still have this situation where a much smaller percentage of any major museums/ permanent collection is women artists. Generally speaking women still make much less in a secondary market. No artist makes any money in a secondary market. I mean to say, their work is sold for less in the secondary market. All of that is bad news. But the good news is that it is integrated more naturally into peoples' lives at the ground level.

M.M. One thing that I've been interested in in the last couple of years – but I've had no change to research or anything—is what I call the lost women of Pop Art. I think people are starting to do research on that. Maybe two years ago when I was in London there was a show of Pop Art and they were bringing out some women artists who had sort of been lost. I can't remember the names right now.

D.M. Was it a point that was made in the text?

M.M. No, not that I could tell.

D.M. They didn't make an issue out of it?

M.M. No. It's also in Lucy Lippard's book, I think that there is maybe one woman in Pop Art. There'll probably be a book about it.

D.M. We covered all the questions that I had, so if there is anything else general about NYFAI . . . ?

M.M. Marge Mellman.

D.M. Mellman.

M.M. I have to go tell Marge.

D.M. There's our closer.

M.M. Do you want her information?