



Interview with Nancy Wolcott

Kathy Hersh: It is January 25, 2016 and we are on Miami Beach interviewing Nancy Wolcott for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Archive and Kathy Hersh is the interviewer speaking. Nancy, you live on the beach but you're obviously connected with the art scene and the art world here. Tell us what you have seen in the way of the evolution of the art scene here on the beach.

Nancy Wolcott: It's been an extraordinary time to be here. We moved to Miami in '84 and we moved to the beach in '86; 100 Lincoln Road which is now Decoplage. A year later I started working at the Bass Museum. That was my first formal art experience there. The museum was smaller than it is now. It was the original building in front which was the library that is now torn down. The original director at the museum, Diane Camber at the museum, and I worked there for two years as the business manager which was pretty astonishing because I had no business experience. [Laughter][01:08]

The museum is owned by the City of Miami Beach and the friends of the museum were essential to it so as I often have been in administrative work, I was the in-between person who kept the right bills, and the right money, and the gift shop, and so forth going. I worked from Wednesday until Sunday which was interesting because I was almost the only professional person there on the weekend. One reason that was interesting is that there were very few venues on the beach. It was an art scene always from the time I came, there were art people working but there was very little infrastructure. There weren't many concert places and so there would be little Sunday afternoon jazz concerts or Mozart people came

over from the mainland and did concerts and I liked having that.

It was really nice, a bonus to have that part of the workplace. It was wonderful to work in a place that was so beautiful and surrounded by beautiful works of art. But, during that time, there was a lot of discussion which ultimately led to the building in front of us being knocked down, the pathway to the water, and the new museum which happened after I left. That was sort of my beginning. We were very active in politics when we first came in a very low-key volunteer way. One of the things we did was register voters because in the olden days you had to have a signature, you had to have a witness in Florida in order to register to vote. Probably at the end of the '80s I'm thinking, beginning of the 90's, we set up a table with other people right in front of the Clean Machine which was right around the corner from the Marlin Hotel and we registered voters.

Kathy Hersh: What's the Clean Machine?

Nancy Wolcott: The Clean Machine was a laundromat set up by James Quinlan whose wife was also very involved in the arts and still is. And so, again, part of a community of people who were doing interesting things and what made it interesting is that we began to notice that we were getting young people mostly who were moving down. We started hearing Julliard, Rhode Island School of the Arts of Design, and we began to think, "There's something happening here." I remember that there was a performance, a Shakespeare performance; I don't remember who did it, right in the middle of Lincoln Road.

[Chortle][03:35] It got rained out and so we all ran to a garage near Lincoln Road that I don't think exists any longer and we began to hear people say, "Didn't I see you at Interlocking last month?" [Laughter][03:46] We began to get a sense of new people coming in so that was one

thing that was going on. Miami City Ballet began in '86 and they were performing downtown at the Gusman but Villella, Edward Villella came to the Colony Theater before every big performance, a week or two before, and really took on educating the public about what he was doing in a way that was just extraordinary and really privileged. Often it would be almost empty in the beginning and he would still, full-strength, do an evening where he said, "It's not Giselle. Let me show you what bouncing is, this is where it comes from." He would demonstrate and call people out from his dancers to demonstrate.

Kathy Hersh: It wasn't a large crowd?

Nancy Wolcott: It came to be, but initially it wasn't a large crowd because there weren't any large crowds. Lincoln Road was totally empty and what impressed me about that is he put on the same kind of full-strength show, you know educational show no matter who was in the audience. Then busloads of people started coming in from senior citizen centers and eventually he built an audience and eventually made that part of his dance-talk presentations but never in such a full way and never, I think, so formally as saying, "This is different from the ballet you're used to and let me tell you why." That was really terrific. That was part of the energy. New World Symphony was also new and also didn't perform on the beach in the beginning but the young people lived here so the first poster shows a musician pushing his instrument, bass I think, on the sand. It's like these are Miami Beach establishments so there's that kind of energy.

And then, probably in the mid-90s, Edith Gelber, the mayor's wife, pulled together a little group of people to talk about culture. I was one of the volunteers; again, I'm not an artist. I had a little cartoon on my desk at work that showed this hip beatnik-looking guy, "I'm not an artist but I know a lot of artists." [Laughter][06:05] So, I was part of that little group and part of that idea was to do a calendar

pre-internet or at least pre-social media, to put together a calendar, so people would know what was going on and to find out what people were doing for children. That was part of her interest with the arts. Through all that period there was a sense of possibility, electricity, and new discovery.

Kathy Hersh: In the middle of that period is when Leonard Horowitz and Barbara Capitman got together.

