



ELLEN ROTHENBERG

In 1988, after completing a series of drawings formally derived from Mexican picture novellas and Chinese opera books, Ellen Rothenberg worked with the paper-makers at Rugg Road Papers to produce a series of handmade sheets that would be used for “future” projects. One set of these papers, a series of twelve large base sheets with various overlays of smaller colored paper frames in gray, black, white, and red would become *Those Which Are Most Common*. Although the sheets were produced independently of the images that would later appear on them and devised strictly according to formal considerations, the *tabula rasa* of the sheets began a process of collecting images and ideas that would occupy Rothenberg for the next few years. In this context *Those Which Are Most Common* can be seen as a notational device for the working out of images, ideas, gestures, and details that would find further revision and development in *Partial Index, A Probability Bordering On Certainty*, and other works of the early 1990’s.

What was set into motion in *Those Which Are Most Common* is the specific matrix of history and documentation, their mediation through form, and the placing of the individual in the current of historical events. As a large and irresolvable set of questions on the nature of historical experience, the artworks generated from this matrix remain provisional responses, meditations on the range of possible relationships.

The individual images that comprise *Those Which Are Most Common* are a series of linoleum block prints that are used in thematic and formal variation within the twelve panels. The images run the range from the leaves of a calendar, a computer bar-code, the remote control from a TV set and other visual details of everyday life, to television images from the evening news, particularly those relating to the student uprising at Tiananmen Square and the hanging body of Lt. Col. William Higgins, direct references to documents such as a list of names from Dachau, and appearing for the first time in Rothenberg’s work, a sample from the Netherlands State forensic analysis of Anne Frank’s handwriting. These images are put through the formal wringer—

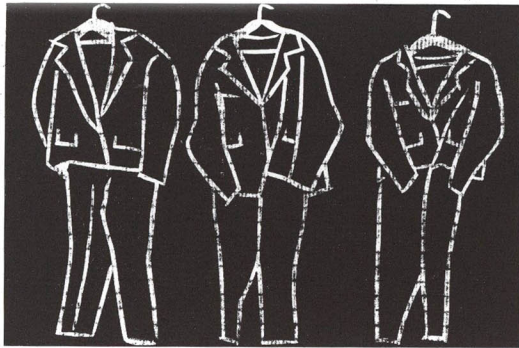
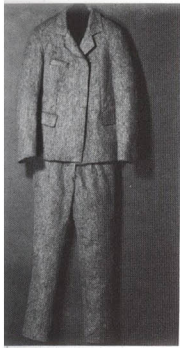
backwards, forwards, upside down, right-side up, positive, negative — a virtual compendium of variations that cannot be read in any prescribed order.

Formally, *Those Which Are Most Common* shares much with Rothenberg’s performance and “time-based” works. The twelve panels do not function as independent entities, but as fragments of a whole. Although compositional solutions exist within each panel, the true form of the work is only revealed when all panels are seen together. This development depends on time, on the relation of images in one panel to those in another. The narrative progression, although somewhat more open, is similar to that in Rothenberg’s video and performance works where images operate according to iconic associations and where meaning derives from a peculiar sensibility of accretion and accumulation. An innocuous image such as the computer bar-code suddenly becomes sinister when an image of lists from Dachau is close at hand. Proximity and context both determine and transform meaning, specifying a range of associations.

The work is experientially porous, indeterminate. There’s lots of space between images; between panels one must take a leap, engage in a constant revision of meanings. A revision that requires one not only to “revise” but also “to see again.”

The hanging suit and the hanging men provide an interesting model for how meaning occurs in the work. Rothenberg has said that the hanging suit is a quote from Joseph Beuys’s *Felt Suit* (Fig.19) of 1970. But many images of hanging exist within the piece, each with multiple possible sources. Beuys’ own image could very well have derived from the suits hanging at the Dachau Memorial Museum (Fig.18), reproduced in the museum catalog. In place of the hanging man the suit embodies the absent man. Other images of suits on hangers may very well have come from Rothenberg’s own studio, with her costumes on racks suspended in the air, embodiments of her own alternate identities. She has long been fascinated by the transformative qualities of





clothing, shoes, gloves. Their multiple appearances in the range of her work evoked the body in both corporeal and psychological presence. Add to this the image of the hanging feet of Lt. Col. William Higgins, an American soldier working in Lebanon under the auspices of the U.N. who was kidnapped and hung by Islamic Fundamentalists in 1989, and a necessary iconographic density is achieved.

If I may use a rhetorical description of the general method, there is a metonymic compression in the selection of images — the choices are spare, yet each image retains a visual language potential that is wide and variable. There is then a parataxic construction within and between panels; panels are composed to a logic that is beyond normal narrative conventions, and one is confronted with relations and juxtapositions that are at once ordered and random — one is unsure at times which.

