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Bringing It All Back Home

CAREY LOVELACE ON ARLENE RAVEN

Arlene Raven, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and Judy Chicago at the Feminist Studio Workshop, Woman's Building, Los Angeles, 1973. Photo: Through the Flower Archives.

ARLENE RAVEN cut a complex swath through the world before she died this past summer on August 1. Indeed, she was an activist as "pluralistic" as the 1970s feminist art community from which she emerged—a quality perhaps most clearly recalled when one considers a 1983 landmark exhibition she curated at the Long Beach Museum of Art in California, titled "At Home," which brought together many of the artists and ideas she had championed for the previous decade. The show included Suzanne Lacy, who pioneered massive group performances on social themes; West Coast–based performance artists Rachel Rosenthal, Eleanor Antin, and Susan Mogul; ecovisionaries Helen and Newton Harrison, whose *Lagoon Cycle*, 1974–84, was an early rumination on global warming; and Betye Saar, who skewered racism in works such as her 1972 assemblage *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, where the pancake-mix icon wielded a rifle. All of these artists were born out of the tumultuous 1970s, a decade of relentless politics and the invention and reinvention of new forms of art. The catalogue for "At Home" was itself unusual—a cacophony of photographs and captions, artists' commentaries, and analytic text, all running simultaneously, as if asking readers to make their own paths through the work.

While best known as a writer in the "advocate critic" tradition, Arlene was also a charismatic lecturer, an art historian, a founder of radical institutions, a generous and inclusive editor, and a lesbian whose Susan Sontagian glamour helped bring attention to the often marginalized worlds she sought to make visible. With (appropriately) raven hair, a firm jaw, and chiseled features, the Baltimore-born Arlene Corkery (née Rubin) exuded a kind of streetwise toughness. Involved in '60s radical politics, including a stint with Students for a Democratic Society, she got a BFA in painting from Hood College in Maryland in 1965 and an MFA from George Washington University two years later, then switched to art history and started a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University that she completed in 1975. Fascinated by the early Women's Lib movement, she began working on one of its first publications, *Womyn: A Journal of Liberation*, and in a women's clinic in the same building. But having married her master's thesis adviser, she was too busy juggling lives as a housewife, stepmother, and student to fully engage.

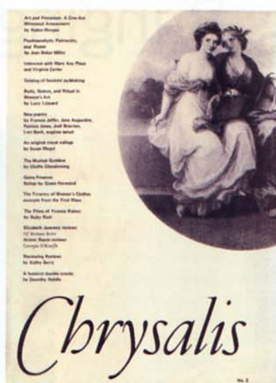
In 1972, however, she discovered that her husband was having an affair with a student. Shortly after separating from him, she was kidnapped on a Baltimore street, attacked, and raped by two men; she nearly died. (With typical gallows humor, she once told me, "I kept thinking, 'How can they do this? *Don't they know I'm getting my Ph.D.?*'") In between those searing events, she had attended the Conference of Women in the Visual Arts at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC, a historic forum where she heard Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro speak about the new Feminist Art Program (FAP) at the California Institute of the Arts. FAP had just completed *Womanhouse*, a Hollywood mansion that students had converted into environments symbolizing women's oppression. Once recovered from her injuries, Arlene had an epiphany. Days later, she left for Los Angeles, where Chicago became a close friend during this extremely difficult time in Arlene's life. That summer, when Arlene decided to divest herself of her husband's surname without reverting to her father's, it was Chicago who suggested "Raven." ("Edgar Allan Poe was from Baltimore—it just seemed right," Arlene later remembered.)

The Feminist Studio Workshop would be a community and a home, nurturing "leaders" in the arts, and perhaps generating a new form of art entirely.

