

SPEAK!

An Exhibition
of Work by
Ellen Rothenberg



COMMON SENSE: Potential Energy and Transformation in the props of Ellen Rothenberg

Anyone who has seen the performances of Ellen Rothenberg cannot approach these objects with anything but a memory of her performances. For although they are complete and coherent in themselves, these props acquire still greater resonance in the charged context of performance. Because they are objects, dimensional and tangible, they remain as the only artifacts of those events. Muses to the memory, they undergo a kind of archaeological transformation; shards replacing larger more complete works, or events in time and space. This transformation is just one of the many these objects undergo. It is the quality of transformation, and with it a simultaneous sense of potential energy, that makes these objects and props so compelling.

When one looks at them, the senses of touch, sight, and sound are aroused. These objects want to do something; they want to be heard, they want a hand to touch them, to activate their meaning, to complete them.

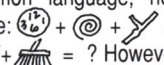


This is the aspect of potential energy that is essential to all of them. They all point in the direction of action, and it is through action that they undergo transformation.

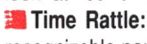
First is the transformation that ordinary materials or objects undergo when they are put together by Rothenberg to form a prop. Unlikely combinations occur; a collage of

unrelated textures and surfaces becomes strangely unified. The raw materials are simple, reduced elements such as sticks, candles, feathers, wood, wire, string, and cardboard. Many

1. surfaces have words

printed on them. Oftentimes, these simple elements are conjoined to create new meanings entirely. Transformations of language are implied in this as well. As new definitions are created, so too is language, or at least a new light is made to fall on it. That is why the rebus is such an important element in Rothenberg's work. It is where language and object reside as equivalent values. If we would explode the props to create a rebus, it would still remain,

in common language, nonsensical. For example:  = ? or VOICE +  +  = ? However, when joined physically together their meaning is activated, and when in use, defined. Let us look at four of them individually:

 **Time Rattle:** It is an object made of recognizable parts: a smoothed twig for a

handle, a clockface, and a mechanical spring bound with wire. These elements are natural, abstract, industrial. The wooden handle brings to mind a shaman's rod or a well used tool. The dang-

2.

ling spring insists on a new way to keep time; by hitting the clock face. This rattling of time, shaking it loose, has a primitive quality about it, but also a subversive one. Replacing well ordered seconds with a musical beat of the body, the body asserts its authority over time. And so time is released from its absolute standard and made strictly subjective, mutable, a plaything. You can hold it in your hand and control its tempo as well.



Ruler Shoes: Certain elements appear over and over again in Rothenberg's performances, recycled or adjusted. Shoes appear consistently, allied with other objects or altered in appearance. These shoes, an old pair of mens oxfords, have rulers attached on both flanks of each shoe. The rulers are themselves altered in Rothenberg's characteristic drawing style: flat white and outlined in black paint. This is seemingly a contradiction; to take four rulers (each a foot long) and to paint over them the image of a ruler. This, like the Time Rattle has a powerful effect. The gesture reclaims space as a private domain, appropriated from the ideal back to the particular—a perfect foot made imperfect. The measuring device is altered as well. The shoes return both measurement and language back to their respective roots; more essential, more tangible and at the same time more direct. Language is very much at issue here. Rothenberg questions just what it is we agree to call things, what constitutes a standard, and in doing so asks whether things change once they are named.

The return of the rulers to the shoes of real "feet" can only mean they function



3.

through the body. Where time is in the hand with the Time Rattle space is on the foot with the Ruler Shoes.

VOICE Broom: The light leads the way. The mouth is extended by the handle. Just look at that word "handle" - this displacement of hand and mouth is a deep one; amplified along the wooden distance of the rod to the word VOICE on top of the broom head. There the voice is heard and what is it? The sound of stiff bristles slowly pushed against an unyielding pavement, accumulating as it moves. What of this mouth/hand/voice association? Rothenberg never really answers such questions. It's the lambent quality of the juxtapositions that is the key. If it were not enough to merely replace the hand

with the mouth, the word itself is made into an object; wooden and silent: voice unheard, or at most eked out of laborious, useless work. This work, in the lexicon of social activity, is woman's work. It's hard to say whether we see these objects as having the common frame of gender from Rothenberg's handling of materials or whether gender is actively articulated as subject matter. One thing is clear, they arise out of an intuitive shaping process that is open

and associative. In this regard Rothenberg reaches to the core of her experience, an essentially feminist perspective. It is interesting to note that Rothenberg often takes on the mantle of male identity in her performances, drawing attention to gender issues.

