

Interview with Ellen Rothenberg

BY JOHANNA BRANSON

JOHANNA BRANSON: I perceive a similar structure in most of your work, from the early performances to recent installations, in which the viewer is asked or obliged to participate in the construction of meaning. Do you see this as being true?

ELLEN ROTHENBERG: I have an interest in making work that resists a singular or static reading, work that operates on different levels simultaneously, that requires a re-viewing or a re-visiting by the viewer. Often, the intellectual or conceptual center is outside the individual pieces which make up a larger work. Meaning is rarely resolved within a single object, a single action or a single image, but derives instead from an additive associative resonance. This is a non-specific, non-linear relationship that can be reconfigured in different combinations. Meaning is formulated by a cumulative reading of the work.

On the surface the works in performance, on paper and in installation seem dissimilar, although the central ideas in the work cross disciplines. I'm not presenting conclusions and I'm not presenting finished arguments; I'm asking questions. Often there are loose ends and a certain level of ambiguity. The form asks the viewer to construct meaning out of fragments, and to respond to the questions in the work, perhaps with a question of his or her own. In that sense, the work demands participation. In *The Great Circle* (Fig.1) and *Subway Rebus* (Fig.5) — two performance pieces, one which took place in the city streets and the other in the subway system — many people actually travelled from location to location with the work. There was a similar fragmentation in *The Marginal Way* (Fig.34), an installation which was located throughout the architectural framework of two two-story structures. There were no maps; viewers encountered the installation sites in the same way that they might discover something on the street. Without an itinerary, the viewer's own experience would be pulled into the work, and the viewer would be asked to

JB: Do you think it's accurate to say that earlier in your work, you personified this searching, or thinking, or mulling over things, that in your performances you were a kind of protagonist?

JB: Could you be more specific about this subject matter?

JB: I'm struck by what you said about turning to performance as a way of draining out the distance between you and the audience. In the installations and the other kinds of work that you are doing now, it seems to me that you still accomplish that. Do you think that's in any way as a result of the materials that you use?. I guess what came to mind as you were speaking was your use of everyday materials and your personalization of them, whether it's belts or shoes. Sometimes I think your use of mundane, shared materials also punctures the distance between you and the audience.

construct meaning out of all of these parts, and make some decisions about their relationships. There wasn't a prescribed meaning.

ER: I became involved in performance because there was certain subject matter — ideas, and experiences — that I wanted to discuss but I didn't have the language to do so. Somehow it was necessary to insert myself in the work. It became an immediate, transformative experience.

ER: Sexual identity, homelessness and the difficulties of economic survival, the boundaries of social relationships. I was preoccupied with the question, "Where should art be located and who is the audience?" Performance allowed me to puncture the distance that exists between the act of making art and the audience and it gave me a voice and an arena for physical action. By moving outside of arts institutions to public sites for performance, I was able to broaden the audience for the work.

However, after a number of years of performing a contradiction emerged; the dilemma of being situated within the work did not allow me any perspective. It was impossible to have a contemplative relationship to what to what I was doing.

ER: I've never thought about materials functioning in that way. Perhaps the use of common objects draws the viewer into the work through his or her associations or particular history with these objects. I feel like I've always been drawn to certain objects, for example pencils and erasers. As a child, pencil cases and fresh notebooks of paper were extremely powerful objects. Going to the stationary store before the year started to purchase these things was a ritual act that suggested the promise and potential of the year. I've carried that sense of the object — its life, the object's innate power, its use — to the

objects I make or have fabricated. I have a preference for objects that have a certain material integrity. Where the materials of the object are not disguised but refer to the process of its making.

JB: Can you give an example?

