

NYFAI – Oral History

Interview: Rosemary Starace interviewed by Katie Cercone

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K.C. Hi, this is Katie Cercone interviewing Rosemary Starace February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009. When did you first becoming involved with NYFAI and how did you hear about it?

R.S. It was the spring of 1980. I heard about it from a friend who'd heard about it on the radio. I told that to Nancy and Darla recently and they said, "A radio announcement?!" I had been searching for something. I had no idea that anything like this existed. It just seemed perfect.

K.C. How long were you there?

R.S. I was involved for around 4 years.

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

R.S. I wanted to be a student of art. I was about 27 and I had not studied art prior to that.

K.C. What did you study?

R.S. I studied psychology in college, that was my major. One reason I didn't study art was because I had no sense that I could actually make art, and I was afraid to expose myself to that possibility of failure. But by the time that I had gotten into my late twenties, I was feeling desperate; I knew I really needed to face that fear, to find some way that I could get over this barrier between not being and being an artist—to find out what "being an artist" was. At that point, I had gone to The Art Student's League and I had found it terrible. Not that it *is* terrible, but for me it was just a dizzying, strange situation to be thrown into a room with some paint and a model. I had no sense of direction or purpose. I didn't know what I was trying to do. When I first got the catalog from NYFAI, I saw this wonderful statement that said, "Art making arises from self understanding and content inspires form." Although I would amend that a little now, I still think it's basically sound, and at the time it was magic words, like an open sesame into art for me, and it even connected my study of psychology with art. I always saw psychology as being a study of self and what it meant to be a human being. When I realized that being an artist was really the same endeavor, I saw a way in. I understood that I could make art from who I was, rather than from something that I didn't have or

didn't know how to get. I think that was the major gift of the Feminist Art Institute. It really spelled out that primary truth and taught people how to access it.

K.C. Were you working in the field of psychology?

R.S. I was working in publishing.

K.C. OK. Describe your experience of art as a woman, art student prior to NYFAI . . . classroom, writing.

R.S. I knew I wanted to be an artist for a long time. My background was Catholic school, which in those days meant no art whatsoever and no support for the imagination. And culturally, I had an Italian-American background—in a wonderful family, but they were here trying to provide opportunities for their children to take part in the American dream, not become an artist! So I had to work through all that, and it certainly had to do with why I hadn't studied art up till then. I drew a lot on my own and I also wrote. For a while I was undecided about which way to go (art or writing), although it was sort of a moot question because I wasn't really going any way. I was in publishing as a writer for book jackets and advertising copy, but I wasn't really able to do my own work at that point, not because I didn't have time, but because I just didn't know how—if you can imagine that. Being a woman had a lot to do with it, as well as being of that time and cultural background. When I went to the Art Student's League, I attended only twice; I knew it would never work for me. Stumbling on NYFAI was a miracle; it saved my life. I took my first class with Catherine Allen, and overnight I saw the world of art open before me! The following semester they started a full time program, a core program, and I was part of that.

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

Please describe any classes you took or programs you were involved in, open houses, panels, exhibitions at the Ceres Gallery.

R.S. I was a student in the full time program for one year. It was funded, and then I don't know if they didn't get the funding that they wanted for the second year, I think it was supposed to be more than one year . . . so the program itself didn't continue, but a bunch of us who were involved in it formed what we called the NYFAI Studio Collective, and we rented studio space from the school. This was back when we had space on Spring Street.

K.C. The Port Authority?

R.S. Yes. The Port Authority building. The collective had a really great, big room that 4 or 5 of us shared. It was fluid; we had partitions, and a beautiful view of the Hudson River. It was an amazing studio for really cheap rent. So we worked in the same space, and we exhibited together in that space. It might have been 2 yearly exhibitions that we did. At that time, Linda Hill, one of the NYFAI teachers, got funding from the NEA for a collaborative art project, and I was also part of that. It was advertised nationally and people came here for a month of experimenting and collaborating. It was called “4 by 27: Women Collaborate.” Four groups of six or seven women produced four pieces of work that were exhibited at Gallery 345 in New York. It was a big thing, and definitely an experiment! I don’t think we, collectively, that era of feminist, knew how to collaborate. The project had mixed results in terms of how people worked together and how easy or hard it was to create together.

I also did some writing for the school, grants and promotional materials, brochures etc. Then I was in on the beginning of the Ceres Gallery. Initially it was called Kore Gallery, after the early Greek sculptures of the female form. The gallery idea was advanced right after Darla Bjork bought the building on Franklin Street—that was the gallery’s first home. But a group of us who were initially involved left after a dispute that occurred before the gallery opened. We took the name “Kore” with us; those who were left chose “Ceres” as the new name. I think there were about 20 people involved at the beginning, and 18 of us left. That number might not be right, but the point is that a vast majority of the initial group left, but the small group re-formed and opened the gallery. The rest is history, or herstory! In your article about NYFAI history in *nparadoxa*, Katie, which was excellent, I thought you really got the NYFAI experience, and it seemed very accurate from my perspective. The only thing that I found puzzling was that someone was talking about how that whole Kore/Ceres dispute had to do with age and ageism. I don’t remember that as having anything to do with it. It certainly wasn’t so for me. I don’t know how much we have to go into it. It’s something that was very difficult at the time and for years after, but it’s OK now. I think it was one of those things that, again, we were young—not just in age, but also as feminists. I’m including the whole group in that. We were young and didn’t have the experience to see it through. The gallery was another