COMMON SENSE: It is a small attache case labelled in felt with the words "COMMON SENSE". Of course this in itself is a comical gesture. As if you could contain in a suitcase those qualities which are rarely common but always assumed to be. Standing in place with a wash-pail on one foot, mouse-traps in each hand and a whistle in her mouth, Rothenberg slings the suitcase around her neck. She beats out a



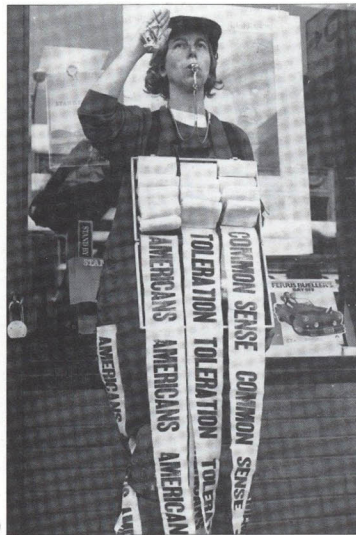
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military drill on the whistle and pail, almost a life and drum. Once in rhythm the case is unlatched, revealing fifteen tightly bundled streamers, hand printed in block letters. They read as telegraphic quotes from Tom Paine's revolutionary pamphlet "Common Sense": National Honor, Toleration, Americans, Jobs, Civil Rights, Paper Money etc... As the streamers unfurl to pail and whistle a common sense begins to emerge. The unleashed energy behind the benign exte-

rior of this briefcase is sharply felt. The ironies of object and message run parallel. The common sense of Paine is seditious, dangerous. It upsets the social order. But our own social order has its roots in these revolutionary impulses. Similarly this benign object holds behind it a kind of chaos of streamers. Unseen at first and part of daily life, it becomes a call to action, a call to consciousness.

This object, like many others in this show, refers to the process of putting things together, of taking things apart, of affirming our senses and our particularly human talent of making connections; our common sense.

Daniel Eisenberg 1/89



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Singularity, I

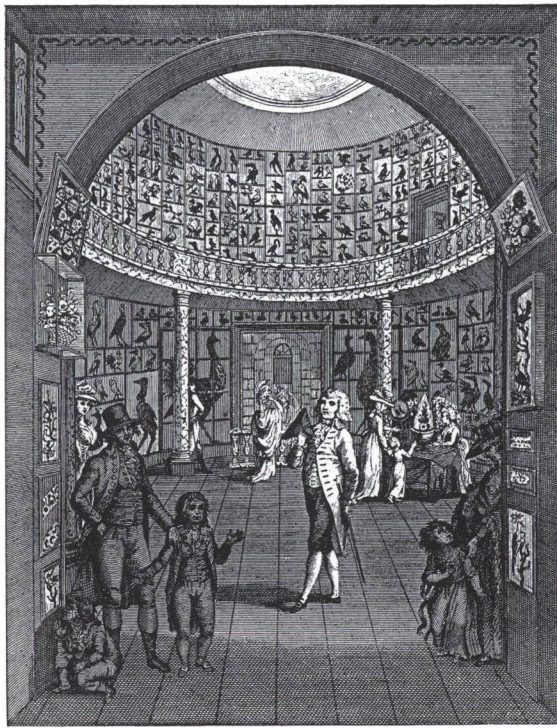
I would like to start in a time and place quite distant from the here and now of Ellen Rothenberg's performances. In the illustration at right is the cabinet of curiosities assembled by Sir Ashton Lever on London; this engraving is the frontispiece to a Companion to the Museum he published in 1790. Cabinets of curiosities such as his were assembled by many people in Europe until the early nineteenth century, and they seem quaint to modern eyes. We are used to modern, often state-run museums of specialized disciplines—art, anthropology, zoology—with objects organized most often in descending chronologies, filling in the subsets of a universal map of the world through time. Sir Ashton Lever's cabinet was presented differently. It was suite of rooms full of the various objects he had collected. There is a gun that exploded in the hand of a man without

harming him (exhibited in the Hall, Glass Case 1, No. 1); there is a nest of the banana bird from Jamaica (in the Saloon, Apartment IV, Glass Case III, Shelf III). He organized such diverse objects according to various schemes; sometimes they are grouped according to place of origin, sometimes according to kind, such as "naturalia" (nest), or "artificialia" (gun). Chronology is not an organizing principle.

Earlier, in the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon had written about his dream of the perfect collection. It would have a botanical garden with various climates, holding one each of all the world's plants; it would have an animal park that was as inclusive as Noah's Ark; it would have a cabinet of curiosities both natural and artificial, objects that could not be so neatly classified, things acquired by "singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things." It is as if Bacon knew

and the Shuffle of Things

he needed a place for the uncategorized in his park, which otherwise would be a tiny map of the world. The cabinets of curiosities seemed to be the place where collectors could concentrate their energies on the problem of how to go about knowing the world, how to try to figure out what to believe. Indeed, as explorations around the world increased, and more and more objects poured back into Europe, collectors had to constantly revise and expand their notion of Bacon's perfect park. There was a steady business in fakery—mermaids, unicorns—and for some scholars the cabinets became vitiated by fraud and misrepresentation. For others, however, collecting and presenting their objects led to further questioning. In view of constant, surprising discoveries, how could one know what not to believe? For these collectors, curiosity prevailed. That which was curious was that which excited speculation and investigation, also that which was prepared with special skill, also that which was a souvenir of travel, and even, still related to the word "cure," that which was brought to a state of readiness, healed. One can imagine vividly alert people, following the impulses of their curiosity, adjusting their



ideas and beliefs, trying to make sense of what came through their everyday lives, organizing these objects into tableaux for contemplation.