At CalArts Arlene helped pioneer the inclusive feminist art history then being formulated on several fronts, including in Linda Nochlin's work at Stanford University. It incorporated women's previously ignored heritage and expressed skepticism about Western art's *idées reçues*—attitudes, some believe, that set the stage for postmodernism. That this was the same school that launched hypermasculinists David Salle and Eric Fischl is an irony that has since been noted by alumna Mira Schor, among others. In fact, even before Arlene's arrival, Chicago was becoming disenchanted with the highbrow macho of CalArts' early 1970s Conceptual art atmosphere, and sharp friction was growing between her and Schapiro. Almost immediately, Arlene and Chicago began to consider forming a separate institution where women's work could develop in its own context.

Walter Benjamin once wrote of "events that affect us like an echo—awakened by a sound that seems to have issued from a past life." The founding of the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) in November 1973 was an event that would reverberate throughout cultural history, just as Arlene's confluence of traumatic experiences probably triggered forces lying within her all along. (She had, as a student, quite unselfconsciously clipped the lesbian writer Jill Johnston's picture out of the paper and carried it around in her wallet.) As conceived by Arlene and Chicago, the workshop would be a community and a home, nurturing "leaders" in the arts, and perhaps generating a new form of art entirely.

Although Chicago was leaving the school under less than happy circumstances, CalArts still rented the group an Old Hollywood–style building near MacArthur Park that had once housed the Chouinard School of Art. Arlene, Chicago, and a third FSW cofounder, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, leased space to a bookstore, travel agency, wire service, theater group, and four galleries—all feminist enterprises—to create what they famously called the Woman's Building. The workshop formed the heart of the place; it began with thirty-five students from all over the country. ("We just thought we'd send out a brochure and whoever came would," Arlene told me. "And they did.") The yearly fee was $750, high in a low-tuition era—particularly considering that part of the "training" was renovating and running the building. Students included many who would soon engage in the emergent California performance



Left: Susan King and Arlene Raven at the grand opening of the Woman's Building, Los Angeles, November 28, 1973. Right: **Cover of *Chrysalis* 2 (1977).**

scene: Jerri Allyn, Cheri Gaulke, Vanalyne Green, Cheryl Swannack, and Terry Wolverton; also included was sculptor Nancy Fried, who later moved to New York. The program involved a range of activities, from carpentry to résumé-writing.

The second-wave debates about essentialism had not yet emerged, so the program had free rein to explore . . . everything. Arlene initiated a Lesbian Art Project in 1977 with a one-year "Sapphic education" program based on the Greek poet's legendary ancient school for women. She also coedited what was arguably the era's most highly regarded feminist publication, *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture*, a quarterly elegantly designed by de Bretteville (who now heads Yale University's graduate graphic design department), with contributors ranging from Audre Lorde to Susan Sontag to Arlene herself. Started with money from Adrienne Rich, Susan Rennie, and Kirsten Grimstad, two hundred charter subscribers, and no institutional backing, the publication needed 35,000 subscribers to be solvent. "So we were doomed from the beginning," Arlene said to me, calling the project "a whimsy of feminism—it's not going to happen, and you do it anyway." Indeed, although the FSW (a kind of combo Bauhaus/self-help seminar) changed the lives of many, it closed along with *Chrysalis* in 1981, victims of an increasingly conservative political climate.

Two years later Arlene—by then with her life partner, Nancy Grossman—moved to New York. In the mid-1980s she became a *Village Voice* critic, deploying a loose, knotty, unstructured style—her reviews were like a necklace of insights strung together, linking art to current events, literary references, and politics. She championed well-known artists, such as Hannah Wilke, Pepón Osorio, and Petah Coyne, as well as those on the margins, such as Korean artist Ik-Joong Kang and porn star–turned-performer Annie Sprinkle. Arlene was aware of the day's debates about the social construction of "woman" and the body, but her primary area of interest was how artists intersect with society to change commonly held views. She made countless studio visits—often with her "ladies," students from her class at the New School, which she taught for twenty-one years.

Her home with Nancy, a 3,500-square-foot loft on Eldridge Street in Manhattan, seemed a world apart from its Lower East Side surroundings. It was cozy, with dark wood and exposed beams, and animated conversation was focused around the kitchen's round oak table. Arlene, who could seem a cross between Susan Sarandon and Charlotte Rampling, would toss off observations about the art world, feminists, and writing, and she shared professional advice, exuding intellectual confidence. Discussions occurred over very strong cups of coffee made by Nancy—and everything took place under the gaze of Nancy's powerfully menacing sculpted heads masked with black leather, zippers, and grommets.

