



ELLEN ROTHENBERG

*“She wants to understand
how to move from
one place to another”*

Spaces of Possibility/

Spaces of Change:

the personal geography

of Ellen Rothenberg

by Cindi Katz

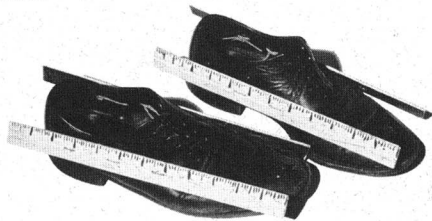
Geographic scale is a means of staging the world and situating oneself in it. Scale is often understood descriptively as a hierarchical scheme for ordering space, but the production of scale is an inherently political act wherein the multiple arenas of social life are constituted and identity is negotiated. Geographic scale resonates with tension between what is held within a space and the lines drawn between spaces. The socially constructed nature of accepted demarcations such as those between home, body, and community is usually masked by its taken-for-grantedness. A spatially informed politics not only would expose the constructions and seek their origins, but would work in ways that transgress them and produce new spaces that empower more than rein in. This kind of politics is at the core of Ellen Rothenberg’s work which produces space both metaphorical and material to call into question and violate the constructed separations between public and private, body and world, lost and found.

Rothenberg’s performances and props intrigue and compel me as much for the specific and wonderful ways they produce space as for the way they interrogate and reframe issues at the heart of my work as a cultural geographer and feminist social theorist—orientation, mobility, and control over personal and public space. As



Figure 28: *History or Choice*, 1989
photo collaboration with
Bruce T. Martin
produced in conjunction with the
installation *For the Instruction
of Young Ladies*
Installation at the
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

Rothenberg charts a course for exploring the meanings and multiple determinations of the identities offered by gender, work, class, and nationality, she undermines any possibility of holding these social locations separate. One of her most telling metaphors, a pair of compass shoes (Fig.34), in the *Landscape Vitrine* from *The Marginal Way* (1990), suggests a means to navigate that continually undermines itself. Perched on stacks of plates and surrounded by the location numbers off telephone poles, the shoes in the vitrine un/settle—wearing them Rothenberg might move but is always already home; her ability to wayfind pivots on her own axis. Likewise in *Speak Speak Speak!* (1987), her ruler shoes (Fig.29) make her body the standard measure. In that piece she literally traces a path that moves but cannot leave home, that travels but finds no safe harbor. Wearing an enormous kimono of stiff paper with “HOME” stencilled all over it, an Asian mask, and a broom as a hat, she trudges along a path, dragging a model of a house, her head framed in a video monitor, grasping a banner stamped “family” in her outstretched hand. To write these words it sounds obvious, but the thrill of Ellen Rothenberg’s work is its astonishing subtlety and wry contradictions—the striking beauty of the *Home Kimono* seduces as the “house and chain” jars.



In Rothenberg's work, the pain of everyday life choices is encoded as spatial practice. She stages a kind of representational space so textured and rooted that it allows us, in the words of Henri Lefebvre,¹ "to rediscover time...in and through space." For Lefebvre, this rediscovery, which explicitly recovers the production of space, counters the mystifying fragmentation of modern society. What Lefebvre was after, and Rothenberg provides, was a way of understanding the social in the spatial and the spatial as social relations. He was working against the dominant tendency to compartmentalize—to understand space as a container for discrete objects or as something discontinuous. His project countered conventional knowledge of space that "wavers between description and dissection," because it was "integrated unintentionally into existing society and forced to operate within that society's framework." In *Speak Speak Speak!*, which plays with the simultaneity of fixity and motion, self and otherness, representations and received identities, Rothenberg uses spatial strategies—the tethering of her body to home, the constant framing of her motion—to question that very framework.

Similarly, in (Fig.35) *Measuring with Eyes and Feet* (1991) Rothenberg sets up a series of spatial metaphors to describe the resonances between women's sociospatial marginalization and multiple roles, the ways women are nowhered while having to be everywhere. Ladders lead to glass ceilings on which rest a "motherhood belt," "know/how gloves," and "passion meter underwear." At the foot of the ladders are a purse filled with burned candles and the *Hers Shoes* (Fig.26), a pair of shoes with clocks on the toes, each set to a different time. Time geographers who spent years studying and charting the paths and encounters of people's daily lives and foundered on finding a means to illustrate meaningfully the multiple and competing time-space demands on social actors might draw inspiration from the elegance of the *Hers Shoes* for conveying their insights.

1. Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. p. 91.

