

NYFAI

Interview: Penelope Franklin interviewed by Katie Cercone

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K.C. This is Katie Cercone interviewing Penelope Franklin, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009. When did you first become involved with NYFAI and how did you hear about it? From friends, the newspaper, or other source?

P.F. It was in the 70s but I don't remember the exact year – probably mid to late 70s. I think I heard about it from the beginning because I was a woodcarving student of Nancy's. I was in her studio every Thursday afternoon. I'm quite sure that whenever she first started talking about it, I heard about it but I don't have any specific memory of that.

K.C. How long were you active at the institute?

P.F. I don't have any specific memory. I talked to Nancy about it and at some point she needed volunteers to do really simple things like addressing envelopes, licking envelopes and stuff like that. I volunteered and then I got – over a period of time – more involved. My involvement probably ended in the mid 80s. As long as I was involved, I collected things like exhibition programs and listings and meetings. I might be able to pin it down a little more than that. I also have all my journals from those years in a storage unit but it would take a while to go through them to get the specifics.

K.C. If at the end you want to go over and edit you can do that. It will be a written as well as an oral archive. How would you describe your relationship to art at the time? You said you were doing some sculpture. Did you consider yourself an artist, a teacher, a student, or just interested in the arts?

P.F. I considered myself an artist. I had graduated from Columbia University in 1973 with a double major; one of my majors was art. It was a combination of art history and studio art so I had pretty extensive courses in drawing, painting and sculpture. Then I went to NYU and the Art Student's League and then I went to Nancy. So I had studied

drawing, painting, and sculpture over a period of years; art was a big interest but it wasn't the main focus in my life because I was working as a writer and editor at that time. I was doing both of those things.

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

P.F. I never had any exhibitions, I never exhibited anywhere but NYFAI . . . or published. I wrote for my coursework at Columbia because I took art history. I wrote a lot about art in that regard, from an art historical perspective. As far as my experience, I didn't directly feel that I had been discriminated against although I had no doubt that there were all kinds of discrimination. In the classes I took, there were always a lot of women students. I never sensed that the women were treated any differently from men. It may have been that I just didn't pick it up, but I felt that I personally was not treated very well because of my personality, because I was sort of spaced out and vague. I just always had issues with that; in the different courses I took, I wasn't taken that seriously. But I didn't connect that it was because I was a woman because I saw other women who were taken seriously. I realize that was kind of a different experience from what a lot of women have.

K.C. When you graduated did you imagine that you would be showing your artwork? Was that something that you wanted to pursue?

P.F. I felt that I would always be doing art but I didn't think of it in terms of exhibiting because I knew a lot of artists and I knew what incredible hassles they went through with the whole gallery scene and how difficult it was. I guess I was a little bit shy and not a person who sought to exhibit in any way. I never thought I would have shows or anything, I just thought doing it was what was important to me. And knowing artists, being around artists was really important to me. The learning the craft of it . . . I was always concerned about . . . what was my subject matter, what was I really trying to say?

I felt that was a struggle to really know that. That was really what I was focused on more than ever thinking about exhibiting.

K.C. Was the writing you were doing connected to the art at all?

P.F. No.

K.C. How were you involved at NYFAI? A student, teacher, administrator?

P.F. I was involved at a lot of different levels. When I started it was just volunteering, doing very ordinary tasks like putting up posters and helping with mailings and stuff like that. I can't remember the order but at some point I became a teacher and at some point I was on the board of directors. The teaching went on for a couple of years. I got into that because in my writing, and my editing, I was a specialist in women's journals. That was really the focus of my life, finding journals of women that hadn't ever been read before and publishing them. I don't remember the year but I'm sure there's a record of this . . . there was a woman who was going to teach a journal writing workshop at NYFAI and she dropped out. I think she maybe taught one class and then she dropped out and they needed someone to take it over. I think Nancy or somebody asked me if I would take it over. I did so with great trepidation because I really felt writing a journal was not something that could be taught.

K.C. Like a personal journal?

P.F. Yes. I felt, how could you teach someone to do that? But, I did it and it actually was a really interesting class. I think I taught that class for 2 to 3 years and then at some point either before or after that I was on the board of directors. I was on the board of directors for quite a few years.

