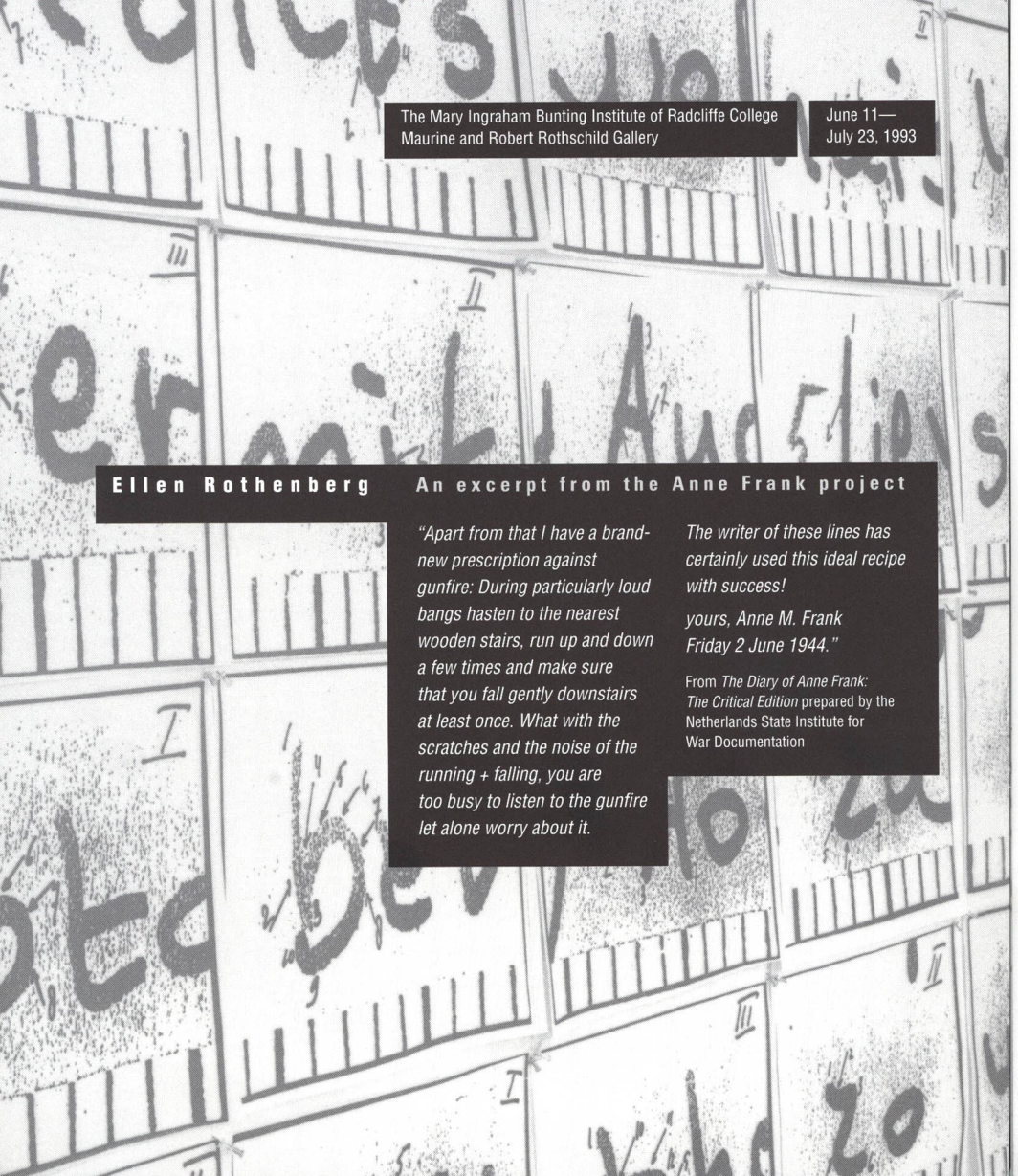


The Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College
Maurine and Robert Rothschild Gallery

June 11—
July 23, 1993

Ellen Rothenberg **An excerpt from the Anne Frank project**

"Apart from that I have a brand-new prescription against gunfire: During particularly loud bangs hasten to the nearest wooden stairs, run up and down a few times and make sure that you fall gently downstairs at least once. What with the scratches and the noise of the running + falling, you are too busy to listen to the gunfire let alone worry about it.

