



ELLEN ROTHENBERG

Disjecta: observations, speculations and ruminations on Ellen Rothenberg's Anne Frank Project

by Lynne Cooke

"I would like to make it harder to forget... I try to break through the purely rational communication of knowledge or experience... It seems to me that where the past is concerned...we have filtered our emotions out too much. They are left standing alongside knowledge, but outside it; one is alone with them.... The one without the other, though, produces remarkably split personalities, as we can see around us...."

I think that a lot that happens in the world is allowed to occur because we lack vision, because our powers of imagination are too weak to allow us to put ourselves in the position of the people to whom it is happening. But the smaller the world becomes through technology, the more important it becomes to develop the virtue of sympathy with what is alien to us....[L]iterature, among other things, ought to do precisely this: exercise our imagination, develop our vision...so that contemporary history finds us capable of proper feelings and able to act according to our own judgment."¹

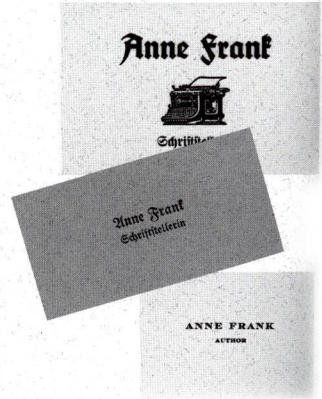
It can be said of Ellen Rothenberg as of Christa Wolf, the renowned (East) German writer, that a moral code of artistic behavior rather than an aesthetics regulated by the senses informs her art. In Rothenberg's oeuvre, as in Wolf's, a number of abiding precepts govern each new project: the legacy of the past as it shapes the present; the contestatory operations of memory and amnesia; the social as well as moral responsibility integral to the role of the artist. Each artist invents novel modes of working partly because each views the standard art-forms as traditional male preserves. Thus Wolf has had recourse to other, non-literary forms—travelogue, diary, letter—in addition to fracturing those narrative unities particular to the traditional novel via the insertion of the voice of the author as both agent and commentator.

Rothenberg's forms are equally unconventional, spanning as they do the sculptural object, multiples, installation, placards, clothing, gift shop items, and performance. Sometimes she incorporates pre-existing objects, manipulating them marginally (*Guilt Erasers*,

Fig.39), sometimes she makes replicas (the cast combs); sometimes she makes new composite entities (*Footprints*, Fig.38) and sometimes she makes wholly symbolic constructs, as with the hair composed of strands of paper overprinted with the text of Anne Frank's diary (Fig.45). The actual, the authentic, the copy, the facsimile, the surrogate....From issues of originality and duplication burgeon questions of truth and duplicity, plus a recognition of the ways that notions of truth are constantly open to slippage and redefinition depending as they do on the situation and context, the frame of reference. The vagaries of memory — the interventions of amnesia including the proclivity to hide and suppress what is uncomfortable — and the splitting of affectivity from intellectual knowledge are all brought under scrutiny. In both artists' work a preoccupation with the interplay of history and memory leads to a belief in subjective authenticity, inner truth in preference to mimesis, and verity over vraisemblance. By means of multiple perspectives, the elimination of a single authoritative viewpoint, and the eschewal of a unified linear "text," the viewer is brought to a self-conscious reflection on the processes of constructing meaning and

imputing veracity. "Reminding, remembering and narrating are closely bound together," Wolf has argued. "One reason for the emergence of narration, if we look at it historically, is that the members of society...needed to feel remembered, or to be reminded of their long past history. The recalling of history and stories in order to make the village, tribal, or national community aware of its own origin and development has always been a function of narration."² And she continued in terms that apply equally to Rothenberg's works where the apprehension of the various parts and components implies the weaving together of a composite multi-layered story, "In spite of all the other forms of media which have taken away from narration, this function of remembering and chronicling an aspect of that original meaning remains in our modern narrative, though admittedly other tasks have devolved upon it...."³

Although one artist is American and the other German, one Jewish and one not, they approach their underlying subjects in remarkably similar ways, testimony perhaps not only to the centrality and pertinency of their subject matter but to its place in contemporary collective memory.



2. "The Origins of Narration: A Conversation with Jacqueline Grenz", in *The Fourth Dimension*, op.cit., p.127

3. *ibid*

1. "A Model of Experience: A Discussion on A Model Childhood", in *The Fourth Dimension: Interviews with Christa Wolf*, Verso, London & New York, 1988, pp.43, 56-57

Figure 36 (left and below):
Anne Frank Business Cards,
1991-2
assorted paper with letterpress
printing, from the installation
*A Probability Bordering
on Certainty*

Figure 37 (right): *Signage*, 1993
laser printed text and frames
6 in. x 8 in.
from the installation
*A Probability Bordering on
Certainty*

Installation at
The Mary Ingraham Bunting
Institute, Radcliffe College
Cambridge, Massachusetts
1993



II.