K.C. What classes did you take?

P.F. I only remember taking the Visual Diaries class. I might have taken something else but I just don't remember. I remember there were a lot of workshops, weekend workshops and stuff like that that I took. There was a drama thing once, it was improvisation or something, and I remember taking a collage workshop with Elaine DeKooning and there was something with Nancy where we did masks. I don't know if that was the Visual Diaries class or something else . . . where we would make masks out of our bodies, our faces. I still have the mask that I made. I remember going to a lot of workshops rather than long, entire semester classes.

K.C. Coming from your education at Columbia, how did you compare the two, or could you compare the classes you took at NYFAI and the more formal, academic classes? Did you like one better?

P.F. I wouldn't say I liked one better, I would say that it always depends on the teacher. . . .and NYFAI was very freeform. Sometimes, I felt, too freeform. I had some arguments with some of the ideas that were, I felt, unfocused. I tried, when I taught, to have a structure that was very flexible -- but I felt you needed to start out with a structure, that you needed the students to know what you were going to do from day to day and what their readings were and all that, and if you felt like throwing it to the winds, you could do it. I'm not a rigid person, but I did have issues with some of the lack of structure, which is a little bit vague in my mind. I remember that feeling. At Columbia and NYU and the Art Students' League, I had some wonderful teachers and some really bad teachers. I know the NYFAI philosophy was different and I know that it was really important for a lot of women who felt they hadn't been taken seriously . . . and I totally respected that. That wasn't my particular issue. I was interested in encouraging women to do whatever they wanted to do and if this was something they needed, I was behind it. Whatever encourages them; but I felt that there should be a standard. In other words, I didn't agree with the idea of some of the people that everyone is talented, everyone can make art, and whatever you do is OK. I felt that you have to have some standards; people should learn the craft . . . there are skills, they need to be developed. You can't just come in and rip up a roll of paper towels and call it art.

I always had a lot of figure studies and I really felt you needed to understand the figure. You needed to seriously focus on craft. You can't just say that whatever somebody does is wonderful. It is always a step toward something else. You can appreciate where the student is. I never liked teachers who were dismissive of students' efforts, but I liked teachers who could understand where the student was going and even if they just made a little scribble, they'd say, "Well that's an interesting line; try to develop that line or try to develop that feeling" rather than say, "Oh that's just a scribble." But on the other hand, you don't want to take a scribble and say, "This is the most wonderful thing in the world. This scribble is great art." It isn't, and that's not doing the student any good either.

I did have some disagreements. There were a lot of different theories at NYFAI and it was hard to get people to agree. There was this whole thing about making decisions by consensus that I felt really got in the way, because we just spent a lot of time trying to come to agreements and a lot of times it just wasn't resolved.

K.C. Do you remember any of the open houses or panels, or the salon exhibitions at Ceres Gallery?

P.F. I remember a couple of them. I exhibited a few pieces and I remember the quality in general was very uneven, which I didn't think was necessarily a good thing. I remember upstairs it wasn't the greatest space in the world; there were some issues about the space. The open houses were always great and as time went on – as we had a little bit of history – we had students coming that we hadn't seen for a while, lots of people coming. . . . It was like a reunion and that was always really great, to have your old students and your new students coming together. It was always really good energy at the open houses and I always felt I met unusual people . . . that was always encouraging. It made me feel good to be there. They had excellent food too; I remember Mexican food in particular.

When we were in the old building, the Port Authority building, that was a really weird space. I didn't like that building at all. I lived in Soho and I used to walk there but I

remember walking home at night, it would be kind of scary and very often, if we had some event late at night, we'd be the only people in the building. The floors were highly polished linoleum, all slippery, and the bathrooms were a really long way from the classrooms. It was too weird. When I was teaching my journal class, there were UPS truck bays underneath and there would be trucks starting up and they would be making the loudest noise. If you opened the windows, fumes from the trucks would come up. But with the windows closed, it could be hot and stuffy. We always had problems with the noise and with the fumes. I vaguely remember problems with radiators too. It was not a hospitable environment at all.