Nancy Wolcott: Right and the MDPL was always part of that, there was something that was going on simultaneously and part of the electricity of the beach. Part of new people paying attention, part of outside media being a need to come and pay attention and those buildings – and I can't name the buildings, the New World Symphony people for example were staying in the building right by the Bass Museum that was a deco building. And the Deco buildings, part of because they were inexpensive to stay in is part of what was happening in terms of the artists finding a place to live. Then because they were in those buildings there would be rehearsals, impromptu performances, that kind of thing. There was a lot of that.

Kathy Hersh: There was recently a news report on PBS, or a news report, about someone studying the geography of culture and that art and the artistic endeavor happens in specific places where artists come together. It said it creates its own life, mostly in big cities, but throughout history. It sounds like you saw the beginning of its convergence.

Nancy Wolcott: Absolutely and then because people are out in one place they're talking to each other, and as said with the younger people, sometimes they have in common the places where they were trained, summer music camp, or whatever. With the older people there's a certain kind of serendipity. Following Edith Gelber's little committee, sometime in the late '90s the city created the Miami Beach Cultural Arts Council and that was extraordinary. I served on that almost from the beginning and I chaired it

into the early 2000s; not the whole time, I was the third chair. So there was money, which was extraordinary, about 700,000 dollars available for grants.

Kathy Hersh: How much?

Nancy Wolcott: I think it was around 700,000 dollars. I know that sounds extraordinary. I haven't gone back and checked it but I chaired the grants committee that began the grants program and we had the lovely job of figuring out how to separate out the big organizations from the little struggling ones. We created categories that were not incredibly new, like "majors" and "smaller." Part of what we were interested in doing was communicating, partly, to tax payers who funded this probably through resort tax, but to the public that there was an art community and not just heres, siloed big organizations.

We prided ourselves on having invented something called Second Tuesdays I think, and now they're all over the place; there's Third Thursday and Fourth Wednesday and other communities like Little Havana and Little Haiti but we thought we came up with the idea. It's extraordinary to think about it. The idea was to get people to come to Lincoln Road which was empty. It wasn't only on Lincoln Road but that was the focus and so up and down Lincoln Road inside Colony Theater and so forth were activities. We asked and sometimes pressured the major groups, we asked our grantees, to contribute to that in some way or another and there were some extraordinary scenes.

I'll give you a couple of examples. There was a moment where some New World Symphony people and some Haitian musicians were playing in the middle of Lincoln Road, just a jam session basically. My husband was actually in a dance program that went down Lincoln Road; Gerry Houlihan Dancers. He was the tour guide figure in that as a dance down a basically empty Lincoln Road occurred. Part of what our idea was was to put people in touch with one another who were already in the arts but

also to let people know how much was going on and that was helped by a very lively “Miami Herald.” At that time art coverage was really vital and people like Gail Meadows spread the word about what was going on.

Also dance and theater were sort of embedded when you talk about a physical place. The Strand restaurant had a theater for example, right next to the restaurant internally so people knew even if they didn’t go to a play by Acme Theater; you knew it was going on. You felt like you were part of something even if you weren’t necessarily going to it and on Lincoln Road; Area Stage was in one of the storefronts. I’m doing this because it’s a long, narrow building and very improbable to use for theater and Maria Rodaz was the director and owner of it with her husband. They would stand outside, almost like the people who would give out menus, but not as aggressive, and they basically greeted people. So even if you never went to the theater there, you knew it was happening.

Too, the Colony, which again has since then been changed physically and reoriented, at that time was relatively underused; they had some traveling shows like folk music for example, but also local people used it. South Beach at that point was almost empty of people on the street and it became sort of an open stage and a lot of people used it that way. When I look back and think, I knew it at the time, but when I look back I think, “That was really an extraordinary period and I was really lucky to be there as part of it.” Most of those things I’ve named are still around and institutionalized in the best possible way and they’re beautiful new spaces. There’s a new Bass Museum, a new symphony, and Miami City Ballet and you’ve surely have heard this in talking to other people on the beach. Miami City Ballet rehearsed in what was I think Saks 5th Avenue with huge windows facing Lincoln Road.

So again, you didn’t ever have to go to a ballet performance or even think you cared about dance but you walked by and saw them in the window and it was you

know, stunning, stunning. I think Edward Vilella and Michael Tilson Thomas and the people with and behind them were incredibly generous and probably shrewd in identifying powerfully with the beach, with South Beach right from the beginning. When you look at the early posters, not just the symphony, you see Miami Beach images. You see the buildings that we were talking about; the art deco buildings in the background, or the sand, or some characteristic identifier.