The reluctance of many of Rothenberg's contemporaries, as of those older, to rekindle memories of the Holocaust, and to move beyond a routine recognition to a felt engagement with its legacies, is arguably comparable to the unwillingness that Wolf's generation in East Germany displayed to resurrecting their relationship to their fascist past, to childhoods lived through the years of Nationalism Socialism, and to the question of the relationship between that past and the socialist present (notwithstanding premature declarations of denazification purportedly achieved through re-education). In her longstanding fascination with the life and diary of Anne Frank, Rothenberg has found a subject of intrinsic import that can also operate as a vehicle for examining certain larger issues. After spending almost two years in hiding with her family in Amsterdam, the period during which she wrote her celebrated diary, this Jewish teenager died in the German concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in 1945. That both her life and her art have been the subject of literary machinations, misrepresentations, and betrayals since they first came to public attention in the late forties is crucial to Rothenberg's project.



The best known name, aside from that of Hitler, to be associated with the Second World War, Frank's has come to represent unshakable belief in human goodness, and exemplary courage in the face of oppression. As the fame of her life's tale resounded so the interpretations of it mutated. Typically, and in the United States as much as in West Germany, her plight was increasingly detached from the specific circumstances, the socio-historical and cultural context in which she lived, to be transformed into a generalized account of courage in the face of unspecified evil; a stress, that is, on the ostensible universality of her predicament rather than on the details of Jewish cultural life that contributed centrally to her very sense of self. The goal was thus an optimistic, inspiring message rather than the recounting of a tragedy. In this process of presenting the diary as literature rather than as an historical document, editorial deletions plus certain acts of censorship occurred which were the work of publishers in different countries tailoring the original manuscripts to the perceived needs of their audiences, as well as of writers adapting her daily entries to the demands of different media, notably the cinema

and theatre. For example, several sections in which her burgeoning sexuality (menstruation) occupied her thoughts, as well as a number of dismissive comments on German nationals, were deleted. Complicity, collusion and censorship together helped transform this complex living being into a factoid, a media construction of enormous if increasingly clichéd currency. In recent years various types of revisionist history have sought to extract the original text from the mass of later encrustations and omissions. At the same time neo-fascist cadres have questioned the authenticity of the diary as an historical document in an attempt to discredit not only Frank's memory but accounts of the horrors perpetrated by Nazism in general. And, in 1981, an international commission asked to verify the authenticity of the diary reached a verdict of "probability bordering on certainty."⁴ Their conclusion raises the question that, given the necessity of dealing with the inevitable lacunae and lapses in information due to the passage of time, what is the measure of truth? And does — or can — inner truth override literal veracity?

Whether conducted in the service of canonizing saints, or alternatively, of unmasking and defrocking legendary heroes, research into, and examination of, mythic personages is part of the proper and necessary work of historians, scholars, and other intellectuals. In inserting some of this information into the visual field Rothenberg uses techniques of overlay, juxtaposition, and self-cancelling, together with the refusal to privilege one position or viewpoint over another, in order to divest her presentation of hierarchies and authoritative perspectives. In this way her work not only provokes enquiry in place of passive consumption but instills an awareness that the act of interpreting is a reading-in — a tying together of threads, and an interpolation, and hence as far removed from a detached scrutiny of so-called facts as from a self-confirming recognition of supposed truisms. Any closure of meaning becomes an arbitrary intervention by the viewer in the act of apprehending information. To take one example, a recent work (Fig.36) is comprised of an array of calling cards with different designs and typefaces, and even alternative languages which nonetheless preserve the same text, intimating

4. see David Barnouw, "Attacks on the Authenticity of the Diary," in *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, prepared by The Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, Doubleday, New York, 1989, pp.84-103. The examining body was the State Forensic Science Laboratory of the Dutch Ministry of Justice.

something of the subtly but tellingly diverse ways Frank has been presented, appropriated and defined. But here, as elsewhere in Rothenberg's art, it is the silences and absences which are equally eloquent: there is no card in Hebrew, for example. In place of a unified, coherent entity Frank's identity is revealed to be the sum of multiple subjectivities.

III.

Museums, especially those which mark the birthplaces of celebrated figures or the exploits of famous personages, are necessarily involved with the contingencies and accidents of history. For it is such events which transform commonplace objects into legendary exemplar. In such institutions the incidental and the significant, the banal and the unique, are woven together into dioramas whose *raison d'être* is the recreation of the actual but irrecoverable past. Although their displays depend primarily on relics, on both objects and artifacts from the past, documentary material may be incorporated to round out the presentation, counterpointing the creation of affective experience via illusory means with the conveyance of information by didactic methods. Further polluting this mix are such ancillary museological appurtenances as signage, and safety and sanitary equipment.