K.C. That was in the current Port Authority?

P.F. You don't know about that building? Nobody has told you about that?

K.C. I think I heard Port Authority.

P.F. Oh, that is really important.

The building's still there. If you walk west on Spring Street, almost to the river, there's an enormous building, which I think is still owned by the Port Authority. It's an art deco building. It has offices above, and below it are garages where big trucks park. At least some of the space was rented out to UPS and they had these enormous UPS delivery trucks. We either were given, or rented at a low rate – Nancy could tell you – office space. We had three or four big, big rooms. Big empty rooms, and there were attempts to divide them up in different ways with screens and things like that, but basically they were always these big, empty, echoing rooms and a lot of – well, at night it was pretty empty and there was just something icky about it. There were actually people living in that building. I don't know if anybody has told you about that. That was completely illegal and against the rules but when there was a full-time program, which they had for maybe a couple of years – again Nancy can tell you – there was no place for these young women to live, because they had come from all over the country and maybe other parts of the

world . . . there was no affordable place for them to live in the city. For some period of time, they were actually living in this building, which was against our agreement with the Port Authority, and probably against all kinds of rules and where I didn't feel even safe. They didn't have a proper bathroom, they had no cooking facility . . . I was very disturbed about that. It was just given to them because they got here and they didn't have anywhere to go. It was crazy.

The whole time I was teaching, NYFAI was in that building. It must have been at least two or three years. Then Darla bought the building on Franklin Street and we moved over there. At that point I was already sort of getting less involved.

K.C. Can you describe your experiences at NYFAI in terms of community and friendships in the studio and classroom?

P.F. There was definitely a community and I definitely made friends there. Some of them I kept in touch with for years. Like any other community, though, there were a lot of personalities, a lot of conflict. There were some people who hated each other. There were some really tremendously angry confrontations, and people who had been really good friends breaking up over it. I think the conflict is one thing that made me ease myself gradually out of it. I don't like conflict, and I thought that the conflicts were not really being resolved. Again, I'm a little bit vague on this but . . . I remember a stream of people in and out, attempts at diversity on the board. . . people were brought in . . . women of color from different backgrounds . . . I remember there was a woman who was a banker, she wasn't in any way an artist . . . people who were more or less conventional, people who knew how to get grants . . . people who were there maybe for their own purposes, not necessarily the right reasons. It was like too many worlds colliding, and nobody who was a good mediator. We needed a mediator, we needed somebody who knew how to get people together, like an Obama character, a female Obama who could say, "Look, we're from these different backgrounds but here's what we have in common. Let's try to work on this issue; let's try to set these issues aside."

I remember the meetings became more and more painful and difficult. I felt very frustrated. I didn't really have any power. I suppose I said what I felt, but I didn't have any power to intervene in these conflicts, and I felt some of the people in power were making things worse. Some people really liked their power and were not willing to give anything up. Some people were not good at compromising. There were certainly financial issues, but I think the issue of people not being able to work together was also a big problem.

K.C. Can you describe the visual work and written work you produced at NYFAI and if you were an instructor, how did the experience influence your work?

P.F. I had some visual diaries, one of which I gave to Nancy recently. We were drawing as we were talking. I remember doing sketches of the different women in class. I did a lot of collages. I can't remember how I did that, whether I brought the little bits of paper in and did them on the spot, or maybe I did it later. I used to draw everyday objects that were on the table, like keys or pins, as we were talking. Then we did masks in one class, plaster masks of our faces. I envisioned this mask, it was called, "Portrait of the Artist as a Force of Nature," and it was just my face but I treated the plaster to make it look as though it had been buried in the earth for centuries. I put shells on it and little bits of grass. Then I put it on a pedestal with a live plant in front of it sort of curling around my head, so it looked like I was emerging from the earth. I still have that. I remember doing some collages in Elaine DeKooning's workshop and not getting good feedback from her. She wasn't really a generous teacher; she was very critical, she was not helpful.