Kathy Hersh: It sounds like there was an acknowledgement of an emergent scene and not a focus on the already pre-established arts but in youth and freshness.

Nancy Wolcott: Absolutely and local identity because Miami Beach and Miami for forever had quite wonderful traveling performers. When I first came, Judy Drucker with The Concert Association was bringing her close friends in like Pavarotti and other people. Pavarotti sang on the beach free at one point. We sat on the sand and watched him.

Kathy Hersh: What an experience.

Nancy Wolcott: Absolutely and it was so hokey and so wonderful to have him sing "O Sole Mio," and there's a full moon, you're on a beach and it's Miami Beach, and you're just like, Ahh. There was that tradition that this was homegrown even and Edward Vilella used to say when people would ask where his dancers were from, and many were Latin American, he'd say, "We're from Miami now." Then New World School of the Arts, where I eventually worked, and other schools were also producing young people of the arts.

Kathy Hersh: Anybody that sticks out in your mind that you feel were catalytic, had an impact, or added to the whole growing expectation of art?

Nancy Wolcott: I think the giants, and I go back to Tilson Thomas and Vilella, were names that were already famous

internationally and certainly nationally, were huge and gave a type of validity right away that it wasn't just a homespun thing. They were Miami Beach organizations but they had external validation because they were famous people. I think the city of Miami Beach was extraordinary, when I think about that. I used to do some traveling in my work and I used to talk with people about what we did and I'd chirp away about all the clever things we did at the Cultural Arts Council and then they found out we had this enormous budget and they'd say, "Alright, great! Aren't you clever?"

Kathy Hersh: Is the council still in existence?

Nancy Wolcott: It is in existence and again part of our mission with the council was to bring other people in for the grants panels so people would know just how much was going on. A lot of that, as with all these other things I'm naming, became more institutionalized. Gary Farmer's the staff person who had been the owner of The Strand restaurant when the theater company was there so he's always been committed to the arts. All of it's less visible because it doesn't need to be visible in the same way. There's not that same mission, you no longer have to make sure you've populated Lincoln Road. Even though I was there then and I'm there now it's very hard for me to put those two pictures together for people and myself to realize the extraordinary change. I think those are the big catalysts and some of it is just what was going on with preservation and the sense of energy and that anything is possible.

Kathy Hersh: It seems like it happened very fast.

Nancy Wolcott: It does now when I think back and try to put together the dates. One of the reasons I've been thinking about those stories, is that sometimes I overhear and get very frustrated that people say, "Art Basel brought culture to Miami Beach." It really went the other way around. In maybe 1999 but certainly 2000, people from Art Basel came and talked to people in Miami and Miami Beach.

There was a series that I knew of and I'm sure there were many things I had no knowledge of but there were a couple of receptions, dinner parties, and cocktail parties in homes of people like Helen Kohen, who has an art critic for the Herald, and her husband Roland who was on the Cultural Arts Council for example, hosted one to acquaint the people from Switzerland with Miami Beach and the Miami art scene. A big part of what I think brought Art Basel is there were already arts receptivity and an art scene like places like Wynwood are now, where there's potential and things happening, but a sense of a lot more possibility. That preceded, and I think was part of, Art Basel coming here.

Kathy Hersh: Otherwise, why would they come to a place that didn't have a base?

Nancy Wolcott: It had a reputation of being frivolous and insane and bikinis and whatever.

Kathy Hersh: Do you see that reputation changing?

Nancy Wolcott: Of Miami Beach? Absolutely!

Kathy Hersh: Do you think it's headed in the direction of art and culture?

Nancy Wolcott: I think so, absolutely.

Kathy Hersh: How do you or where do you see that happening?

Nancy Wolcott: The extent to which I read about Miami Beach, we travel a lot and first of all Miami Beach is recognizable everywhere. We can be in Australia at a history preservation activity about art deco and say we're from Miami Beach and very often it's the architecture because that's what Jeff and I are personally engaged in in terms of active work at this point. Otherwise, I'm a cheerleader for the arts. I think there's international recognition. You see it in the media and the press.

Kathy Hersh: So when you've said on your travels, "We're from Miami Beach and we're active in the art deco preservation movement," what kind of response do you get?

Nancy Wolcott: What we never get is, "Duh. What? Huh? Where?" It's more, "That sounds so interesting," and sometimes people have specific questions but I think it's definitely on an international map. As I said, there, Art Basel has made a difference because they are so big, they are so rich, and they involve so many people from all over the world that that has given Miami Beach and Miami a different kind of international stamp.

