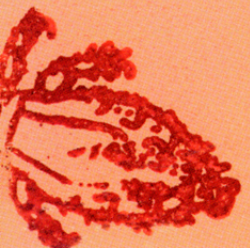


the anne frank project

AN INSTALLATION BY ELLEN ROTHENBERG



The Conditions for Growth

Whitney Chadwick

The Holocaust continues to haunt the twentieth century in part because, in the words of Alvin Rosenfeld, "...what cannot be satisfactorily represented can be neither fully comprehended in the present nor securely retained in memory for the future."¹ To an artist, motivated by the need to apprehend, and to embody meaning within the material, an event the magnitude of which defies both comprehension and representation calls into question the creative act itself. Ellen Rothenberg's *The Anne Frank Project*, an ambitious three-part installation begun in 1990, explores both the parameters of this historical narrative—through its artifacts and documents, its silences and absences, its uncertainties and ambiguities—and the moral responsibility of the artist to bear witness to history.

The Anne Frank Project is not a documentary about the young Jewish girl whose two years of hiding in Nazi occupied Amsterdam ended with her death at the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in 1944. Its subject is not the facts of history, whatever they may be, but its successive representations and permutations as Rothenberg first experienced them through reading the *Critical Edition* of the diary. It is history viewed through the lens of the Anne Frank story, as it was recuperated and rewritten, reinvented and transformed. It is history understood as systems

of knowledge and information rather than events. And it is Rothenberg's insertion of herself—female, Jewish, vanguard artist—into a history which effectively silenced the voices of Jewish women and modern artists.

Partial Index (Fig.41), the first of Rothenberg's three installations, opened in 1991 at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. Reproductions of "documents" from the life and times of Anne Frank were interspersed with "false artifacts" in a large architectonic wooden "room" organized to suggest a giant filing cabinet or rudimentary computer. Fabricated images (a radio, a monogrammed handkerchief, a girl's undershirt) called into question the ability of any artifact to "stand for" reality, and spoke to the difficulty of representing the past through its survivals in the present. Hanging panels of text, written by the adolescent Anne but omitted from the published version of the diary by her father, and images taken from a forensic handwriting analysis conducted to "prove" the diary's authenticity in the face of challenges by neo-Nazis were printed on fragile sheets of rice paper and sealed with beeswax and paraffin. Like ghostly traces of missing realities, they called into question the "evidence" that forms our history, while at the same time blurring the distinctions between truth and fiction, the real and the represented.

The second part of the project, titled *A Probability Bordering on Certainty* (selections from which were first installed at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College (Fig.40), where Rothenberg was a fellow, in May 1993), was based on research undertaken by the artist during a nine month stay in Germany in 1991. Visits to the National Forensic Science Laboratory in Rijswijk, and the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam with its "reconstructed"

secret annex, led her to confront her own assumptions about the documentary nature of her project, and to explore the difference between imagining and experiencing history. The heart of the installation was composed of fragments of text taken from the handwriting analysis. Enlarged until they "read" as gestural marks rather than linguistic signs, framed by the measured markings of the forensic scale, and photocopied onto thin sheets of silk tissue, they covered the walls with a fragile "skin." This porous and translucent membrane, transmitting an ethereal light as it quivered in response to the movements of spectators in the gallery, also evoked the permeable barriers that sustain life in all organisms, whether single cells or complex bodies. The scientists' conclusion of authenticity—"a probability bordering on certainty"—served as a powerful metaphor for the uncertainties of both history and science.

Rothenberg also used different categories of objects: both actual historical artifacts from Anne Frank's life, and objects from daily life which were available both during the 1930s and today (among them enamel signs, certain hand tools and work clothes) as a matrix within which to explore the ways that our experience of history is mediated by the conventions of its display. What relationship can a facsimile environment have to the original, she asks? How do we reconstruct history from the fragment? What role does museum display play in how we understand the past?