of those feminist experiments; it was another collaboration that was supposed to have been non-hierarchical, except it didn't work out that way. Looking back, I'd say simply that we had a dispute about something, and authority issues came into play that could have been worked out had we known how. It wasn't an insurmountable difficulty. Things like that get polarized quickly and that's what happened here. I think it was expedient to just regroup, rather than deal with hard feelings and complex issues—without any maps. K.C. A lot of people have brought up that perhaps the collective decision-making didn't work. Did you lose faith in it?

R.S. I didn't know if the problem was collective decision-making or not. I continued to be attracted to that form, and I thought it had real potential, but I just didn't know. In just the last few years I had the opportunity to be involved in another collaboration among women that was also based on a consensus process. It was an Internet collaboration that involved people from around the globe putting together a poetry anthology. [Letters to the World: Poems from the Wom-po Listserv, Red Hen Press, 2008.] I was very deeply involved in this anthology making and it was a wonderful, difficult, involving process that ended up facing the same kinds of issues as the gallery project: issues of authority and issues of the collective process falling apart under pressure. It looked for a while like this project was going to dissolve, too, and then it didn't. It didn't because we didn't let it; it was partly a miracle and it was partly really hard work and willingness to make the project itself more primary than "being right." And the book got published and it was a really wonderful success in terms of the process and the product. It answered the question, "Can collective decision-making work?" and also showed *how* it can work. That went a long way toward helping me let go of the Feminist Art Institute/Kore Gallery thing, because I saw that it wasn't that we were "wrong"—any of us; it was that such processes are very difficult and there are pitfalls that can generally occur, and they do! It was uncharted territory for us in the gallery group, but now I know that there are predictable issues that occur in processes like this. There is much more information out there now, more collective experience among feminists and others to bring to such projects. You have to be aware of the potential issues, but there are strategies for working through them. You have to be in for the long haul, but it is absolutely worth it.

K.C. Could you describe your experience at NYFAI in terms of sense of community and friendships in the studio and classroom.

R.S. I made deep friendships with my cohorts and also my teachers. They still feed me even though I haven't seen a lot of the people in years and years and years. I still feel nourished by those connections. I have kept up with some of the people or gotten in touch with them again. At the time I think we were thrilled to be a part of this big feminist and artistic movement, larger than ourselves. There was such a sense of empowerment and mutual support. It was a fabulous thing to be in the heart of it.

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

R.S. I worked in series a lot. Nancy Azara influenced me on that. She worked in series and she talked about it as a way to work through whatever it was that you were working on . . . to find out what your artistic and personal concerns were. To just keep working on the same thing, not necessarily the same piece, but on the same theme or the same form, as a way to explore all its facets and learn what your work was really about for you. I took to that. I still work in series.

Some of the series at the time had to do with . . . one came from a dream that told me the horse was a vehicle of memory and so I made a series of horse drawings in magic marker that carried me into some important content. It was so powerful to me because it was the first time that I had really tapped into inner content. That was the earliest series I did.

That morphed into the study of longing and a bunch of pieces where the house was the main symbol, house as self or soul. I did a lot of drawing at the Feminist Art Institute. First it was the Catherine Allen class that opened me up—that was a drawing class—and then I did a class with Elke Solomon for years on end. I kept going back. I must have taken her class 5 times it was so wonderful!

There was a good balance at NYFAI. Nancy Azara and Linda Hill were instrumental in helping me learn ways of connecting with my subjects and teasing out what they wanted to be, and Catherine's and Elke's classes were a lot about seeing and exploring materials, letting them come alive. Drawing was about making marks, and about making your particular kind of mark. This was all completely new to me when I got there. I had no background in any of it. Among many other things, the whole idea of mark-making has

continued on with me all these years. I think of everything as mark making, even writing . . . one of those fundamental ideas that meant a lot to me.

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

R.S. I think it was the realization that art could come from an ordinary self. Maybe I would just put a capital “S” on Self now. . . so that self can include both self and the world, the self *in* the world. The understanding of that, or the exploration of that, is the locus of art making, the matrix of it. The other monumental discovery, a corollary, was that I was then sufficient, that I didn’t have to be somebody other than I was to find my art and make it, or to be original, because it was by definition unique: my experience, my study, my perception . . . anything you want to call it. I, who never thought I could really be an artist, was actually perfectly and utterly sufficient to make art! I think that’s true for everyone. That’s a feminist and an egalitarian insight. Each person’s being has its own validity and can be expressed as such in art. For anyone making art it changes the locus from whether it’s good, to whether it’s authentic. “Authentic” is within everyone’s reach; it’s a form of “good.”

