

Introduction to Modern Times

by George Myers, Jr.

Lunchroom Press, East Lansing, Michigan, 1982.

Paragraphs from Chapter 12: *Cretean Bull Dancers: Five Women* (Barbara Rosenthal, Linda Montano Carolee Schneeman, Terry Kennedy and Irene Siegel)

Art is criticism. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M.H. Abrams suggests that there are four basic approaches to literary criticism: the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive and the objective. The mimetic describes the relationship of the work to the world in which the work was conceived; the pragmatic, with the workings of the creation on its audience; the expressive, studying the relationship of the work to the writer or artist; and finally, the objective approach -- non-referential and without regard to the world in which the art was created, its effects or relationship to its author. For five artists who happen to be women, the subject is breaking out. Their approach is primarily a mimetic one, natural for these five women, because their subject has been conceived and yet prevented by the world in which they themselves were conceived. "All my work is but a reflection," one [Barbara Rosenthal] quotes Salvador Dali, "of my total cosmogony."

Some cosmogonies may be rejected. Some confuse and reduce the restrictions between art and life, especially the case of Linda Montano....

Barbara Rosenthal and Irene Siegel have chosen the book -- traditionally small flat volumes in which pages are filled from top to bottom in type -- as their field of battle. Their books, *Clues to Myself* and *70 Instructions on How to Make Certain Drawings*, respectively, are products of that unique book art production shop -- the Visual Studies Workshop Press in Rochester, New York. Since 1972 the workshop press has been active in producing artists' books. As book concepts go, VSW Press books often represent the vanguard of what's new and important between covers. Usually, they fall into the general category of "Not Commercially Feasible/Important Labors of Love." Book art -- that odd and fractured compilation of photography, typefaces, collage and surrealist pastiche -- is what Rosenthal's and Siegel's texts are all about. Rosenthal's "give the subconscious a camera" comment, from *Clues to Myself*, is an accurate description of what she does with "something forgotten, something once clear but now fading, once true and important but now questionable." Chunks of her life and imagination (including the imaginations of several of her artist-heroes) are thrown together in a neo-narrative and curiously threaded together photo album. Like Montano, Rosenthal has juggled art with life and come up with a kind of action art handbook. To add strength, she quotes Claes Oldenburg: "I have got love all mixed up with art. I have got my sentiments for the world all mixed up with art. I am a disaster as an artist because I can't leave the world alone."

Her work is more affective than mimetic, adding to the difficulty in the decoding of pictures and text about trees, fathers, Henry Miller quotes and STP gas treatment. The paradox is to share the ultimately private. The common ground is rocky, treacherous even, but there exists a possibility of identification. The quality of similarity -- between the book's "life" and life as we know it -- is part unconscious, part archetypal, and partly in its use of a grammatical structure. For all its oddness, hers is a scrapbook in which all can participate, all have participated.

Siegel's spiral-bound book....

Daring, courageous, not locked in with any previously existing dogma, these women use texts as a field of action, just as their counterpart performance artists play out their life/art on a three dimensional stage. These women either choose to meet reality head-on or to skirt it completely, creating devices for the abolition of a particular reality. Sparks fly at the intersection.

Performance artist Carolee Schneemann was one who was there near the beginning -- one who made crossroads possible. Originally a painter, she was the first visual artist to work with the Judson Dance Theater, where she pioneered "body art" and developed her own performance vehicle, Kinetic Theater. She did to the stage what Siegel and Rosenthal do now to the page, that is, to provide layer upon layer of textural and imagistic material.

"Rosenthal's life study easily may be compared to Donna Henes' *Dressing Our Wounds in Warm Clothes*. Henes, primarily a performance or happening artist, documented an intensely personal event at Manhattan Psychiatric Center on Wards Island in New York. The artist collected meaningful items of clothing from the public, tore them into strips and ritually tied knots around Ward Island trees. On an external level, Rosenthal's knot of photographs and paragraphs appear similarly unattached to a meaning that we, as outsiders, can comprehend. Henes, to continue, spent her nights in a small cell at the center, keeping a journal with her and noting encounters with patients and doctors. The whole manuscript creates a web of connection.

....