ER: Tools attract me. As a child, my family visited historical reconstructions like Sturbridge Village. The exhibits are explanations of how life was lived and how things were made—for example, candle making or spinning. Often there were people in costume demonstrating the task or process. The explicated process, the evidence of the hand, and the clarity of how things worked was comprehensible, even to me as a child. There was nothing hidden or unavailable. The tools themselves were hand-made and their form revealed how they worked. The sense of the hand, of activity, is important. I am interested in objects and materials which may not be in common currency but suggest a certain history. They might reference an outdated technological process or the historical period during which they were used. For example, I prefer letter press printing and find that the pressing of the metal letter into the paper has its own beauty and distinct quality that computer generated type doesn't have. And I'm interested in the fabrication of objects, so I work with people who do casting or metal construction and whose shops and technology are more from the 19th century or early 20th century than the late 20th century.

JB: Why that time period? You're talking about a world of objects that was disappearing after our grandparents' generation. Is there any particular reason that it's that generation of materials?

ER: Maybe it's the last kind of technology that I can understand. Often it requires some hand labor, and most of them are made from machines that are not electronic.

JB: That are still based on hand movement.

ER: Hand movement and the role of the body is central in my attraction to both materials and objects. Some of my choices grow out of my experience as a performer, where the body and physical activities are at the center of the work. Those are fundamental

JB: There's a clear connection in the objects between the materials and how they were made physically. You can understand them. In a way, they're repositories of knowledge. And they encourage you to continue to think about the associations of the time in which they were made. They always have implications for direct action as well.

JB: It's clear that gender and sexual identity have been important issues in your work right along. Can you talk about that ?

JB: What do you mean?

JB: Anybody in particular you want to mention? You mean, for example, *Womanhouse*?

connections. For example, I find I'm attracted to shoes: to the activity of walking, the ability to transform yourself by putting on other peoples' shoes, to insert yourself in "their shoes."

ER: And use. The reason that the work draws people in is because people project themselves within it. People's associations with the particular materials and the suggestion for use inherent in the objects, makes a connection with the viewer. People can look at the belts in *Das Wesentliche* (Fig.40) and say it's about abuse. It's about beating. It's about bondage. It's about the body. It's about corseting. Printing a text describing skin on skin. It's about a visceral connection. I have my own associations and reasons, but I want to hook into other people's experience.

ER: I was very affected by the feminist movement of the 70's and the politics of protest from the 1960's. However, my training as an artist was very traditional.

ER: I received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in print making at a school where there was one female faculty member. There was little support for my work except from the other students. In school we worked on landscapes, self-portraits, abstractions, still lifes. It was a traditional training. At the same time, there was the political activity of the late 60's; people were protesting, organizing, taking drugs and going to parties. Only after leaving school did it occur to me that my experience was unlike that of my teachers. My training as an artist in color, form and space had nothing to do with the subject of my work. At this time, I was very affected by the feminism and the political and social activism of the artwork that was coming out of California.

ER: *Womanhouse*. Some of the early California performance artists like Suzanne Lacey and Barbara Smith. There were

JB: Did you feel that it was uncharted territory? I remember in some of your early performances I had the sense of you feeling your way along, almost presenting tableaux — very quiet, very slow, very thoughtful examinations of gender. There was a work, and I don't remember the title, where you appeared in a black slip?

JB: And I remember sitting there thinking this is a woman who comes out of territory that is only too charted and too overdetermined and she's trying to figure out how to proceed. That's actually close to a title you used for another work.

JB: You did this in *Man on the Street* and *Subway/Rebus*. It was still uncommon at the time you performed *Man on the Street*. Now, of course in the last couple of years, everything is cross-dressed. But at the time, 1980, there was still a real shock to people who saw you; people who didn't know you would do a double and triple take to try to figure out who you were, and what you were, and how to be comfortable with it.

many people who were doing work about identity, sexuality, and the place of women in society. I was strongly affected by that work. It gave me permission to go ahead; I began performing. It was something new, it was a new way of speaking.

ER: *Episodes*.

ER: *She Wants to Understand How to Get from One Place to Another*. In *Episodes*. I wore cardboard high heels strapped to my feet, and I had drawn cardboard arms. There were direct references to prescribed femininity, and my own sense of difficulty of fitting within that prescription. The reason my sexuality was indeterminate in many of the public performance pieces was I wanted to reject a socially accepted definition of femininity and the notion that as a woman you would never dare transgress the confinement of established boundaries. Dressing with an indeterminate sexuality allowed me greater freedom. This is nothing new; historically woman have dressed as men for that exact reason. Somehow in drag I was able to perform on the street, or in the subways. I never would have been able to do these performances in a skirt, heels, and a silk blouse.

