

ESSAY ON THE WORK OF BARBARA ROSENTHAL

Matthew Hogan, Archivist

Franklin Furnace Artist's Book Archive, N.Y.C., Fall, 1988.

I have been aware of Barbara Rosenthal's work since 1982, and actually met her in 1984. Of particular interest to me is her investigation of a society which finds it difficult to distinguish between, as she puts it, "reality and fantasy," while being obsessed with authoritative sources. In using common text-based forms (.i.e., newspapers, magazines, books, and so on) she is able to focus our attention on the generally held assumptions about the world we live in.

Ms Rosenthal would like to get beyond "info glut," common even in the art world, so as to examine both universal and individual ways of knowing how to measure and judge moral and political issues. Her choice to focus on "replicable media" like photography and printed texts is a nexus for carrying on her inquiries. Both the book and the photograph live double lives: on the one hand they are a source of documentation; on the other hand, they are artistic media. The line between these two is often defused and subjective. Ms Rosenthal's investigation of these notions and issues has led to an interesting body of work in which the containers, book and photograph, are turned inward and outward and the effects tested and recorded.

Behind this investigation of objective and subjective knowledge, lies her search for clues to a personal understanding of life. However, I think that Ms. Rosenthal's aim is to enlighten us and not just to grope for her own peace of mind.

It is interesting that in her search for public reactions and societal values, she has chosen intimate vehicles to realize her work. The book is generally encountered on a one-to-one basis, while photography has the potential to reveal the most intimate aspects of life. It is with the use of videotapes and installations that Ms Rosenthal's work takes a step away from the intimate experience.

The so-called artists' book is becoming more popular every day. In many cases, the publication appears as a weak link to the individual's primary work. With Ms Rosenthal this is not the case. Her use of the book and investigations into language are unique and strong. She seems to be following a line of inquiry unlike any of her peers. It is not an esoteric search for an arcane goal, but a part of her desire to resolve the issues outlined above. Personally, I find the work has a good mix of wit and pathos. If there is any weakness it is that it goes in too many directions at once making it difficult to understand and appreciate the work without the aid of the artist herself.

Her contribution to the dialogue about the role of art in everyday life is worth examining.