Since Rothenberg undertook *The Anne Frank Project* in 1990, the history which she has chosen to address has undergone its own successive transformations. The enormous popular appeal of recent events like the openings of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and Stephen Spielberg's feature film *Schindler's List* point to more contemporary

reinscriptions of the imagery of the Holocaust in the popular imagination. The Bitburg Cemetery that President Ronald Reagan insisted on visiting over the protests of his own advisors as well as representatives of many Jewish groups, was an actual place: the site of the burial of SS soldiers who had participated in the burning alive of over 600 French women and children at Oradour sur Glan. The opening of the Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington, alongside memorials to the country's founding fathers and its twenty year war in Vietnam, signals a loosening of the ties that once bound the images and artifacts of the Holocaust to the specifics of place and time.² Once liberated, they often assume new meanings as they circulate across geographical and historical boundaries. The much-heralded premier of *Schindler's List* further reconstituted this imagery in the public imagination, linking it to institutions and forms of entertainment and popular culture, much as the 1955 Broadway play *The Diary of Anne Frank* had done for an earlier generation.

The Conditions for Growth, Part III of *The Anne Frank Project*, which opened at the Tufts University Art Gallery at the beginning of 1994, reframes Rothenberg's earlier investigation of history within a more studied interrogation of the politics of collecting, display, and cultural identity. As the gallery space itself begins to function as a locale of spatial and temporal indicators, objects and images imply metaphors and narratives within a fictional space that suggests a vast airy warehouse. The presence of a wall of industrial steel shelving filled with numbered cardboard boxes holding objects like light bulbs and rolls of twine underscores this association (Fig.50).

1. "Anne Frank—And Us: Finding the Right Words," *Reconstruction* vol. 2, no. 2 (1993), p. 86.

2. for further discussion of this phenomenon, see Thomas Laqueur, "The Holocaust Museum," *The Threepenny Review*, no. 56 (Winter 1994), pp. 30-32

Unlike the Dada or Surrealist Found Object, however, the objects which Rothenberg has chosen (or in some cases manufactured) are not just occasions for reverie or for psychic dislocation. Instead they point in multiple directions: on the one hand, toward Germany's history as an industrial nation and, more obliquely perhaps, toward the Holocaust's deployment of industrial technologies and human labor on a mass scale; on the other, toward the elusive ways that personal and cultural identities are formed through the arbitrary systems of meaning and value that we assign to the manufacture and consumption of objects, both personal and cultural.

Entering this fictive space, the spectator passes by a "wall" made up of sheets of translucent glassine (Fig.49), each bearing a single pressed gold letter. These decals (originally manufactured for a

now obsolete system of commercial window signage) were transferred using water, a medium that wrinkles and activates the surface. They were then sealed with a thin coating of wax. Unlike the handwriting analysis that figured so prominently in the previous installation, and that reduced cursive script to abstract marks, the wall of letters forces the viewer to confront the enigma of linguistic building blocks that are at once concrete (printed letters) and ephemeral (without meaningful linkages). An alphabet is not yet language and this disjunction serves as a fitting introduction to the installation as a whole.

Once inside the larger gallery space the viewer confronts the problematics of an historical consciousness produced through a selection of "artifacts." The display of these bits of "evidence" in glass vitrines and free-standing piles underscores the capriciousness of collecting, the arbitrary nature of the processes through which we seek out and/or claim that which we choose to recuperate, and the fact that the harder we work to "document" the past through its physical survivals the more elusive its meanings become.

Beyond the wall of letters, the interior of the gallery space is broken into two areas by the placement of large groups of objects. In one, an assortment of glass display cases mounted on rolling dollies emphasizes the provisional nature of the "history" presented here (Fig.51). In another, some twenty five hundred wooden rulers and yardsticks hanging on strings from a frame attached to the ceiling create a "forest" of signs (Figs.46-47). Glass thermometers bound to each ruler imply a reference to the human body, drawing the viewer into a heightened awareness of the interplay of presence and absence within a space both mental and physical.

A scattering of bare lightbulbs hanging low from black electrical cords illuminates the space around the rulers. On the floor thick steel footprints (originally torch-cut using a pre-World War II industrial technology) crisscross the fragile field of suspended measuring devices. Nearby a small cluster of pocket watches hanging from strings tick audibly. Large old-fashioned industrial scales scattered throughout the installation "weigh" still more collections of objects: pencils, glass thermometers, more footprints, a pillow cover embroidered with the words "Where Have They Gone?" A loaf of bread and a small framed piece of wool bearing the monogrammed word "You" balance each other on the bed of a large scale, incorporating the human element into the weighing and measuring of raw materials. At intervals along the walls that frame this section of the installation, visitors are offered pencils and encouraged to inscribe their own physical measurements on the white wall (Fig.53).