Kathy Hersh: About some of the talented young artists coming out of The New World School of the Arts; do you sense that some of them are looking at Miami, Greater Miami, or Miami Beach as a possible place to live in and make a living?

Nancy Wolcott: Absolutely. It's been one of the most exciting things about it. New World started in '87 and so it has sort of the same trajectory as the other organizations I've been talking about. So by now, those young artists and students are really professionally established. Zoetic Stage for example is filled with New World School of the Arts graduates and founded by them as well but let me give you one example. Somebody who has now become one of our most famous graduates is Tarell McCraney who was a theater student, went on to DePaul, then Yale, and won the MacArthur Genius Award.

Kathy Hersh: Can you say his name again, please?

Nancy Wolcott: Tarrell, T-a-r-r-e-l-l and I'll double check that in writing, McCraney, M-c-C-r-a-n-e-y.

Kathy Hersh: Okay.

Nancy Wolcott: His middle name is Alvin and I might've butchered the

spelling of his first name, I'll double check it in writing. He was in drama theater at New World and he could also dance. He went on to playwriting at Yale, doing theater in between to get his Masters. He is a member of the Steppenwolf Company, was involved with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and has a play coming up at Public Theater in New York. It's a wonderful, really interesting playwright, who became an interesting person, who came from a really down-and-out situation in Liberty City; just the kind of person who goes to an art school and it changes their life. However, Tarell has come back, who is now famous suddenly.

Once he got the MacArthur Genius award he was officially a genius and so now his plays are traveling around theater companies, for example, in Orlando in the spring. It'll be performed by a small theater company that we've admired for a long time and I think he's now hit that level. He's come back to Miami. He's working with the University of Miami with their outreach mission. He's an adjunct faculty member. He's working with high school girls in the summer for three years in a row, working on Shakespeare culminating in some sort of project in the third year. I could not be vaguer on the details but I'm very clear about his commitment to Miami.

He's also involved with Miami City Ballet for example did the scenario on the upcoming "Midsummer's Night Dream," which is set in Miami strangely enough and instead of having an ass it has a manatee. Beyond that, I know nothing but Tarell is a good example. He grew up in a tough situation. He was rescued, I think, before he even got to high school by Teo Castellanos, a playwright in Miami at a neighborhood theater situation. Then he went to New World and is committed to giving back to the community. That is a good example. There are a lot of them, a lot of visual artists.

Kathy Hersh: That's wonderful.

Nancy Wolcott: It really is. It may not have been the explicit goal of the school but implicit certainly that it would enrich Miami.

Kathy Hersh: It's interesting that there's all this activity in dance, drama, the arts, and music. It's kind of amazing that it's all going on in one place.

Nancy Wolcott: Yes, in Miami Beach but it's not all Miami Beach. Much of it is, Miami Beach, in so many ways, the center but partly because it was so down-and-out which is the great Miami story that occurred in different ways over and over. It wasn't very long after the total despair of Miami being paradise lost, seemingly hopeless, the beach being run down, Lincoln Road being empty, the buildings being drab, nobody coming here and talks of leveling it all to build something else. The very fact that it was empty like an empty stage and that there were so many people civically committed who supported those big organizations and all those things those happened at once involving different individuals, The World Symphony, The Miami Beach Ballet, New World School of the Arts, the book fair, the film festival, and other things all in the same dates in the mid-'80s and they weren't the same individuals necessarily but there was just this unbelievable explosion.

Kathy Hersh: It does make you wonder about the theory of a kind of contagion, because if you're starving, excitement can help relieve the pain of being a poor starving artist. If you feel you're in the right place it's just a matter of time.

Nancy Wolcott: Right and of course it was very inexpensive for people to live here so there are all kinds of stories that people a bit younger than me will tell you, about living in Versace's mansion. We knew people like that, for 100 dollars a month there were New World School of the Arts college students who didn't have dormitory space who lived over here for very little money.

Kathy Hersh: I know of a young ballerina that lives over here.

Nancy Wolcott: That made a difference too, that they could find a place that they probably couldn't find now and they couldn't in the center of Manhattan. So the empty stage, the energy, and I think the sun and the sand worked together. I feel very lucky to be a part of it.

Kathy Hersh: Well, we just saw a public, on-the-street memorial to Barbara Capitman.

Nancy Wolcott: Oh wasn't that extraordinary.

Kathy Hersh: Tell us your perspective on her role in helping create this phenomenal explosion.