Later, in the nineteenth century, questions of scale changed the complexion of collecting activity altogether. The truly mind-boggling numbers of objects that were collected turned organization and categorization into a major post-enlightenment industry. Sir Ashton had not yet succumbed to these pressures, but he felt them coming. He published the *Companion* because by 1790 his collection had become too large for him to support—he had acquired a great deal of the booty from Captain Cook's voyages, for example—and he was obliged to open it to the public and charge admission. He, and other collectors like him, became showmen of sorts. They

publicized their cabinets, advertising visits to them as being special events. The central figure in our illustration may be Sir Ashton, gazing out at us, or it may be an ideal viewer, standing in for our own presence. At any rate, we are clearly invited into this fantastic scene. These collections had come to serve as *Theatrum Mundi*, small theatres of the world.

II Ellen Rothenberg's performances comprise a similar *Theatrum Mundi*, a theatre of the world, especially the everyday world, the mundane. She creates a mobile membrane, sometimes enclosing a gallery space, sometimes enclosing a space on the streets or in a shop window, sometimes moving like a bubble up and down the channels of the city through the streets and the subways. Her temporarily charged spaces hold mundane objects—shoes, aprons, a pushbroom, rulers, a megaphone—which are either items of apparel or tools for moving, amplifying, measuring.

Rothenberg changes the uses of these objects, sometimes nudging, sometimes slinging them out of the various categories we've made for them in our minds so that we become steadily more alert as we watch her.

In "Man on the Street," Rothenberg stood walking in place on the street talking to herself, dressed in a man's black suit and golf cleats, wearing a transparent plastic half-mask. The person she became kept muttering about his worries, fretting over possible ways to solve daily problems, figuring out how to pay the rent. This person was the



noise in our minds, the noise we can usually keep composed behind our public street faces. The noise had slipped out, and was inhabiting a distracting, embarrassing, visible, audible body in front of us. Perhaps to our surprise, this person fit right in on the street.

In "Subway/Rebus," Rothenberg's bubble of space floated down into the subways. This time her black suit was covered with bundles of white chalk marks, and she performed various activities. Early on, she held a flowered picture frame around her head, and wore the sign "hello" pasted over a beard. Later, she walked very slowly, an island in the rushing crowds, and carried a clod of sod in front of her. In a major, central subway station, she made a small "scene," enclosing a space with picket fencing, performing with her props and a tree of signs. In effect, she created tableaux both on moving trains and in the stations. These tableaux referred to and reshuffled the presences and absences of the subways—the absence of growing grass, the press of time schedules, the absence of speech, the press of crowds—the tableaux themselves echoing and reframing the artificial staging of the underground networks.

Marcel Duchamp made notes on certain kinds of events—sitting on a chair still warm from another body, yawning—which he called weak energies. There is a fugitive, yet intensely personal warmth which is a little shocking. Such surprises, or shifts often occur while Rothenberg performs. Sometimes it comes when her face, with all its own variety of color, texture, and detail emerges from behind a



mask, or similarly when her hands appear at the edge of broadly stencilled, flat, bright, paper kimono sleeves. Other times it comes when her calm, unremarkable manner suddenly becomes focussed in a performance, face flushing, eyes absolutely trained on a task, losing all peripheral vision.

In the entrance to the current exhibition, a similar shift occurs when what seemed to be a house, a private place of repose and domesticity, becomes in-

stead a passageway, exposed to change and even violence. The identity of the room seems to shift or dissolve even as we stand there. In Rothenberg's books and drawings, spaces shift in the same way, so that we are left questioning how to read what we see. Sometimes we are left wondering what to believe, as in a set of drawings full of information about reports of space aliens. In short, the personae and objects Rothenberg creates are entities without identities, collapsing our sense of categorization, of secure boundaries. We are left to speculate, to investigate, to negotiate credibility in a world of change and expansion. The way a group of objects personally assembled can lead us to think how to know, what to believe, how to distinguish plausible forgery from fantastic reality, this attitude of curiosity is the bridge that arches from Sir Ashton Lever's gentleman standing in a pool of light in the cabinet of curiosities to Ellen Rothenberg's man shuffling in the street.

Johanna Gill 1/89

Ellen Rothenberg is an artist who works in several media: performance, video, and paper. She has done over thirty performances in various locations and venues ranging from street corners, the subways, shop windows, and lobbies of public buildings to more-or-less traditional gallery/museum spaces. She makes extensive use of handmade props and costumes (often out of paper) and has produced videotapes based on her performance work. Recently her drawings, costumes and props have been exhibited in galleries and museums.

Rothenberg graduated from Cornell University in 1971; she received the Master of Fine Arts degree from the Massachusetts College of Art in 1978. She is a 1987 and 1983 recipient of the Massachusetts Artists Fellowship, a 1986 recipient of a

Fusion/Fission grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and The Rockefeller Foundation, and a "New Works" grant from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities and Mobius. Rothenberg has performed and exhibited her work in many cities in the USA and Canada. She is a frequent artist-in-residence and visiting artist.



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6. Cabinet of Curiosities illustration: The Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University
7. "Man on the Street" (1981), photo: John Waite
8. "Subway/Rebus" (1988), photo: Bruce T. Martin
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