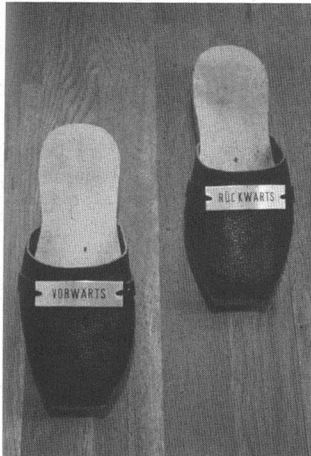
Throughout Rothenberg's work, shoes and other props tell stories of encumbered mobility and blurred boundaries. In her public performance, *Man on the Street* (1981), she becomes a deranged man ranting through mundane choices to resolve deeply unsettling problems. Un-grounded, she scrapes in place, grasping at possible futures that perish as they are uttered. The metronome of her cleats at once marks time and scratches at the world. In another part of *The Great Circle* (Fig.1) she wears a papier mâché suit of tabloid front pages. She rolls the "time/money furrower," designed after an early American farming tool — on one side a quarter on the other a clock — shouting "the great circle." Always moving, her newspaper suit encompassing a world and encumbering a body, she goes nowhere, producing a space that traces time as money. In *Vices and Virtues* (1989) bread shoes sit neatly on a series of doormats under aprons inscribed with each of the vices and virtues (Fig.33). Their homey presence transfigures movement to rootedness and binds the domestic to a catalogue of sin and morality.

This move is reversed in her public performance *Hello Traitor* (1992) where the bread shoes insinuate home-made evil. Rothenberg walks through Berlin in the shoes, wearing a man's suit jacket with price tags over the front and a "verkauft" (sold) sign on the back. In blond braids dangling from a hat (Fig.30), she frames *The German Question* (Fig.27) — saluting as she raises a plastic hot dog to her mouth. Later in the piece she sweeps a cavernous open space, pushing a giant street broom with the word "voice" mounted on it. In gardening shoes marked "forwards" and "backwards," (Fig.31) she scrapes along in front of a monolithic housing project in the eastern part of Berlin. Her act, which recalls the *Man on the Street* carefully sweeping a patch of sidewalk in a maniacal bid for meaningful presence, makes literal the metaphor of 'municipal housekeeping' through which women, marginalized from production in the nineteenth century, reinserted themselves into public life. This replacement has added urgency in post-war Berlin as Rothenberg marks her presence, her silenced but insistent voice as woman and Jew, in the city.

Figure 30:
German American Hunting Cap
1992
prop from *Hello Traitor*
plaid woolen cap and flax braids.

Figure 31:
Ruckwärts/Vorwärts Shoes
1992
prop from *Hello Traitor*
German gardening clogs and
engraved aluminum labels

Props from performance at
Festival Giannozzo, Berlin, Germany



The “backwards and forwards” shoes suggest history as well as geography, and Rothenberg’s more recent work moves through time as well as space. Again the course she charts is rooted, embodied, personal and deeply political — not an anonymous history, nor a single trajectory but constantly reworked, multiply traveled paths in which fragments of identity are recovered, foreclosed possibilities reopened. In this project, the diaries of Anne Frank provide a perfect lens to refract the world and position herself in time and space. In *Partial Index* (1991) Rothenberg’s fascination with the written word (Fig.43), the act of writing as an historical and spatial practice, and the marking of space and time as a means to recover memory and the loss of bearing is brought to bear with profound elegance on the case of Anne Frank.

The work is a meditation on indexing as at once a marker of loss and a means of location and retrieval. It turns on the power of the absent presence, simultaneously recovering, documenting, and mapping all the detail of Frank’s life as if it could somehow conjure her presence, and building a structure that marks her loss in the traces. This move, of course, subversively reworks the cold efficiency of Nazism—the very tale it tells marks the failure of all their cataloguing and indexing to erase those numbered for extermination, while the piece (and the diary) testify to the singular horrors of their success. Rothenberg attempts to locate herself/ Anne—victim/witnesses, subject/objects—in the diary and in contents of the attic quarters that comprised the world of its utterance. The blown up samples of Frank’s writing from a handwriting analysis (Fig.32), with arrows showing the direction of her pen stroke, are maps to the irrecoverable site of enunciation. If we pore over them long enough it seems we might at last locate Frank, whose loss is what makes the minutiae of her presence so powerful and important.

It is on the minutiae, the mundane practices and fragments, of everyday life that Ellen Rothenberg’s work turns. She is an explorer of her homeland, producing a space that pivots on the inseparable axes of identity, history, and geography. Her explorations are of the ordinary, the elemental—her body in its home space. But the point is that there is no space outside. Rothenberg’s insistent scratching, probing, and subverting constantly interrupt the production of her home space as a terrain of terrible limits to glimpse and even create possibilities for undermining the meanings and comforts offered by received identities of gender, class, nation. Her work produces an imaginary, and it constructs a space from which social change is possible. ■