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

R.S. I considered myself a feminist beforehand. I was not an activist in the typical sense, but I remember what I was reading was Mary Daly, a radical feminist philosopher. She had a book called *Gyn/ecology*. It was a wonderful, radical book about words and patriarchy. I used to carry it around and leave it on my desk at work, which felt radical to me! I remember that, and I made some friends that way, people who would not have otherwise talked to me I think. I had at that point been starting to educate myself in what feminism meant, or what it was going to mean for me. Then I came to NYFAI.

K.C. How did your experience at NYFAI further your development as an artist, writer, interested participant?

R.S. Being there gave me confidence, which I had never had. But I didn’t only lack confidence; I lacked information on how to do this “art thing.” How does one go about being an artist? NYFAI gave me answers to that. It made me see the difference right away between technique and inner process and how there has to be a marriage of the two.

You have to learn your materials and your craft—but it's kind of meaningless without also educating that other part. I think the Feminist Art Institute did that. They educated the other part. I think it's quite amazing. Many people today still don't really understand that the inner work actually can be taught and can also be relied on.

K.C. How do your experiences at NYFAI influence you 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 in feminism?

R.S. I do consider myself a professional artist in the global sense, someone who has professed to live a life in the arts. After NYFAI, several years later, I got a master's degree in The Creative Process in the Arts, which was a study of the things I was just talking about, the marriage of the inner and the outer. I taught art from that perspective privately and at different institutions up in the Berkshires where I live. This work was in a direct lineage from what I learned at NYFAI, both my interest in the subject and my understanding that it was so important. It kind of kept me out of the mainstream, however, because I never did go to regular art school. Then, when I was teaching I wound up with a number of students who had gotten BFAs and MFAs and were floundering, looking for what it was they wanted to make art about, or from, or for, and how to access it.

So I taught and made art, that's what I did until a certain point in the '90s when I reached some place inside me that felt a little bent up, depleted. It came to me then that I wanted to go back to writing. It wasn't like I wanted to give up one for the other, but rather that making art had become fraught with a need to be successful in it on certain societal terms. I found that really frustrating; it was affecting my ability to work and to just be there and enjoy it and be fresh with it. So, I started writing again and it was fresh and new, without any baggage. As time went on, I found that writing felt like a better vehicle for me and now I'm writing more than anything. I still do some artwork, but I can't really do both with the necessary devotion, though I still maintain a studio.

K.C. Poetry?

R.S. Yes. Poetry.

K.C. How would you describe the relationship between art and feminism in your life and work?

R.S. There are a lot of different kinds of feminism, none is right or wrong, they all sort of work together. Some people are activists politically, and others are less so. I think I'm mostly attracted to a transformative feminism. I certainly want equal rights and equal pay, but I'm interested in cultural changes that could occur through more use of things like consensus-based decision making. I'm attracted to the potential of feminism as a creative force that stands outside the norm, critiques it, and comes up with new, more life-affirming forms that add something to our cultural mix. Feminism is like an art form. Being an artist all my life has been a way to bring my imagination to bear on not only my work, but also hopefully my life in the world. My feminism is very much a part of that.

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?

R.S. I think I pretty much answered what I think the legacy of it was. When I was thinking of these questions—this is not necessarily an answer to this question— but it is something else I wanted to say about how my NYFAI experience still affects me. In Elke Solomon's class, I enjoyed her intellect as much as anything else. She always had these great ideas. And there was this one— this is just a great example of how she operated and how legacy operates—we were in front of this gigantic piece of paper, bigger than I was, and the assignment was to draw using only our peripheral vision. I can remember I was like, "What?" I remember just standing there. I don't know if I even made one mark on the page. I stood there the whole time trying to figure out what my peripheral vision was seeing and how I could possibly translate that, how I could even separate that from whatever else I was seeing. I have never forgotten that. Maybe it was because it totally stumped me, but it has become like a koan, a Zen koan, all throughout my life. The physiological question of how it might work is interesting, but it also became a metaphor. I see it even now in my poetry. That metaphor has come in several times – the metaphor of the periphery, what hangs out there, so to speak. One thing I do, do now, since I'm not really painting much, is that I take photos to keep my visual life alive, and what am I doing . . . I'm taking pictures out the side window of my car, snapping pictures of things rushing by. I was looking at them yesterday and I realized, oh, this is the peripheral blur, and I thought of Elke again. You never know what little thing is going to stick. There's been so many ways that my NYFAI experience has stuck. It was perhaps my most



important, useful experience in terms of education and what happened in my life going forward. It was great.

K.C. Is there anything you didn't touch on that you want to talk about?

R.S. Well this is just a tidbit, but when NYFAI was at the Port Authority building, there was a bar across the street called the Ear Inn—maybe it's still there—we'd always go there for sandwiches and stuff. The place tickled me because it had a neon sign outside that said, "Ear," but it was just the word "Bar" with a part of the "B" blacked out so that it looked like an "E." There's the importance and delight of a mark, or an "unmark!" It is just one of those lovely details, a stitch in the tapestry of my time at NYFAI.

K.C. Thank you.

R.S. You're welcome.