Interference

An Interview with Artist and Educator, Wilma Needham

by Lynne Bell and Carol Williams

Wilma Needham membre de la faculté des Arts et du Design au College de la Nouvelle-Ecosse discute des nouvelles stratégies d'enseignement pour son cours "Critique féministe en arts et culture," le premier cours féministe en studio d'art au Canada.

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Lynne: Wilma, I think of you as a public intellectual, to borrow a term from Edward Said, because you are clearly engaged with social analysis and change. Tell us about your approach to artmaking and teaching.

Wilma: When I first saw Martha Rosler's photographic work in the late '70s I recognized that it was possible to make art about social and political interests. *Niagara: River of Fame* (1983), was a series of prints relating to the pollution of the Love Canal in the United States. I was shocked by the research on the pollution and felt compelled to do something. The suite of prints used the same image 14 times. I overprinted seven with statistics about pollution in the Niagara river and seven with quotations from women who lived in the area. It was clear to me that a dry statistical presentation would not be as moving for the viewer as first-person accounts of the women living with those threatening statistics. The language of the women was very poetic and moving.

Over the last decade I've been moving back and forth between theoretical and creative approaches in my work. In teaching, I give the students theoretical articles as well as fiction to read. The problem with assigning imaginative writing is trying to get the students to acknowledge that it contains theory—the writings of Alice Walker, for instance, are full of social critique.

Carol: Tell us about the "Feminist Criticism of Art and Culture" course that you teach at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD)?

Wilma: When I first came to NSCAD the responsibility of this course weighed heavily on me because there were few other feminist resources at the school. Prior to my arrival, the students had lobbied the administration to include it in the curriculum. Initially I conceived of the course as a survey but now I'm more flexible and I shift the focus. When there was a large anti-militarist action going on in the local community, for instance, I spent time on anti-militarism, a theme which encompassed anti-racism and class analysis. Or, if I have textile students I direct the course to issues of feminism and craft.

"Feminist Criticism is" primarily a studio course and its goal is to enable students to produce their own work. I contact other institutions so that I can integrate local exhibitions into course content. It's important for students to attend exhibitions and artist talks, otherwise they spend their time looking at slide images which they can't feel or touch. In one of the class projects students do a series of writing exercises using their journal excerpts. Then we talk about various approaches to language and the presence of narrative in their work.

Lynne: Do you ask them to explore the social construction of whiteness?

Wilma: Yes, the students are mostly white. I ask them first to examine their own histories. They are often third or fourth-generation Canadians and their great-grandparents may have come from a politically-charged situation associated with class and ethnicity. Sometimes the conditions their family encountered on arrival here were also unfavourable. We don't have to go back very far to hear about charged situations. I remember my father talking about the struggles between Irish Catholics and English Protestants in southern Ontario.

To get students to think about white skin privilege, I introduce theoretical materials that deal with issues of race and ethnicity. Without this critical analysis they tend to fall back on a liberal response to racism. They say, "Oh I remember when this friend of mine had this terrible problem and I felt so sorry for her." That kind of response. But it is difficult to get accessible sources to help them address their ethnicity, to understand not only how whiteness has been culturally constructed but the ways in which they've performed their own identities.

I talk to them about my own sense of identity as a child: blond hair, blue eyes, white skin ... like the princesses in my books. Potentially I was the princess and I acted this out. Looking back, I see that it was understood that my girlfriend who had dark hair and darker skin couldn't be the princess. She always had to be the dark prince. The earliest book I used was Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class.* She talks about how white woman were expected to be insipid, frail, useless creatures. Maybe some of them were, but others were incredibly angry and went behind their husband's backs to assist the black community. How femininity was constructed had to do with skin colour and class.

The history of race has become crucial to me since I've adopted Elena. When she was a baby I spent so many

NAAGS Hiroshima memorial service, Halifax. Photo: Bonnie Bobryk

hours looking at her face that when I looked into the mirror I thought there was something wrong with me because I was so white. It's a funny reversal. She's from Peru. Blond or fair babies now look peaked to me. At the beginning of the class, I tell the students that we cannot separate being female from being white. When they come to the class they think gender is all they are going to talk about.

Lynne: What kinds of readings and projects do you assign to think through this conjuncture of race, class, and gender?

Wilma: I usually start by assigning to them the article "Kindling Fires, Planting Forests," a conversation between Filipino-born artist Lani Maestro and three women students from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) of Greek, Jamaican, and Japanese heritage. It is very moving and accessible. I give this article as a warm up and then ask students to talk about their first memories of the colour of their skin or another culturally-specific story. For some, these stories overlap with religion. We do a few story-telling projects then we move into writing often with drawing exercises related to the writings. This is an important process. It's not enough to read books—they have to write about being white to figure it out. Frequently, when we read important and moving narratives about race, the white students regard themselves as nothing, or they exoticize non-whites saying "Oh they have this black history to relate to and I haven't anything. I am like a zero."