Nancy Wolcott: One ingredient in everything we're talking about is energy and we talked a lot about young people who had energy. At New World School of the Arts they used to be on the train metro rail or in the elevator the first couple of years there but Barbara Capitman had as much energy as anybody I knew. I didn't know her well and she didn't know me but she was here when we first came and we got here in '86. Her hair stood out and her clothes flew off and we saw her at demonstrations, we were with her at demonstrations, and only later reading did I realize the tenacity she had of documenting. To come and discover the beach is one thing to have the energy to excite people about it is another thing and those are huge gifts but then to back it with knowing the people in Washington, doing the research, going around the country looking at art deco, and having the content – she's really intellectual in a way we probably don't take time to appreciate because the external part was so exciting.

She was part of it and nothing is ever a simple time, there are all sorts of tensions here and there about the preservation movement, particularly before the government was sympathetic to it and before people who had been here a long time really understood what they had. She and Leonard Horowitz, who made the buildings,

pop literally, so part of the pleasure that still exists is walking the strip. From here to Lincoln Road is 20 minutes; we can walk down Meridian, we can walk down Michigan, we can walk down Jefferson and even now you can see details in the buildings that you had noticed but then you walked by and it was all brown then suddenly there was a flamingo and a palm tree up on the side you hadn't noticed before. That was Barbara and Leonard.

Kathy Hersh: That was surely contagious too.

Nancy Wolcott: That was and of course you then went outside of your building and painted [laughter][29:02] or highlighted your own flamingo. The people who had these art deco buildings and even the owners I think looked at them in a new way and part of that was paint and color but I go back to the energy and Leonard as well was over the top and just wonderfully exuberant. Even if they were arguing with somebody they had that sense of excitement and I think that was part of what was going on at the time.

Kathy Hersh: It certainly attracted a cadre of young people like Michael Kinerk and Dennis Wilhelm, a lot of people, to come and join the ranks.

Nancy Wolcott: One of the great things last year about this centenary is MDPL had a series of panels about the decades randomly organized and you'd get old-timers sitting and talking about that. One of the things somebody said about Barbara is that she captured you. You just caught her eye and she said, "You're going to work. You're going to do this, right?" We're talking about all volunteer work and in the case of a few paid people it wasn't very much pay. The people working with non-profit organizations had made such a difference that the ability to get volunteers animated was part of it.

Kathy Hersh: We've heard people telling stories about her pulling certificates out of her purse and handing them as rewards to people. I heard Dennis and Michael tell a story about

her giving them a reward for an outstanding art deco collection. So they got a certificate and it was one way of drawing people in.

Nancy Wolcott: With a combination of a marketing background, marketing techniques and her personal energy and commitment along with the intelligence that informed it with an aesthetic sense is pretty wonderful to combine. That gathering of people at her memorial was truly amazing; somebody said we were veterans of civil wars but it was an astonishing group of people. All of us knew one another even I think, though there were some people I hadn't seen in a long time, you're reminded of some of the people involved and it's a range of ages. It's not just young people and of course those young people are not young anymore.

Kathy Hersh: It sounds like you're optimistic about the future here if it continues in the way it's going.

Nancy Wolcott: I'm mostly optimistic. I get anxious about the extent to which it's successful. It's not an issue it's a surprise and a danger. We used to sit in some rundown hotel in the '80s which was spiffy and say we're going to get to the point where it's all going to be too slick. We worried about chain stores coming to Lincoln Road and then the chain stores came and they fixed up buildings on Collins and Lincoln Road and we wondered what was happening. There was a lot of money and there's always a danger that it's going to be too homogenous and there wasn't any good way, is what we decided, to slow that down except to keep fighting for preservation. So I do worry about it becoming just one more place and losing what makes it funky, edgy, and a little different. That's an ingredient for the arts that has to be there in some way or another. If it's too slick and smooth and so expensive that no artist could ever live here, if it's only Europeans who come for Art Basel and then leave, it would be a loss and I do worry about that.

Kathy Hers: Do you worry about attrition for the buildings even though they're supposedly protected by ordinance?

Nancy Wolcott: I do but I'm always encouraged by the extent to which people are willing to fight so I was very happy for example with North Beach. I don't think that's a finished story but when North Beach was saved during the last election people came out to argue that even though those buildings facing the ocean are in fact rundown, and it's been a long time that nothing much has changed and something has to happen, which is the old Miami Beach and South Beach argument that has validity, despite that, the voters still came out 60 to 40 against changing that. So I have some confidence in the people who live here and confidence that MDPL still goes on and other organizations and young people are coming along and fighting for preservation. But, I don't think there's anywhere that that's not an ongoing fight.

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