ER: It's still a shocking act, because it suggests a social critique. It questions the rationale for certain codes of behavior and dress. When you don't subscribe to these codes it raises questions and everyone who's around you is suddenly on an unstable surface, or in an unfamiliar, uncharted landscape...

JB: For the people who are watching, it does have the effect of putting them in a state of not knowing, so that they may be open to suggestion.

JB: Why don't we stand together in groups?

JB: In your performances your protagonist often seems to go through various border crossings — male/female, public/private, even what you might call normal/deranged — and the spaces in your installation set up borders as well. I'm thinking of the way people huddle in a constructed space to see through the wall in an excerpt from the Anne Frank Project to watch the videotape. Or the bending, stretching and climbing you asked people to do when looking at *Measuring with Eyes and Feet*. I saw those enterprises as being somewhat similar; they achieve the aim that you just described.

JB: The larger questions that you are hoping to suggest to people center on our usual patterns of behavior and social interaction.

ER: I hope that suddenly the questions become larger: why are we standing as a group on the street with many people whom we don't know watching someone pouring detergent on the sidewalk? And then possibly — why don't we do this more often?

ER: Yes, why don't we stand together in groups? Why don't we talk to each other? What is the nature of public discourse and public social exchange? Why is it so confining? Why are people at such remove from one another? Those kinds of questions are what surround those very public performances.

ER: It's also a question of how far people are willing to participate as viewers of art. In *Measuring with the Eyes and Feet* (Fig.35), I wanted to subvert the expectation of where art should be located— in the center of the wall under lights. The subject of the work was where women located themselves in urban/architectural space. And so I took down the lighting track. I placed objects at the ceiling, around corners, between a false gallery wall and the window. Text for the installation was adhered with wax to the edge of the molding at six inches above floor level. The type size was small and could be read only by bending over. The objects at the ceiling could be seen in part from below because they were sitting on glass shelves. But you had to climb ladders and stick your head between the beams for a very private kind of viewing experience to see the objects as they were meant to be seen. The work demanded a physical response. There were people who were afraid to climb the ladders. Women were taking off their heels so they were able to climb. There was a sense of challenge. Some people maintained a viewing distance of several feet and missed the work entirely.

ER: Right. I'm hoping that people will start questioning their relationship to art, their assumptions about where they expect to find it, about the distance at which they are supposed to view and not touch.

JB: From an early work, *She Wants to Understand How to Move from One Place to Another*, to the recent *Handwriting Analysis* (Fig.32) in the Anne Frank Project, there's a sustained interest in language. I'm curious what your thoughts are on that.

JB: So it works in several different ways. In your early work the categorizing function of language was what seemed to be uppermost in your mind. It was a kind of resistance. You were pushing categories like gender away, and resisting oversimple or overdetermined categories.

JB: You make the language itself a spectacle in a way. There is something to be contemplated in several ways at once. You make language a part of the world of sensation and vision.

ER: Language. Well, speaking and reading are two ways in which we learn. I've always been a reader. Growing up, I felt isolated. Books were important companions. Being able to enter another world through words was magic. I didn't have that experience watching television, but I sometimes did with film. My earliest and most sustained means of travel was through words.

Also words are labels. They form categories. They're the means by which we organize and name. Labeling, naming, categorizing have always had a fascination for me. Spoken or printed language is a way of being able to talk about things outside of the language of images, which is the area where artists have been relegated. As an artist you inhabit the world of images. Language is a bridge to other worlds. It's a powerful act to name or to label or to use language as an artist.

ER: I'm also very much attracted by the letter and letter forms visually. For example, in the works where I used wooden type, it was the visual representation of language that interested me. Language has a physical presence and a visual presence that's compelling. My father was interested in old signs, shop signs, and he used to give us cast metal letters for birthday presents. He had a collection of circus poster broadsides, 19th century for the most part, some 18th century. Through his interests I was aware of the beauty of letters and the printed form of language. Also, I worked as a graphic designer and type design was central to that work.