Lynne: Yes, as the critic Richard Dyer points out in his essay "White," white power has secured its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular.

Wilma: Yes, that's the struggle for the students, especially since Anglo-Protestant Caucasians are dominant in my class.

Lynne: To return to the title of your course, is "feminist" a problematic label in any way now?

Wilma: Not for me, no. I know that when issues of race have come up in the last two decades, feminism has been problematic. But as a lot of feminists have said the term is not a fixed concept. Part of the education process for all of us is learning that feminism's politics are unfixed—they grow and change. I have no problem with feminism.

I think the students still have a problem with it. In the first class I usually ask them to write down everything they have ever heard about feminism. I want to hear all the bad words. We talk about how to deal with the reactions they'll encounter. I plunge right into a discussion of the "dyke thing." For a lot of young heterosexual, or apparently heterosexual, women being called a "dyke" is a big deal. I make room for discussions about homophobia and sexual orientation right away. I'll also ask them to tell a story about their names. Why do they have their first and last names? This raises interesting questions about race, gender, and family history. These types of strategies work well in terms of discussions about the role of feminism.

Some students think that feminist art is art about

therapy. But what is the role of art? You're not in the classroom for therapy. I try to encourage the students to become angry rather than depressed because I think women often internalize anger and turn it against themselves. I encourage them to let it out. I have had students who are immobilized by strong emotions. I urge them to go home and make work, inside the closet if they have to! I don't need to see it but I'd like to hear about the process. Not having to worry about production values helps to get them started. But this aspect of teaching is particularly difficult. That's why I keep encouraging them to link their personal narratives with the social and to use theoretical analysis.

Carol: Has the institutional reception of the course, "Feminist Criticism," changed over time?

Wilma: For many years the administration asked me to defend the existence of the class. When I was up for promotion, I was criticized for being too ideological. But that's why I was hired! I often heard from colleagues that what I teach is peculiar. I have witnessed changes in the use of language but I haven't seen significant, wide-ranging change in the school just because "Feminist Criticism" is part of the curriculum. I think the phenomena of, "Well now we've satisfied them, they'll stop bothering us" still operates in certain quarters at the school. However, because of the course some women students feel stronger. They talk about experiences that are gender or race-related. Once students see how important feminism is for them they can actually effect change in the institution a lot faster than I can as faculty. They have permission to be louder and they have the numbers. They often feel vulnerable and powerless but I remind them constantly that they are very powerful. If I ask for something related to feminism in the school it's frequently perceived as an idiosyncratic demand. But the students just have to imply that there is considerable dissatisfaction over some matter and the administration takes note. One of the interesting twists in this recent round of budgetary cutbacks is that the "Feminist Criticism" course is collateral as the College defends its uniqueness as an institution. It was the first feminist studio art course in Canada: it's existence and the presence of noteworthy faculty like Barbara Lounder (Foundation), Susan McEachern (Photography), Jan Peacock (Intermedia), and other strong women have secured a certain reputation for the college.

Carol: Besides working for curricular change have you had a lot to do with affirmative action in the college?

Wilma: Given the current budgetary crisis, the only options we have for hiring now are with summer faculty and guest speakers. I am very intent on having women, Canadians, and regional people as visitors. I can't hope to balance the odds but at least these visitors adjust the discrepancy between the non-white to white faculty. I was on a committee concerned with underrepresented populations but the administration of the time didn't do anything with our recommendations. When we raised the issue of equity hiring they said: "We can't have Equity hiring until we have an equity officer because we need someone to monitor the situation." This, that, or the other. But when our current president, Alice Mansell, came for her interview, I asked her a leading question about affirmative action. She said, "When we have an opening we look at what we need. Well, what do we need? We need people that don't look like us, right." She made it clear that we don't just need a painter or a video artist, we need somebody who is not white, so the full range of a person's cultural knowledge is addressed.

Lynne: How do you balance the demands of home, work, and the studio?

Wilma: I find it very difficult to make any art if I am teaching—I do most of my studio work in the summer. Theoretically, I have one day per week for studio work. Often I get pressured into committee work on that day because people know I'm not teaching. If it's an important committee you feel an obligation to participate because there is always a need for critical voices. It seems to me that a lot of women who work on committees do the bulk of the domestic work at the college. There are some men who get out of committees by saying, "I don't do committees." My view is, if he's not going to do committee he's got to do something else—and it'd better be good!

It's difficult to reconcile the obligations between home and work, especially now with Elena all the evenings are taken care of. A lot of the women I know go home to a shared domestic situation. However, in many instances where two people work full-time, the woman still takes the major responsibility for child care. If somebody is able to make a lot of art, we should ask, "What is being done domestically to enable this?" No wonder women artists often make work about the domestic situation!

