

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.

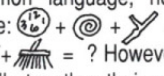

When one looks at them, the senses of touch, sight, and sound are aroused. These objects want to do something; they want to be heard, they want a hand to touch them, to activate their meaning, to complete them.

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-

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



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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



4.

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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