This communal feeling in Arlene and Nancy's life in many ways infused Arlene's professional endeavors. She was a gifted lecturer. Her delivery was funny and relaxed, with deadpan brio, as she dissected a range of social foibles through the study of art. (Indeed, her writing seemed the realization in print of her lecture style.) Over the years she taught at the Maryland Institute College of Art, the Corcoran School of Art, CalArts, Otis College of Art and Design, UCSD, Parsons, and lectured around the country. An organizer of panels and a contemporary observer, she gathered in many artists, fellow writers, and others with whom she felt a kinship. By the end of the '80s she had authored or edited three books, including the anthologies *Feminist Art Criticism* and *Art in the Public Interest*. Six more would follow, including the catalogue to accompany Nancy's twenty-five-year retrospective in 1990 at the Hillwood Art Museum at Long Island University in Brookville, New York.

Arlene and Nancy had rough patches, including one separation, but they always reconciled. In the late '90s they were evicted from rough-and-tumble Eldridge Street, where Nancy had lived since 1965, to make way for pricey condos. By that time Arlene's mane of black hair had a streak of gray. A cavernous enclosed former lumberyard on the edge of Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn, which Nancy had bought in 1980, was renovated into a new, surprisingly gemütlich home. Arlene's office was an ample, meditative, wood-shelf-lined library—here again it felt miles away from the city, perhaps in some university enclave. And there was the familiar round kitchen table, always welcoming.

But things suddenly changed. When I saw Arlene at an opening last winter, I didn't immediately recognize her. Her hair was shortish and gray, she wore wire-rimmed glasses, and she walked with a cane. But her wry sense of humor was there, that deadpan delivery. I learned later that in March 2005, she had been diagnosed with cancer, and it had attacked her kidneys. She had undergone an operation and further treatment.

At the same time, she had returned to her feminist-art origins, collaborating with Chicago and others to organize a behemoth Feminist Art Project, involving lectures, seminars, and publications, many focusing on 1970s women's art, tied to massive exhibitions set for 2007 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles ("WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution"), and the Brooklyn Museum ("Global Feminisms"), and coinciding with the opening of the permanent installation of Chicago's *Dinner Party* in Brooklyn. Once again, Arlene was using the force of her personality and her organizational skills to push forward.

This past May I visited her in Brooklyn for the first time. Somehow, she remarked with irritated dismay, it had gone out over a Listserv that she'd had a relapse; people kept calling to ask how she was. Frankly, I thought she seemed fine. So I didn't ask the inevitable question until we walked outside, accompanied by her dog.

"So . . . how are you?"

"Well, I've had a recurrence of cancer; it's spread to my lungs, and in situations like that, there is an 85 percent fatality rate."

I think I said, "That doesn't sound good."

"No," she agreed. We waited for her beloved blind, ancient pug, Zoe, to waddle back. The air was chilly and clear. "But we're all going to die," she said, with typical matter-of-factness. "It's just a question of whether it's now or later."

And I thought, Well, that's right, isn't it?

It wasn't the first time I'd learned something important from Arlene Raven.

She was sixty-two. □

CAREY LOVELACE IS A NEW YORK–BASED WRITER. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

CAREY LOVELACE

An art critic and playwright based in New York, CAREY LOVELACE recently completed a three-year term as copresident of the US chapter of the International Association of Art Critics. In 2004 her play *Couples Counseling* debuted at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater in Los Angeles, and this year her play *The Second Act Problem* was a finalist at the Samuel French Festival in New York. Lovelace is currently at work on a two-volume study of the women's movement in art from 1968 to 2005. A regular contributor to *Art in America*, she has published essays and reviews in *Ms.*, *Newsday*, *Harper's*, and the *New York Times*. For this issue, Lovelace remembers American critic Arlene Raven, who died at age sixty-two this past August.