This kind of open construction demands a highly active engagement on the part of the viewer. It is here, in the world of reception, that a kind of “hermeneutic” activity occurs. And this interpretive engagement is essential, for the images have multiple glosses and sources. It’s in the cross-points of memory and association that the piece is energized.

There is a fascination here with both the document and its transmission device, whether it be a newspaper, a TV, or an archival document. The choice of

Figure 18 (left):
prisoner uniform,
Dachau Museum
reproduced in
*Concentration Camp
Dachau 1933-1945*
Brussels, 1978

Figure 19 (center):
Joseph Beuys, *Felt Suit*,
1970
Courtesy of
Busch-Reisinger Museum
Harvard University
Art Museums, Cambridge,
Massachusetts
Purchase in memory of
Eda K. Loeb

Figure 20 (right):
Detail from panel nine
of *Those Which Are Most
Common*, 1989

linoleum block images alludes to earlier political usage of the graphic image, in particular political broadsides and the twentieth century expressionist woodcuts of Kollwitz, Barlach, Munch, Kirschner, Nolde, Heckel, and Schmidt-Rotluff.

The earliest forms of paper and printing technology are used to great ironic effect; an interesting dissonance occurs when one views these contemporary images rendered in antique form. The suggestion is of a long, dark historical record predicated on disaster and death that extends into our computer age. But there is also a stillness and silence that reminds one of the great Eastern block printing tradition, providing a grander scale of historical time as well. All of these seemingly contradictory articulations raise important fundamental questions. What is a document? How does memory work? What is historical, how do we differentiate between personal and public spheres? Where are the divisions?

By using “frames” within the panels as a formal device, *Those Which Are Most Common* recalls both the pictographic narrative methods of comic books and the storyboards of cinema. But it is the image of the prisoner caught within the confines of his “frame” that reveals perhaps the most essential nexus of the piece.

Michel Foucault has keenly pointed out in *Discipline and Punish* that a significant transition in the history of incarceration was the advent of the Panoptic Prison of Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century (Fig.21). In this architectural model, a central core stands as an observational tower within an annular building, with a multi-tiered ringing of cells around the imposing central structure. The cells have two windows, one large opening facing the tower, the other on the opposite end of the cells allowing light to pass through. “By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each

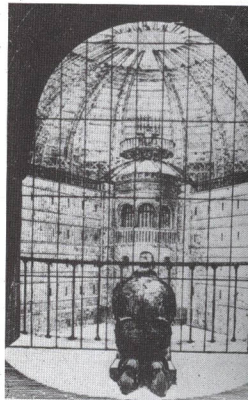
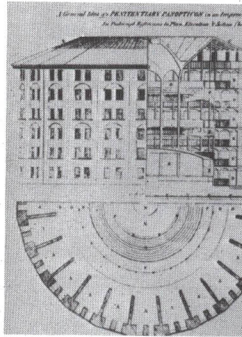


Figure 21: Jeremy Bentham plan of the Panopticon
The Works of Jeremy Bentham,
 ed. Bowring vol. IV, 1843, 172-3

actor is alone, perfectly individualized.” One of the salient characteristics of the observational tower is that through a system of visual baffles, the observer is invisible to the observed. The prisoner never knows who is watching or when surveillance takes place, with a concomitant psychological pressure to “self-correct”. In this space authority is localized yet anonymous, power derives through omniscience and the potential for response and thus becomes the architectural model for the state itself.

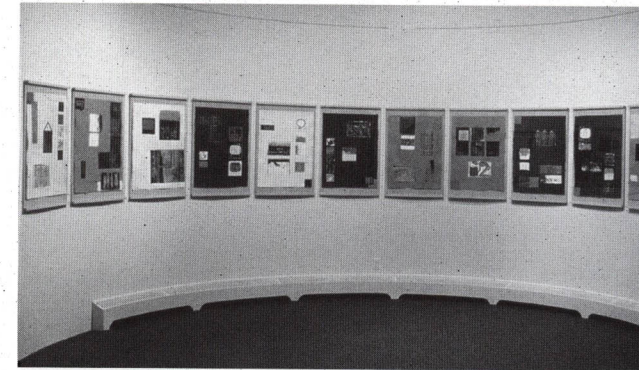
What is so interesting about the Panoptic Prison is that it is designed with full awareness of the fact that Barker was constructing at exactly the same period (the first seems to be around 1787) “Panoramas in which visitors, occupying a central place, saw unfolding around them a landscape, a city, or a battle.” The visitors occupied exactly the place of the sovereign gaze of Bentham’s Panopticon.