As for my teaching, I was teaching journal writing. It might have been the only class that was teaching written art as opposed to visual art. That was really wonderful because I met all these women. It was very intimate. It was almost like it was therapy, not that I made it that, but it became that because what I wanted to do was make them feel safe. There were teenagers and there were women in their 80s and everything in between. The first class we would discuss our history of journals and whether we were keeping journals currently. Right away you saw that these women were very ambivalent about their journals. I just

wanted to let them know that whatever they were doing was OK. They would say, “What I’m doing is not very creative,” or “It’s too detailed or not detailed enough,” “Too emotional or too abstract,” “I don’t write often enough” or “I write too often” or “I write the wrong things” . . . and I just wanted to let them know that wherever they were coming from, it was OK. I also told them that they could, but didn’t have to read their journals to the class. We had a book that discussed different uses that journals could be put to, different ways of writing them, and we’d read a chapter every week. At first I read from my journal. Then it seemed like almost everybody was reading from their journals and some of the stuff was really heart-wrenching. There was every kind of bad life story: incest, alcoholism, people being abandoned, people losing their loves, people being injured . . . betrayal, the violation of diaries being read by lovers – one woman had burned her diary because of that and not written again for years . . . horrible stuff, but good stuff too. There was a woman there who was psychotic and taking anti-psychotic medication, and had several breakdowns. She described exactly what it felt like. It was just all out there, so I learned a lot from those students about life. And I learned how to teach journal writing, which I didn’t think could be done, but just by doing it. It was a pretty profound experience.

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

P.F. I think just meeting all these different interesting women. Being exposed to a lot of different perspectives.

K.C. How would you describe your relationship to feminism at the time: feminist, radical feminist, lesbian feminist, interested in feminism?

P.F. I was a feminist. I had always been a feminist. My grandmother was a feminist, my great-grandmother was a feminist. It wasn’t anything I thought a lot about. I wasn’t radical. I remember when the feminist movement got started in the 70s in New York, there was a tremendous amount of anger and a lot of women really angry at men, saying that men were the cause of the problem. I had my share of anger at men individually, like

my father, but I didn't see men as the problem. I saw society as the problem. Individually we were responding to our society, and there are some people that are not nice people, but you weren't going to get anywhere by saying that men were the problem. We had to work on society as a whole. That was my perspective.

K.C. Were you involved in any activism, feminist or for women in the arts?

P.F. Not particularly. I used to go to peace demonstrations. It was more like the kind of activism that had grown up around the Vietnam War. I would not really say I was an activist. I used to go to marches and demonstrations and stuff like that but I was never really an organization person. Before I joined NYFAI, I don't think I had ever been a member of an organization.

K.C. Did NYFAI contribute to your development as a feminist?

P.F. It certainly gave me a grab bag of ideas to choose from, because there were certainly a lot of ideas. It was in the air. It's hard to pick out what specifically influenced me. I was professionally very involved in women's history. That was my main contribution because I was one of the pioneers in terms of publishing women's history. I don't know if NYFAI really contributed to that. I think at NYFAI I was exposed to some ideas that I liked and others that I didn't like. It was a lot of exposure but I wouldn't say that I necessarily picked up a philosophy there. I liked the idea of women's experiences being explored in art. I don't know if that was a new idea for me. The only consciousness-raising groups I was ever in were at NYFAI. The visual diaries were like consciousness-raising groups. Later I was in other women's groups for different reasons, but that was the only consciousness-raising. In terms of that experience and hearing other women talk about their experiences, comparing experiences and realizing that your experiences are similar.... I guess that might have been the most influential experience for me. It was very intense, because I was exposed to a lot of other women in a short period of time, whereas in my normal life, I wouldn't have had so many intense and personal conversations with so many women. In terms of experiencing what other women's lives

had been like, and were like, that was very influential, rather than any particular philosophy that I got there.

K.C. You may have just answered this question, but how did your experience at NYFAI further your development as an artist, writer, critic or historian?