ER: Language is the vernacular. It's what exists between people. It's the way that people speak to one another. Incorporating it into my work is another effort at speaking to people.

JB: I have three more questions to ask you and each one of those has to do with ideas raised by people who have written texts for this book. The first question is about an issue raised in Dan Eisenberg's essay and in an essay by Alvin Rosenfeld, "Popularization and Memory: the case of Anne Frank". And that is the issue of how we work towards a sense of the past, and of what role documents and objects can play in writing history. There's a quote from Rosenfeld's article where he says that "he hopes to clarify how on the level of popular perceptions, a sense of the past seems to be shaped less on the basis of information contained in historical documents than through the projection of single elements of ubiquitous and compelling power." Now what he is saying is that these single images lead to vastly oversimplified and tendentious presentations of the past. He's talking in particular about Anne Frank's presentation, both in the United States and Germany, as well as Israel.

JB: About how each country took her diary, the already edited, presented and published diary and further skewed the information through the translation, through the way the play based on it was then translated and further edited down the text. He also discusses the movie, and how certain presentations of her life were emphasized. In a way this simplifying into single images becomes to him a method of falsifying the past, or denying the past and its complexity. Were these ideas that were important to you in any way as you embarked on the Anne Frank project?

ER: And he briefly talked about Japan.

ER: I began with a memory of the text as an adolescent. My experience as a young girl—reading the diary, seeing the play, and the movie—was disturbing. When I returned to the text thirty years later there was a new document to look at, the critical edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. This edition, prepared by The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, contained texts that were part of the original diary but not included in the first publication, information about the Frank family's history and notes on the handwriting analysis. The images of the handwriting analysis were my threshold into the work. This analysis was conducted to substantiate the authenticity of the diary and to determine conclusively Anne Frank's authorship. The idea was to address neo-fascist claims that the diary was a hoax.

In contemporary society there is an overload of information and an insistence on speed. There is no time to dig deeper, to understand the complexity of one's own relationship to this history or these historical events. Because this history is difficult and painful, people need icons or symbols. They want to have an understanding that can be easily contained and shelved. A terrain of unanswerable questions, of unknowable experience, of uncomfortable associations is difficult to negotiate. And people protect themselves from that kind of experience or that level of questioning or knowing. Whole countries and cultures have used Anne Frank as an escape valve. She's become a symbol for people without their having any kind of self exploration or real understanding of her experience.

JB: When you say that as a girl the experience of reading the diary, of seeing the play and the movie was disturbing—what about it was disturbing?

JB: It was given to you as sort of a character model, as how one's character should be?

JB: You were put in a bind in the case of Anne Frank, because hers is an arrested development. In a way, it was just character outside history. One was supposed to have these character traits outside any time or any events that happened to you.

JB: When you recently found the critical anthology, what moved you to pick that up, to read it? Were you still interested in Anne Frank?

ER: The book was given to me to provide a role model. The first time I read *The Diary* there was no information regarding her experience after the arrest. That was an unarticulated horror. Here was an intelligent, talented young Jewish girl who never got the chance to grow up. In that way she is a confusing role model.

ER: Yes. *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the story of Harriet Tubman were both books that were given to me as examples of admirable and emulative behavior.

ER: Right. It just terrified me because I never felt up to the task. I wasn't going to be able to sneak back in the plantations and lead people to liberation, or be intelligent and courageous while constantly facing arrest and deportation. *The Diary* as originally published portrays Anne in a singular fashion. Other things that I might have related to during adolescence were edited out of the diary.

ER: No, it was my husband's family history; they were in Europe during the war. His mother went through the concentration camp system and his father was in Soviet labor camps. It's their experience and Dan's film work which deals with his experience of

JB: Was the handwriting analysis interesting to you for all the reasons that we've been talking about, such as its graphic complexity?