The writer of these lines has certainly used this ideal recipe with success!

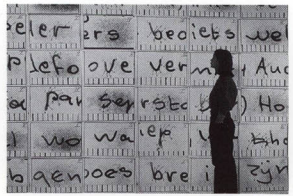
yours, Anne M. Frank
Friday 2 June 1944."

From *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition* prepared by the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation

Ellen Rothenberg: A Probability Bordering on Certainty

by Whitney Chadwick

The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations.
—Michel Foucault



Handwriting Analysis
xerography on silk tissue, 1993

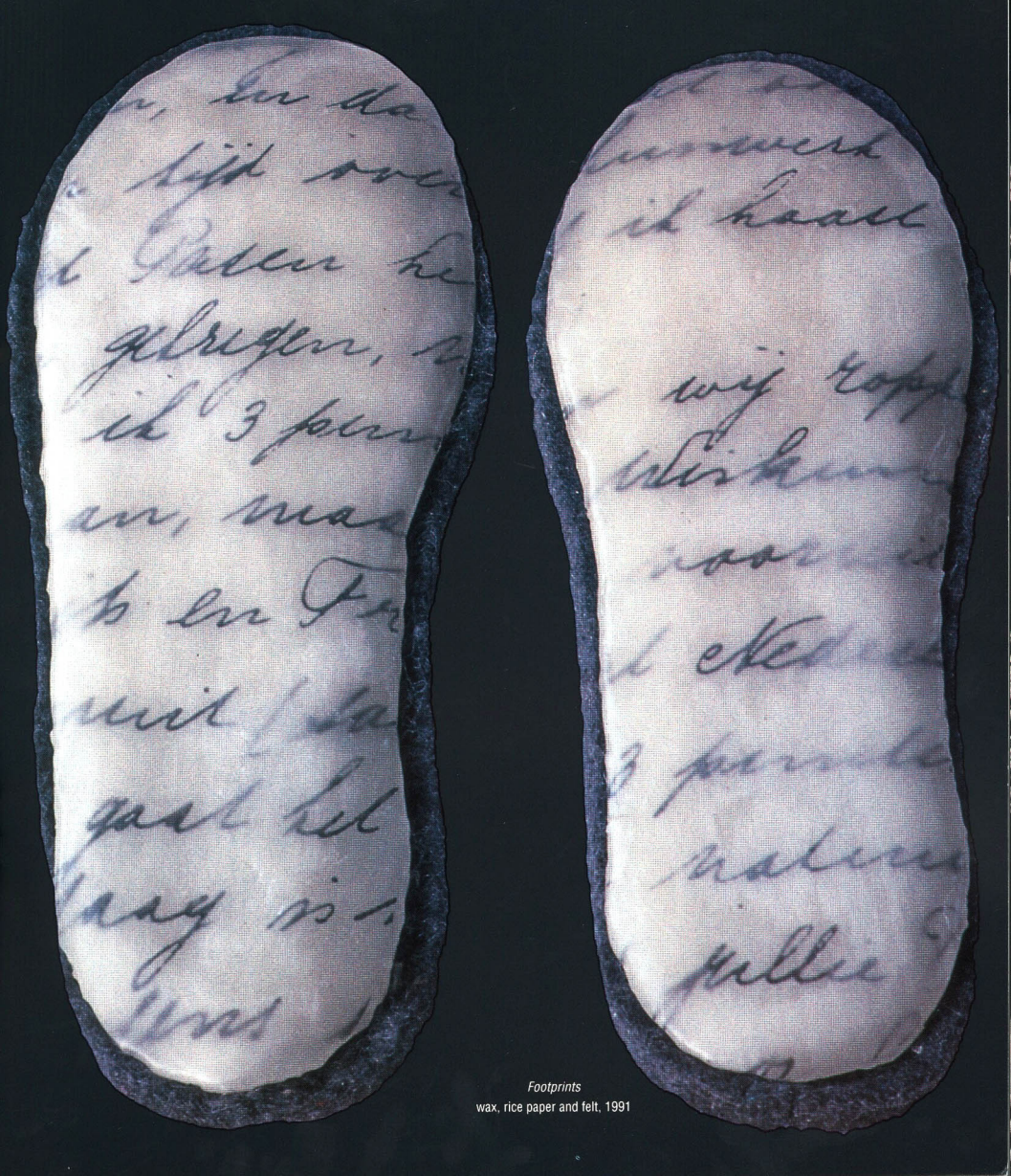
In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Michel Foucault proposes that we abandon notions of history as fixed—focused on a single meaning or unified account—and instead think in terms of rupture and discontinuity, of the interruptions and displacements that underlie assumptions of continuity and homogeneity. Thinking in this way forces us to concede that the past is never static, but shifts with every representation of it, that its meanings are to be located in its silences and absences, in its uncertainties and ambiguities, as well as in its solid homogeneous manifestations.