Defined by rulers and scales, weights and measures, a physical space is marked and quantified, its contents sorted and weighed, but at the same time rendered fluid, ephemeral and allusive. Rothenberg's point of departure was another set of measurements: the inscriptions that appeared on the wall of the Frank family's "secret annexe" on the Prinzengracht canal, markings that measured the heights of the three children hidden within—Anne, Peter and Margot—and that survived their subsequent imprisonment and death. Those marks survived as poignant signs of the ways that humans under siege often seek to normalize life in the face of external threat, to locate sanity in the ordinary and the everyday. It is a process that can be read even today in newspaper and television images from Belfast to Sarajevo.

At the same time, the simple and apparently "objective" act of measuring and testing, quantifying and assessing, assumes terrifying dimensions when placed within the context of Nazi Germany's deployment of statistical and scientific "evidence" in support of its to register social groups. As part of that history, millions of individuals were labeled "degenerate" in order to be eliminated, reduced to names scratched on concentration camp walls, and fragments like the piles of hair clippings and gold fillings recovered at Auschwitz and other sites. Millions more were measured against a mythic ideal of the "pure German" produced, circulated, and reinforced through the visual images of the Third Reich's massive propaganda campaigns, their identities "proved" by another kind of scientific weighing and measuring. Yet within a different German history, that of post-war economic recovery, precise measurement became an economic indicator, an index of production capacity and technological might within an international community of industrial powers. The ends to which empirical knowledge is put are ideologically formed. Often they encompass choices as disparate as whether to commit resources to curing disease or producing weapons of mass destruction. In framing questions of choice, *The Conditions for Growth* functions as a critical practice within the discourse of contemporary art. Contesting Enlightenment assumptions about scientific objectivity, Rothenberg's installation draws attention to the practice of science as another cultural institution structured by the political, social, and economic values of the dominant culture.

If the recuperation of history informs Rothenberg's project, and I think it does, the question of history itself—and its relationship to the objects through which we approach it—remains open-ended.

Figure 50:
detail
*The Conditions
for Growth*, 1994
Installation at
Tufts University
Art Gallery
Medford,
Massachusetts





Like all visitors to museums, whether of art or natural history, we are presented with salvaged objects, fragments of cultural life and natural history which conjure up whole worlds of possibilities. And we are in turn forced to question their sources, the reasons for their selection, their value and meaning. Obsession, whether triggered by the evidence of sheer numbers (the hanging rulers, for example) or by the unspoken desire of collectors everywhere to possess the world, forms a disturbing leitmotif as the installation's focus shifts from counting and measuring to collecting and displaying. As anthropologist James Clifford has pointed out, citing Baudrillard as well as the work of contemporary cultural anthropologists from Susan Stewart to Daniel Defert, collecting and display are crucial processes of Western identity formation:

Gathered artifacts—whether they find their way into curio cabinets, private living rooms, museums of ethnography, folklore, or fine art—function within a developing capitalist 'system of objects'. By virtue of this system a world of *value* is created and a meaningful deployment and circulation of artifacts maintained. For Baudrillard collected objects create a structured environment that substitutes its own temporality for the 'real time' of historical and productive processes....³

In fact, the "artifacts" that Rothenberg has selected (or in some cases produced) for our visual consumption range widely across the cultural landscape. Some refer us to the specifics of Anne Frank's personal

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³ James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 220.

history, and to items through which she was once known. Strips of paper printed with text from the original Diary stream like hair from "Scalp," a manufactured reference to "The Combing Shawl" included in the previous installation. There it signified the protective garment recovered from the secret annex after the Dutch Secret Police had cleared it, all that remained of Anne Frank's physical body. References to that body, and the adolescent girl's fantasies and projections of womanhood, appear on a collection of white kid gloves of differing lengths and styles spread out in a waist-high display case (Fig.52). All of them have been altered in some way: sutured with red thread as if they bore surgical wounds; printed with the titles of fables, short stories, and reminiscences written by the young girl ("Eve's Dream," "Fear," "Dreams of Movie Stardom"), stamped with images of red lice that recall the conditions under which she lived out her final imprisonment and death from typhus, a disease carried by lice.