Many of these panoramic spaces still exist. In Boston, the Battle of Gettysburg was presented in a panoramic space now housing the Boston Center for the Arts. This travelling historical spectacle appeared throughout the US in huge cylindrical buildings with domed ceilings specially built for viewing panoramic tableaux with accompanying spectacles of sound and light.

The oscillation from surveillance to observation to spectacle through the means of architecture suggests a deeper connection than one would be inclined to embrace. The power of the observer, the power of observation itself, is an enlightenment evolution from the application of regal or monarchic power. It obtains from a whole history of new discovery linked to the senses, a science based on sensual differences. That knowledge is power is implicit in this new system, but the abuse of power has its source in knowledge as well, through the control of information and its manipulation.

In its presentation at the DeCordova Museum in 1989 (Fig.23), *Those Which Are Most Common* was exhibited within the curved walls of a “watch-tower”

Figure 23:
Those Which Are Most Common, 1989
 view of the installation
 at the DeCordova Museum,
 Lincoln, Massachusetts



structure, part of the architectural detailing of the museum, recapitulating both Bentham’s Panoptic Prison and Barker’s panoramic spaces of the 19th century. Here the shuttling between surveyor, observer, and authority creates a complicated domain of knowledge, experience, responsibility. It can be disconcerting to place oneself in the central viewing position of this work; for the architecture effects feelings of too much responsibility, or of being too much a judge, or too much a witness.

Counting, accounts, lists, tallies are ubiquitous from panel to panel. The roman numerals and fruit-stand numbers have appeared in Rothenberg’s work before, as costume elements for her performance characters *The Scientist* and *The Fat Man*. Here, the image of *13¢* (Fig.9) which appears in one of the panels is significant beyond its generic quality. It is the value of the single bullet used in the execution of Chinese political prisoners, the amount of the official bill sent to the families of the executed for payment to the state.

The leaves of a calendar tick off the daily balance sheet — this day despair, the next a sense of loss, the following a consideration of one’s own value and self-worth. Every accounting is a measure against death, every accounting is measured against death.

Figure 22: N. Harou-Romain plan for a penitentiary, 1840
 a prisoner in his cell kneeling at
 prayer before the central
 inspection tower.

With the quotations from the handwriting samples of Anne Frank and the Dachau lists we are reminded of the bureaucratic efficiency of the death industry of the Third Reich, of the reduction of humans into names, numbers, constituent body parts, possessions, and labor. The features of the modern state made and make technocratic control of private daily life a constant threat, and information in all its forms is its most powerful instrument. In *Those Which Are Most Common* Rothenberg not only cautions us to these examples, but by citing contemporary images raises doubts about what can be genuinely known in a world of controlled images.

Will others in the future peruse only those documents of our time retained in archives because they were not willfully destroyed, chosen as the “correct” representations of events or facts; will they view only the documentary icons we were too weak to challenge — the toppling statues, the fleeing refugees, the rolling of tanks, the hanging bodies? We too have seen them all before.

It seems that there is an inherent paradox: images are produced for consumption that have been in some measure pre-read, the conditions for their reception put in place well before their appearance. How then can any new event provide a new image or truly unique information, when what we seek is what we already know? We have only these images in our collective repertoire to instruct both composition and content. The question arises, do the images we see and learn instruct or contain our vision of the world, or do they constantly reassert themselves because we see deeper patterns repeating from generation to generation, from event to event, ad infinitum?

In addition to these ideas is the very real problem of the superfluity of images. How often one feels frozen into an over-stimulated paralysis by the sheer abundance of disturbing images calling for our limited attention, resources, and political will. The double meaning of the empty word-balloon; that of the victim, that of the viewer, addresses this directly. Here we are, fluctuating between confusion, resolve, commitment and despair.

Is this a cul-de-sac of irresolvable conflicts, a question which has no better answer than what we are presented in everyday life? The work is not so nihilistic as to suggest that the individual doesn't matter. Doesn't it address the individual with a confrontation, of placing oneself within the historical stream? We've long accommodated ourselves to open forms, to a permanent irresolution — with this comes the false suggestion that art's inability to take a stand confirms our own lack of certainty, or commitment, a sign of the more generalized confusion of our time. Instead formal openness helps to define our own judgements, not as a mirror but as a series of self-interrogations — each fragment requires a processing of information, of an appropriate context, of an active consciousness. The search for solutions is implicit in the construction principles at work in the piece. Redemption is in the knowledge that we still are connected by a moral thread — our real mutual history.

It is in this spirit that the open-formed artwork sees alienation as an open door to discipline, responsibility, and action. ■