JB: The second question that I have for you is that in her essay Lynne Cooke suggests a parallel between Christa Wolf's writing, her investigation of memory and forgetting with regards to history, and your working process, in particular the way you use original and duplicate materials to invite questions of truth, and duplicity. Lynne Cooke explicitly says that both Wolf and you have a moral code of artistic behavior rather than aesthetics regulated by the senses, and that this moral code informs your art. Do you agree with that?

JB: So in a way it's a lesson to viewers or to readers not to heroicize the artist and not to suspend your own moral code when looking at work.

this particular history that has influenced and affected me. I bought the critical edition for him as a birthday present, took it back and have been working from it ever since. Initially, it was the images of the handwriting analysis that really drew me.

ER: The graphic quality, the language of science imposed over the language of the hand. This questioning, the necessity to prove someone's existence—and the authenticity. The question of authenticity was very provocative and compelling.

ER: One likes to think of oneself as a moral person and that one's work and reason for working is tied to a code of ethics and that this informs your activity as an artist. Recently, Christa Wolf's history has unraveled in a very public fashion through the disclosure of her collaboration with the Stasi. This is a case in point. The artist is not exempt. The artist is not pure. It is a romantic notion of the artist to think of her as a heroine. The artist is as susceptible to making the same kinds of mistakes as she may be skilled at critiquing or discussing them. The tragedy of Christa Wolf may be that for so many people she personally was held up as an example. For a German, perhaps someone who grew up in the former East Germany, one needed to believe in Christa Wolf as a symbol. My experience as an American is quite different. But we are all fallible—capable of making mistakes and forgetting our mistakes. I don't see her work as duplicitous. I think that the areas that she describes or explores in her work are significant. And the fact that she was a collaborator and forgot being a collaborator seems true and human.

ER: One shouldn't expect the artist to be the voice of truth. It's just another voice. And that it doesn't relieve the viewer of the responsibility to question. In fact, it underlines it.

JB: At the beginning of her essay, Cindi Katz sets out by saying that she's going to look at your work in terms of geographic scale, and the ways you investigate scale through a number of your works. The reason that she thinks this is important is that by challenging and investigating different constructions of scale that exist already, you release our imagination into new spaces, new ways of moving and existing in time, and that the purpose of that, from her point of view, is social change. Do you share that aim?

ER: Yes. She's looking at the work from her standpoint as a geographer. Pushing against boundaries, performing in public spaces, locating work in places that demand a level of participation from the viewer, speaking directly about woman's experience of architectural and urban space, and trying to describe what that space consists of, how it's defined, resisting the social definition of where women belong, or what their world should consist of— all of that is an effort to redefine, to ask other people to question what is expected or where we belong. There are so many sign posts that let you know whether you belong somewhere, or whether you're an outsider and you don't belong, and who belongs together. That level of confinement has always been something that I want to resist. It's a kind of categorization that's boring. It usually defines like with like, and it's a very superficial reading of social groups. It's more interesting to have diversity.

The potential for change has to do with going against the grain of social expectation. Not all the time, but enough of the time so that you're not located where you're supposed to be. You're required to decide where you want to be and who you want to be with. I never felt that there was a place for me or for my work in the institutions. Whether it was in art school which I was repeatedly advised to leave by people who felt threatened by my work or by my presence, or in museums that had no program or context for it. Necessity demanded that I find other places for the work and for my life as an artist. It would have been an accommodation to give up. And that was the only option that was offered to me, to be relegated to such a marginal existence that there was no room or support to work or to make work. And so if I was going to continue, it necessitated an exploration of other spaces and other

audiences. There was such a dynamic, an excitement when I did that. It worked. And then that in itself became a subject of the work.

JB: So once again, it's not that you set up an agenda or a strategy to effect social change so much as you were living through the need yourself, personally, to find new ways of working and new ways of thinking.

ER: Right. It was a question of survival. ■

Figures 6-17 (next four pages):
Those Which Are Most Common
1989
twelve panels, 30¹/₈ in. x 22¹/₈ in.
handmade paper
with linoleum block prints

Installation at the
DeCordova Museum,
Lincoln, Massachusetts