

NYFAI

Interview: Quimetta Perle interviewed by Katie Cercone

Date: Thursday, January 8th, 2009

K.C. This is Katie Cercone interviewing Quimetta Perle on January 8th, 2009. When did you first become involved with NYFAI and how did you hear about it? From a friend, the newspaper . . .

Q.P. I became involved with NYFAI in 1983. I knew about it before that but I was living in Minneapolis and I saw an ad or probably got something in the mail about this project that was a collaborative project among women artists. It provided the opportunity to go to New York and to spend some time working with other women artists. The project had mentors as well which was appealing to me because one of those was May Stevens who is an artist I greatly admired . . . as well as Faith Ringgold and others - A combination of being able to spend some time in New York, work with other women artists and kind of mix with these other more well-known artists was very appealing to me.

K.C. How long were you active at NYFAI? Did you move to New York?

Q.P. Well it ended up that I did move to New York later. That project was 6 to 8 weeks from sometime in August to November. It was very intense. I came to New York for that period and while I was here decided to move here . . . but that didn't happen until the next June.

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

Q.P. I was an artist. I had been an active feminist artist since the middle 70s when I was in college at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. I had been working for quite some time on my own and was a part of the WARM Gallery as well, which was a woman's cooperative in Minneapolis. WARM standing for Women's Art Registry of Minnesota.

K.C. Can you talk a little about your experience as a woman artist prior to NYFAI? For example experience in the studio and classroom, exhibitions, publications, writing, etc.

Q.P. How much time do you have?

K.C. As long as you can talk. [laughter]

Q.P. During my second year in college, which would have been around 1974, a women's group was founded at the college – or discussion group or something – and we decided to organize a group called Community of Women Artists. The core of it was primarily the women who lived in my apartment and the one across the hall. We were very active but there were others as well. We put on exhibitions. I don't know if we had consciousness-raising but it was a support group. We did exhibit our work. That was kind of the entry. At some point – I think the next year – Judy Chicago was a visiting artist at The College of Art and Design and really shook everything up. That was pretty exciting for all of us women students. Simultaneous with that, there was a program at Saint Catherine's College in Saint Paul that was a pilot program that January in which Judy Chicago was a featured artist and Arlene Raven was a part of it . . . there was just this whole parade of women artists and historians who came through and spoke. There was a studio program as well at the time that I was not involved in but that really galvanized me to want to learn more about feminist art education. I guess around that time everybody became more active or kind of militant and we really fought to be included in the following year's exchange program at Saint Catherine's. There was a group of us that would drive over every day and go to this program. We derived about half our credits from that. Again, there were all of these incredible women artists who were visiting artists from Judy Chicago to Sheila de Bretteville who was part of the Woman's Building as well; Marisol came . . . I think kind of reluctantly really; Louise Nevelson; Betsy Damon . . . just a whole slew of women artists. The summer prior I had gone to the Woman's Building for their summer program. So that's kind of what happened during my school years. The final event of my time in undergrad was at The Minneapolis Art Institute. There was a new program that they had where artists could choose who they wanted to show with and they created these exhibits through a database at the museum. The first exhibit was a show of women artists and somehow I was in that show and it was just so thrilling to still be a student and exhibiting at the museum with other women. Also during the time that I was in college, I joined the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota before there was a gallery. It was kind of a support group. A consciousness-raising group developed and eventually the gallery came about. I did join the gallery but not until 1981. A number of us who had been in the Women's Art Core program at Saint Catherine's college wanted

to continue to work together and exhibit together. We created this organization called MUSE. We were more about showing in non-traditional spaces than a gallery. We had a show in a Laundromat that was kind of an event and we hung our work . . . and other places like that. Eventually that disbanded. Meanwhile, I founded a small gallery in the Woman's Coffee House in Minneapolis so I got to curate small exhibits that were up on weekends at the coffeehouse. I was trying to show my work in various places and finally I thought, this is ridiculous, I should see if I could become a member of The WARM Gallery and have the support of other women artists, be able to show my work, be part of that community . . . fortunately I was accepted into the gallery and had in my time there, two solo shows and numerous group shows. It was a really wonderful experience in this huge space – this huge two-story space. In retrospect, it was amazing to be able to just fill with art . . . to do whatever we wanted. So that was up until the early 80s . . . eventually this pamphlet came along in the mail about NYFAI and I got involved there. I don't think I ever took a class or workshop with NYFAI but I continued to stay involved. They had annual shows and one time I curated their show with Nancy. An informal network sprung up amongst the artists who had been in this collaborative project . . . some of my lifelong friends are from that program.