It is this notion of history that motivates Ellen Rothenberg's *Anne Frank Project*, from which the current exhibition is excerpted. Employing "artifacts" and "documents"—both real and fictive—Rothenberg has produced discrete works, as well as installations. Her artifacts center around a series of panels displaying magnified fragments of the hand-written text produced by the adolescent Anne Frank during the period between July 1942—when the Franks and another family went into hiding in the building housing Otto Frank's office and warehouse in Amsterdam—and August 1944—when the inhabitants of the "secret annexe" were arrested and removed, first to the transit camp at Westerbork, later to Bergen Belsen where Anne and her sister Margot died.

Between 1947, when Otto Frank noted that, despite some editing, the "essence" of Anne Frank's diary was being published intact, and 1986, when the publication of a critical edition of Anne Frank's writings allowed for a comparative study of texts and translations, the Anne Frank story underwent significant alteration.[1] While Otto Frank contented himself with removing details of the young girl's rich sexual curiosity, and her troubled relationship with her mother, the diary's German translator expunged references to the family's German origins and the fact that, in Amsterdam, they were now in hiding from the Germans. A Pulitzer Prize-winning play, which opened on Broadway in 1955, completed the deracination and a-historicization of Anne Frank.

The Anne Frank who emerged from this process of reinscription was an icon, a kind of Jewish saint stripped of both cultural specificity and individual complexity. It was this version of the Anne Frank story that the adolescent Rothenberg read. Returning to the diary as an adult, she found her earlier reading of the text radically transformed by the existence of an unexpurgated version. Feminism has taught women to read "against the grain" in order to expose inconsistencies in the historical narratives produced for them by others. Rothenberg, amazed by the discrepancies in the different versions

1. An English translation appeared in 1989. See *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, New York: Doubleday, 1989; for a useful discussion of the mythologizing of Anne Frank, see Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Popularization Memory: The Case of Anne Frank," in *Lessons Legacies*, Ed. Peter Hayes, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1991.



Footprints
wax, rice paper and felt, 1991

Guilt Erasers, mixed media, 1993
opposite page: *Combs*, cast bronze, aluminum, bronze-magnesium, 1993

Anne Frank Business Cards.
letterpress printed on assorted papers, 1992

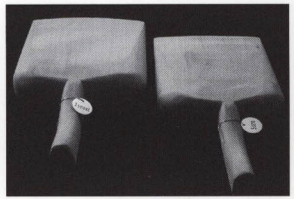
of the Anne Frank story, set about creating a visual language through which to communicate her own investigation into the construction of history.

The first of Rothenberg's installations, titled *Partial Index*, opened at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art in Spring 1991. Inside a large wooden "room," its long wall pierced by a row of salvaged wooden doors, she arranged twenty-nine "documents" relating to the Anne Frank story. Wooden bookcases covered the structure's exterior end wall in front of a collage of school pictures of Anne and Margot. Inside the room, photographs and fragments of actual text from the diary were reproduced on hanging rice paper panels which, illuminated from behind through the thin film of wax that sealed in their images, glowed with an ethereal light.

Rothenberg's wooden structure functioned like a giant, architectonic filing cabinet. It stood as a mute testament to Nazi Germany's passion for collecting, typing, and evaluating a people's history—even as it discarded the people themselves—and to the pseudo-sciences through which Aryan culture secured its social ideologies. Like the photographic typologies that define Aryan beauty and Jewish physiognomy in a more recent piece of Rothenberg's, titled *Double Self-Portrait*, the installation continually redrew the line between the "real" and the socially constructed.