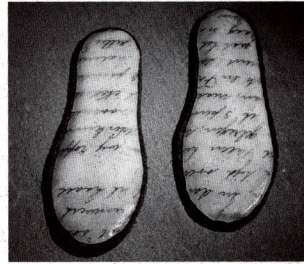


Figure 38. *Footprints*, 1991
printed text on rice paper, wax and felt,
11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. long x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. wide x 5/8 in.
Collection of Charlene Engelhard

To the degree that the historical museum, like the diorama, habitat group or period room proposes immersion in an authentic experience rather than a representation of it, it risks blurring the boundary between illusion and reality. For when objects are transformed from fragments to components in a free-floating totality their realm becomes an imaginary or metaphorical one, one whose existence lies within the frame of the aesthetic or the fantastical.

In her exhibitions in both galleries and museums Rothenberg comports with various methodologies of display, though installation remains her preferred approach to presentation. To date those of her works based around the theme of Anne Frank have been incorporated into

constructed environments. These room-like structures envelop the viewer in a space whose parameters, character and ambiance in the manner of the diorama conceal and shield all evidence of the nature of the actual site, the white walled neutralized enclosure. Rothenberg's contextualising is designed to create the semblance of an authentic experience, yet one that is constantly rendered self-critical and reflexive. In the context of her installations the various works offer themselves as original, unique artifacts while simultaneously subverting their claim to authenticity.

In historical displays, actual relics risk becoming neutralized by the museum experience, and so of losing affectivity as the museum extracts them from the continuous present to place them in the stasis of a supposedly timeless presentation — which is, in fact, the perpetual past. Alternatively, they may be in danger of being subverted into the spectacular and exotic. Rothenberg astutely negotiates these different possibilities in a number of ways, not least by treating her artifacts as mnemonic devices, as signposts which chart a labyrinthine course through the installation and thereby through the mind of the viewer. In this her installations are

reminiscent of the Renaissance memory theatre, an architectural edifice whose elements served as allegorical repositories for storing in orderly sequence items of knowledge that might otherwise have remained irrecoverably trapped in the dusty unmapped byways of the scholar's mental universe. They recall, too, Gaston Bachelard's notion of the mind as a building whose secret passages, attics and cellars are all depositories for different types of experience which can be only revisited by touring its circuitous corridors.

If photography and related reproductive techniques today constitute the most ubiquitous and, often, preferred, means to recording history they do not fully answer the question of how to deal with the past if history is to be more than a repository of material artifacts and indexical images, if it is also to embody memory — collective and personal memory. Artifacts in the guise of iconic images, fetishes and even souvenirs, play a crucial role in enhancing the impact of the document by recharging the antennae of recumbent memory. Cultural critic Susan Stewart contends that "the boundary between collection and fetishism is mediated by classification

5. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984, p.163

and display in tension with accumulation and secrecy.”⁵ Rothenberg’s displays breach these perimeters to partake of both the apparently objective and taxonomic, and the acquisitive and sequestered. Strategically forcing the viewer to shift between these competing modes of organization, her work participates in its own disclosure. In so doing her installations discourse on the mechanisms and conventions by which museological display operates. Their strength lies in their ability to do this without fully forfeiting the emotional rewards that museum display customarily seeks to generate as it endeavors to recapture memory by recreating history. ■

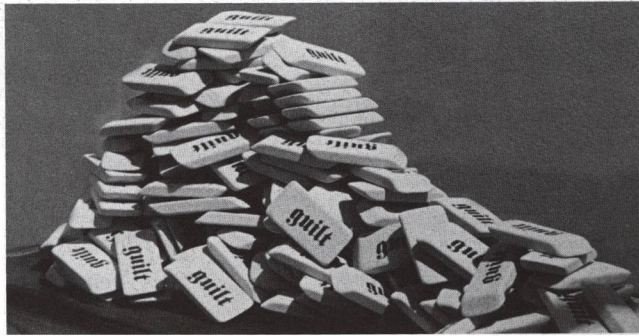


Figure 39: *Guilt Erasers*, 1993
printed text on rubber, unlimited edition
from the installation
A Probability Bordering on Certainty
Installation at
The Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute
Radcliffe College
Cambridge, Massachusetts

C O D A :

This essay was written before the author became aware of Christa Wolf’s relations with the Stasi during the years 1959-62, as documented in the *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (Informal Collaborators) files. How this material should be assessed, and what are its implications for any reading of her work, are deeply complex issues. In respect of this essay the interpretations offered still seem to stand. In the larger arena, it is important to beware not only in relation to Wolf but to the many artists and others newly implicated by the opening of these files of the danger of making the Stasi the adjudicators of truth. As Wolf herself points out: “This perverse mountain of files has turned into a kind of negative grail, to which one makes a pilgrimage in order to experience truth, judgment or absolution. Nothing better, really, could have happened to the Stasi after the fact: banal, narrow-minded file administrators and information fetishists turn state’s evidence and receive once again, in some cases now truly for the first time, the power to judge the fates of human beings.” quoted in Peter Demetz, “The High Cost of a Dream,” *The New York Times Book Review*, April 4, 1993.

Figure 40: installation view,
A Probability Bordering on Certainty,
1993
Background: *Handwriting Analysis*.
Foreground: *Das Wesentliche*
Installation at
The Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute
Radcliffe College
Cambridge, Massachusetts