K.C. Were you involved with NYFAI in any other capacity than a student? In terms of organization or administration, and were you involved in the open houses, panels and salon exhibitions at Ceres Gallery?

Q.P. That would be the other thing that I was really involved in besides being a student . . . were the large exhibitions at Ceres which I curated one of those and was in numerous shows.

K.C. We talked a little bit about this but can you describe your experiences at NYFAI in terms of the sense of community and the friendships in the studio and the classrooms?

Q.P. A number of women that I've spoken to that took workshops really described the community of NYFAI. I think what I experienced – because I came for a particular program and it was very intense – I think there were 27 women all together and we were in 4 or 5 groups and I worked with 4 or 5 other women and it seems like we lived together for 6 weeks. We didn't, but we were really in each other's pockets and on each other's nerves – working really hard. It was sort of beyond community at that point – it

was really just very intense. But from that came these very profound friendships. Three of the people that I am closest to at all in my life came from there.

K.C. And you all live in New York?

Q.P. Yes. Sarah Mecklem lives upstate and Jackie Lipton lives in Manhattan and Janet Goldner – who I think was also interviewed by Dena – also lives in Manhattan. And there are other people that I still know from there. And then of course I got to know Nancy and Darla and a number of the other regulars of NYFA and also a number of the women who founded Ceres Gallery -who may or may not have been in that project. It did create community that wasn't just at NYFAI – that really grew out of NYFAI.

K.C. Can you describe some of the visual and/or written work that you produced at NYFAI?

Q.P. Yes. My group – Jackie Lipton, Jackie Bernstein, me, Joan from Philadelphia (I can't remember her last name) and Sarah Grier Kleeman, now Mecklem – created we were all really painters of various ilk . . . 2 dimensional artists . . . but we created this sculptural installation. There were these three sort of red pepper-like, cave-like forms that kind of enclosed the space that were the surface was painted . . . a very elaborate surface I think we used oil and wax and scratched through it. It was on a chicken wire frame and I don't recall what the next surface was whether it was paper mache' or fabric or plaster but the main thing was that over the top of that was this paint, this very passionate - it was very red – so there was a lot about heart, blood, vagina, cave, all of those things. That was really what we made together. It is so interesting because we weren't really sculptors. At that time I did a lot of journal writing which I should try to find – kind of documenting the process for myself . . . feelings . . . because it was very emotional. I needed to write it down. The part of that we had at the exhibit – it was the thing that gave a bit of a timeline of our collaboration. A number of the other groups made many smaller things but we made this one big thing. It was shown at the gallery at the end and a few months later I had a solo show back in Minnesota and we loaded it up in a Uhaul trailer. I wanted to drive it out there. It was nice to be able to share that with my other community.

K.C. What was the most important aspect of your experience there?

Q.P. I think it was really being able to work together with other artists and to – some of it was the artistic creation and some of it was the personal relationships and struggle and those were very intertwined. We were all very concerned that whatever it was that we made together be an artistic product or artistic creation that we would all feel proud of and consider to be in some way a part of our work as opposed to in some way an experiment. It was important for us that the work be good. I think we achieved that. That was really important. The other thing was we really struggled together personally. It was not easy. There were different personalities in our group . . . very strong feelings . . . arguments over when we should do this, how we should do this, who had to sacrifice what in order to really pull the project off. One of the artists had kids and had other commitments; I was free as a bird so it didn't matter, but others had jobs and there were personality clashes. In some ways it was kind of exhausting but I think in the end, it was really important for us to go through that and come through that and some of us are best friends and some are not. The personal relationships and then the quality of the work was most important.

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, please describe.

Q.P. Yes. I really kind of lived and breathed feminist art for a very long time and I still consider myself a feminist artist. There was that period when nobody really knew what that was anymore – it was thought to be in the past but now it seems to be present again. Feminism was very important to me and I expressed that through my work as an artist. My whole life was that except for my job. I think I worked a lot.

K.C. What was your job at the time?

Q.P. Actually, I was able to go to NYFAI because I had been laid off but I had been working at The Minneapolis Star and Tribune first in the classified ads and then as a designer in the display advertising. I was a lesbian feminist. Relationships with women, creating art together, trying to create new forms; not only new art forms and excavating old art forms that women had, but creating new sort of social forms as women, which I perceived this to be . . . Those were all very important to me.

K.C. How did – if it did – NYFAI contribute to your development as a feminist and/or art activist?