Carol: Further to this discussion on domestic labour, the institution, and class dynamics, one essay in *Working Class Women in the Academy* makes the point that when we tally up how many women are represented in any particular college, we often ignore or erase women in administrative and clerical positions. We forget about this huge infrastructure of women who run the educational institutions!

Lynne: What communities have you worked in outside of the academy?

Wilma: For about three years I was on the board of the artist-run centre, *Eye Level* Gallery. Shortly after I got here I curated a show called "On Masculinity" which featured the work of seven men. I also organized the Women in Peace show for the 1985 International Year of Peace which opened at Mount Saint Vincent at the height of all the protests against the Cruise Missile. Halifax and Dartmouth were hotbeds of protest. I've been involved with the peace community, but that community has been challenged in recent years—people have been too busy just surviving economically.

Carol: Will you speak about your participation in the NAAGS (Never Again Action Affinity Group)?

Wilma: The NAAGS were active for about six years as a anti-militarist affinity group that responded to political

crises. We were all members of the national peace group The Voice of Women. For our street theatre actions we ran the NAAGS rather anarchically but we did manage to accomplish a lot and had fun developing our particular characters and inventing appropriate costumes.

Carol: The NAAGS received considerable national publicity for the performance Debert Debunkers (1983).

Wilma: Yes, Debert Debunkers was interesting. We heard there was going to be a local NATO rehearsal to prepare for nuclear war. According to their publicity, government officials, military, and media people would be rushed to the closest bomb shelter. In the event of a nuclear explosion they were to be housed there until it was safe to come out. They were practicing for nuclear war. The NAAGS staged a number of actions including a fake lottery in a game show format on a busy Halifax street. The first prize was a front row seat at Ground Zero. The second prize was potassium cyanide for the whole family. The third prize was a one-way ticket to Debert, which is where the bomb shelter was located. Each of us assumed the role of some kind of nuclear fool: capitalist fool (that was my role), religious fool, and so on. The maternal fool just thought if you loved and hugged everybody and cleaned up all the nuclear shit everything would be fine. As a capitalist fool I thought that any amount of money could get me a ticket to the bomb shelter. This performance served as advance publicity for the evacuation to Debert.

A couple of weeks in advance of the evacuation, we issued a white paper called "The Continuity of People Program" which mimicked the official title of the nuclear rehearsal, "The Continuity of Government Program." We proposed that instead of marching all these aging government and military people to Debert, the whole shelter should be a sperm bank with room for women of childbearing age and a child care centre. We argued that if the goal was to maintain the species then we didn't need these old military and government guys. After all, God knows what their sperm was like! We dressed in fright wigs and lab coats and discussed sperm motility and sperm counts! I was trying to get pregnant at the time so I knew all about sperm. Some journalists were really angry at us for being irreverent. We distributed photographs, press releases, abbreviated sound bites, and handouts. The creation of media packages was something I learned from the performances staged by the American artist Suzanne Lacey. We targeted the national wire services and we were interviewed by Peter Gzwoski on "Morningside."

On the day of the evacuation about 100 women gathered at Debert. We pretended we were trying to get in to the bomb shelter with the military and government officials. We thought, "If you're going to play for real, we're going to do the same!" So we put on makeup as the wounded and walked the half-mile carrying "dead" bodies and tried to get in the gate. It was pretty terrible actually. It took us a long time to recover from that action. We made ourselves victims in the Debert evacuation which produced our name Never Again. The NAAGS performances used humour as social critique—to produce serious interventions as street theatre or media actions.

This conversation with Wilma Needham is one of 16 scholarly interviews conduced by Lynne Bell and Carol Williams over the last three years on the subject of women and change in the visual arts, thanks to a major research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Wilma Needham is assistant dean of Fine and Media Arts at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design where she has taught in the studio and foundation areas for 15 years. Her artwork centres on issues of the social, particularly in relation to gender. She has exhibited widely across Canada and internationally.

Lynne Bell, associate professor and head of the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan, is a historian of visual culture whose recent work has focussed on two collaborative research projects funded by SSHRC: the first (with Carol Williams) investigates the diverse practices of women artists, curators, and educators in Canada; the second (with Janice Williamson, University of Alberta) investigates interdisciplinary cultural practice on the prairies. Interviews conducted in these research projects are appearing in Westcoast Line, BC Studies, The Capilano Review, *and* Tessera, *among other journals.*

Carol Williams is a doctoral candidate in American and Women's History at Rutgers University. Her thesis "Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic 'Frontier' in the Pacific Northwest 1862–1912" considers the ramifications of photographic imagery, produced by professional and amateur photographers, anthropologists, and missionaries, on settler perceptions of "Indian life." Using photographs as a primary source, the research places an emphasis upon relations between women. Since 1988, Williams has taught as a sessional lecturer and published essays on contemporary women artists and activism in Canada.

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