P.F. It was being exposed to the real lives of real women from many different backgrounds and many different ages. It sort of accelerated the process for me of understanding the range of women's experience, which was something I was doing professionally and personally. In what I was writing about and what I was editing, the question was: how are women's lives the same, how have they been the same over time, what has *not* changed? We all know what's changed, we have dishwashers now, we can vote now, we have more job opportunities...we know all that -- but in what ways have women remained similar over time? I certainly learned a lot more from just talking to actual women than I would have if I hadn't been at NYFAI. I was forming theories based on the women I was speaking with and the books I was reading, the original documents. I was looking at hundreds and hundreds of original manuscripts, actual diaries that women had kept in the past. . . all that stuff sort of went into the hopper. I was coming up with some ideas based on all that. NYFAI was definitely influential in that respect. Again, I think it was the exposure, the people, rather than having somebody say to me, "OK, this is the philosophy of feminism that we believe in." If that happened, I don't remember it; it didn't have any impact on me at all.

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

P.F. I'm not in an organization. I don't go to any organizations. I'm feminist as part of the way I see the world. I have a niece now who's just in her first year of college and she's very involved in feminism. She's a women's studies major and it's really interesting because she wants to know about what my experience was in the 70s. It's really great to see those ideas going on into another generation.

I read a lot about women. I read more books by and about women than anything else, but as far as organizations go, no. I've always been in women's groups, women's writers groups, but not specifically feminist groups. I hardly know any women who aren't feminist. It sort of became mainstream among fairly well educated women. It's not like it's a big deal. Maybe it is a big deal now for younger women, I don't know. As far as being an artist, I haven't done a lot of drawing or anything for a while and it's something that I am trying to get back to. I'm always interested in art. I always go to museums, and try to always experience art in as many ways as I can.

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

P.F. I don't know what the legacy is. I guess that's what this project is about. I don't know how one would define a legacy. I think it's great that there's interest now and that things are being documented. This is definitely important. I wish it could have been more successful.

K.C. In terms of lasting longer, or having the funding?

P.F. If it had had more funding . . . But I wish that the interpersonal aspect of it had been better. I wish that people had worked together better. I was off the board at a certain point when it was still functioning, so I wasn't in on the end of it. I don't know why NYFAI ended, but if I had felt more supported in my perspective.... I wish that when the school itself closed, that there would have been something that still went on. I wasn't there when it folded so I don't know what efforts were made to maintain something of what had been accomplished. Maybe now something will come of it because of all of this documentation. Most of us are still alive so it can be documented. That's really valuable.

K.C. Nancy's working on a visual diaries exhibition.

P.F. Yes. She told me about that.

K.C. She has your diary. That's the last question. Is there anything you would like to add that didn't come up?

P.F. No, I wish I had more specific memories but . . .

K.C. I think you had some good stuff that people didn't really speak about.

P.F. I hate to speak about the conflicts, and to speak specifically about what the conflicts were, but there were definitely a lot of conflicts. It would be whitewashing to say that everybody got along really well. I don't know how many people mentioned it but maybe if some people were specifically asked, then maybe some people would say specifically, "I didn't agree with so and so," or "...such and such." I just remember that the board meetings got more and more painful. For me, I was becoming more and more frustrated because I was feeling like . . . people weren't agreeing on basic things like diversity. What is diversity, and what do we want to do about it? What do we want to do about outreach? How do we make decisions? What is consensus? Who has power? Are our decisions democratically arrived at or is it some person who is powerful who can make decisions?

K.C. It has come up.

P.F. I don't know to what degree people are willing to even say what the conflicts were. I know there were some close friendships that were damaged. It was a shame. That was a hard lesson.

K.C. Especially thinking about what a feminist model is and what you don't want it to be. What you expect from it and then seeing it fail.

P.F. Yes. There's this whole idea of how you don't want to be paternalistic, but I thought that was all sort of a red herring. Paternalism vs. feminism. In general, I feel that people have simplistic answers and that's one reason I could never join a cult because people are sure they have the answers, they know what everybody else should be doing. Everything will be perfect if people do just what they want. If people don't agree with them they're "paternalistic" or "capitalistic," or whatever the negative catch phrase is at that moment, "anti-feminist." I don't think that's helpful. My NYFAI experience was in the end quite painful, but then I was going through a lot of stuff. I was going through a divorce; altogether it was more than I could deal with.

K.C. Thank you.