Q.P. I feel that I had already kind of developed as a feminist and as an art activist and that was already present a kind of full-blown but it allowed me to explore this other area of collaboration, meet new women artists, do something new. It was like the consciousness and the activity was already there but this was a new avenue to pursue, a new venue. Before then I had collaborated with other women artists and since then I have as well, but this was very significant.

K.C. How do your experiences at NYFAI influence your art and life today? What is your current involvement in the arts, do you consider yourself a professional artist and what is your current involvement with feminism?

Q.P. I haven't said much about NYFAI today because it seems like NYFAI has been dormant but water has been sprinkled on NYFAI and it has sort of started to grow again. In the past year I have really appreciated having a connection again to NYFAI, although – and I went to some discussions at A.I.R. and various things – I think I began to feel like they were more for . . . I don't want to say younger women because I don't mean the age but women perhaps newer to feminism or feminist art and maybe didn't feel like there was much for me. There is still this network so I would say that that's an influence. In general all the experiences, feminist art which would include NYFAI – certainly inform everything. My work is still about women's experience and feelings – not specific to NYFAI. I'm certainly still an artist, still a feminist artist, so what role does that have today? I'm not still a lesbian. I have a son with my husband now for 20 years, so things are different but the powerful connection with women remains. I am still very much doing my work, exhibiting my work. I think like a lot of artists I wish I could exhibit more, sell more, etc. I've watched the resurgence of interest in feminist art interesting, exciting, sometimes I feel a little jaded . . . I'm wanting to see something new rather than a rehashing of the past. At the same time, not forgetting the past, talking about the 70s and the 80s. I think it's really important. For there to be any further feminist art movement there would have to be new blood, new directions and of course artists are always creating new stuff so I feel that that will come and whatever it's called, it doesn't matter as long as the collective spirit is there.

K.C. This question is sort of similar so if there's anything along those lines that you wanted to add . . . How would you describe the relationship between art and feminism in your life and work? Your last kind of summed it up pretty well.

Q.P. Yes. It's sort of been all about that. Although, there was art in my life before there was feminism. I never denied that. There were a lot of influences on my work that were not women from going to the galleries and looking at Matisse or Picasso or Toulouse Lautrec or whoever it was as well as being mentored by a male artist when I was growing up to some degree. I didn't recognize that that was what it was at the time but now I see that it was. I see the world through my experience as a woman and a woman artist and feminism coming along put words to that. It enabled me to have a way to contextualize and describe what I was trying to do rather than changing what I was doing, although I certainly did change my work a lot because I suddenly felt free to do all sorts of things I had not felt free to do before . . . to do very personal work. I think I'm still mining that vein because that's a constant in my life, my experience as a woman in the world. I'll keep working from that.

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

Q.P. I think the important thing is for women to keep talking to each other and having genuine and honest conversations about who they are and what they want to do in the world. Really that's what it's about. I'm glad that there are things like this oral history and a recording of the feminist movement because I think it was important and should be known but rather than just studying the past I'd like young women to work together to create new things. Thank you, it's really nice to have an opportunity to talk about all of this.

K.C. Yes. I hope it's helpful. Some people have brought up a lot of connections . . .

Q.P. There's been enough time. We thought we were going to change the world and we changed some things and some of the changes came back and bit us, backfired, but a lot of time passed and we're sort of another generation later looking at it again and valuing it and reevaluating what it was. We'll see.

K.C. Irregardless . . . you've grown as an artist and become more and more successful but just as a woman do you feel that it's much easier for you?

Q.P. Things have gotten easier . . . yes, there are fewer assumptions about what women can and can't do. It's not assumed that women can't do things. Women are more in charge and certainly in a lot of the art world there are tons of women doing things. Well, I don't know if that makes it easier for all of us to make our way as artists but I think it is better. There are other things . . . you can probably hear my son back there with his friends . . . he grew up in a different time and didn't know that women couldn't do certain things and always assumed that women could. Not only that women could, but that gay people, well of course, should be able to live equally and marry. These sorts of things are really revelations to me and really remarkable and sometimes I look back and think that would never have happened. Nobody would have thought that then. And that's really heartening.

K.C. Yes. O.k. is there anything else you want to add?

Q.P. I guess I'd like to add that a lot of running a feminist art organization is a thankless job – and that wasn't my job with NYFAI but – I appreciate that Nancy and others who ran it and run it . . . they did that and that they dedicated themselves to that and I think it gave a lot to a lot of people. I'm appreciative.

K.C. Thank you.