The fragments of text selected by Rothenberg—greatly enlarged and photocopied onto fragile silk tissue—were derived from samples of the handwriting analysis performed by the State Forensic Science Laboratory at the request of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation in response to Neo-Nazi charges that Anne's diary was a later fabrication. The scientists' conclusion of authenticity—"a probability bordering on certainty"—signals the ambiguities that lie at the heart of this ambitious project. Enlarged until they become merely gestural marks—like the marks of the abstract painter that are often taken to stand for an "authentic" expression of personality—and framed by the precise measured marks of the forensic scale, these bits of script—at once microcosmic and macrocosmic—cannot be "read" in any literal sense. Yet they signify the rewritings which have inscribed Anne Frank's original text into history and into post-World War II consciousness. In turn, this process of reinscription becomes the raw material of Rothenberg's visual and conceptual exploration into the ways that history, identity, and gender are constituted.

Like Marie Yates's *The Missing Woman*, Cindy Sherman's "self-portrait" photographs, and other works produced out of postmodernism's desire to disrupt essentialized and unitary meaning, Rothenberg refuses to produce a coherent subject for us. There is no essentialized Anne Frank here; there are only multiple versions of her story. Rothenberg's subject is not the "facts" of history, but its successive representations. She offers traces of the life, sometimes as chilling in their banality as the events that prompted Hannah Arendt's unforgettable phrase, at other times as poignant in their fragility as a dragonfly's translucent wing. And these traces are at once concrete and illusory, like the written testament left behind in the warehouse on the Prinsengracht canal.



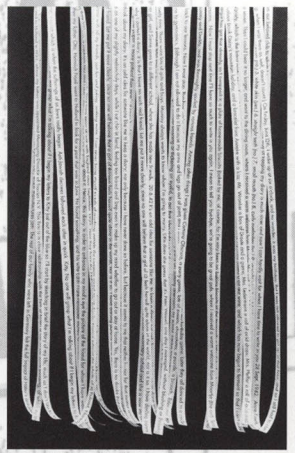
from *Family Portrait*
mixed media, 1992

After completing the first installation, all of which had been based on details of photographs and text extracted from the critical edition of the diary, Rothenberg had an opportunity to spend nine months in Berlin. Living in Berlin gave her her first chance to confront directly the material on which she had been drawing. She visited archives and libraries, museums of twentieth-century history, the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, and the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam.

The research led her deeper into the complexities of Anne Frank's transformation. It also forced her to confront her own assumptions about the documentary nature of her project, and about the difference between imagining and experiencing history. Visiting the "secret annexe," formerly known to her only through photographs, she discovered the fabricated nature of its present existence (much of it has been reconstructed and painted since the Nazis confiscated its contents in 1944). In another case, photographs of a young girl she had assumed to be Anne Frank turned out to be pictures of the young Princess Elizabeth, part of a collection of photographs of movie stars and royalty that decorated the wall of Anne's room in the annex, and that had found their way into Rothenberg's installation.

During this period, Rothenberg also began to collect manufactured objects—artifacts of daily life like shoes, tools, signs—which she believed might have been in circulation in Anne's day. Many of these objects have been incorporated into portions of the project realized since her return from Germany. Among them are combs, inspired by the combs made by prisoners at Sachsenhausen, but cast by the artist in bronze, aluminum, and magnesium. They allude to a real artifact, a combing shawl designed to protect female clothing that had belonged to Anne. The combs elicit associations between the rituals of the toilette and the social construction of femininity. They also evoke more somber images: androgynous figures in death camps, their femininity stripped away with the shaving of heads and pubes, the starving of bodies. In another example, wooden vegetable scoops of a kind still sold in German markets carry tags labeling them "Israel" and "Sara," the names mandated for all Jews as part of the Nazi program aimed at erasing personal identities, individuality, humanity.

Rothenberg's work points to the ways that western cultures formulate their histories through processes of collecting, arranging, and displaying, and to the dangers of failing to expose the assumptions that underlie the smooth surfaces of our historical narratives. It was Brecht who said that "truth" has to be constructed; the Anne Frank project bears witness to this endeavor.



study for *Combing Shawl*
xerography on vellum, 1993