Other artifacts (including loaves of bread and rolls of tickets (Fig.48) derived from ration books and printed in Dutch, German and English with the words "brood," "vlesch," "Drink," "Eat," etc.) refer to social systems of survival, privilege, and admission common during the 1930s, and in some cases still in evidence today. The recurring image of bread points both to the centuries old staple of the north European diet and to the conditions of near starvation endemic in the camps. Multiples of snapshots of inexpensive and widely available consumer goods (from metal hair rollers and tampons to toys and scales) have the look and feel of dated objects, but are actually images of products from the former East Germany. They recall the ways that historical memory is formed by everyday objects and simple rituals, as well as by cataclysmic events.

In another display case, five tanned hides, patterns of dates stamped on their surfaces with library stamps, lie in rolls on shelves. The largest of them, stamped with the dates of entries in Anne Frank's diary, bears mute witness to the Third Reich's use of skin as a decorative material, its denial of the individuality and integrity of the human body, and its deployment of the body itself as an amalgam of usable parts.

If we were to see the objects that comprise Rothenberg's installation in another context, as part of a display at Auschwitz or Sachsenhausen for example, they might take on other kinds of meaning. In the spaces of the art gallery, they become part of the bricolage of the museum and we become witnesses, not only to history, but also to the ways that objects are transformed into art. We read these artifacts, whether found or fabricated, in relation to those other objects—paintings, sculptures, drawings—that circulate within spaces such as this. And we confront the ways that the preservation and display of objects is tied up with the cultural and nationalist politics that produce our sense of who we are, both individually and collectively.

Rothenberg's collections also recall Nazi acquisitions and display policies: the looting and warehousing of art treasures in the salt mines of Austria; the proposed (but unrealized) Museum of the Extinct Race in Prague with its collections of everyday items. They offer evidence not only of the Nazi's desire to lay claim to the cultural history of the West, but also of their eagerness to use it as the raw material out of which to produce a cultural identity for the "new Germany." "When we celebrated the laying of the cornerstone for this building four years ago," Hitler noted at the opening ceremony of a lavish new museum

(the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst*) in Munich in 1937, “we were all aware that we had to lay not only the cornerstone for a new home but also the foundations for a new and genuine German art.”⁴ Why this object and not that, Rothenberg seems to ask? And whose history is it anyway?

The representation of cultural identity, once primarily the province of anthropology, has increasingly become part of the discourses of art and art history. The issue was taken up first by artists of color forced to confront the cultural politics of canon formation, and the ways that definitions of mainstream are secured in relation to that which is marginalized (by differences of gender, race, ethnicity and/or sexuality). It has become the focus of others

4. Cited in Stephanie Barron, et al., “Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany, Exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991) p. 18.

involved in the history of Diaspora, including those of Jewish heritage. Elaine Reichek’s recent exhibition at The Jewish Museum in New York, *A Postcolonial Kinderhook*, and Deborah Kass’s photographic series “The Jewish Jackies” and “My Elvis” (1992) (which include investigations of the imagery of Barbra Streisand) both address the cultural formation of Jewish identity in North America. And they do so by appropriating images and objects, and by subverting the meanings assigned to visual images by the dominant culture. *Conditions For Growth* also functions as a record of an artist’s process, an archive of the objects collected by Rothenberg over the years she worked on *The Anne Frank Project*. It reinserts the Jewish woman artist into a history from which she was not only silenced, but often physically eliminated. In so doing, it demands that we move beyond emotional identifications with the story of Anne Frank, and pose tougher questions about our compliance with systems of acquisition and valuation.

The images and objects that mediate our relationship to the past form the basis for much of Rothenberg’s powerful recent work. She demands that history be acknowledged as the social project that it is. She demands that voices silenced—whether through state intervention and coercion, or through social ideologies that naturalize assumptions about human, behavior, gender and race, be restored. In short, Rothenberg’s project demands nothing less than that we examine our own assumptions about how our various identities are produced and circulated. ■



Figure 52:
detail
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