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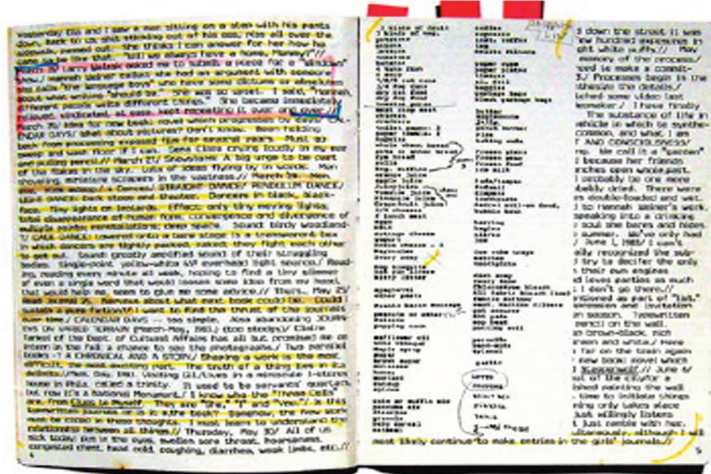
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ARTIST'S COVER PAGE *seven skins* BY EMMANUELLE WAECKERLÉ

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BARBARA ROSENTHAL: "The Journal Gives Me Ideas" at Lettrétage, Berlin

Review by Ngan Le



Pages 4-5 of the annotated copy of *Homo Futurus* that Barbara Rosenthal uses for public readings, which was projected large-scale during her evening at Lettrétage in July.

After Barbara Rosenthal's multi-part presentation of selected writing and photographs from three of her books, *Clues to Myself*, *Sensations*, and *Soul & Psyche*; a live reading from *Homo Futurus*; and projections of never-before-seen pages from the diaries she's kept since age 11 (called

Journals), a person could get the feeling that this New York-born artist/writer exists in some not-quite earthly realm. "Das Tagebuch gibt mir Ideen" (*The Journal Gives Me Ideas*), an evening with her at Lettrétage: Das junge Literaturhaus in Berlin on 9 July, brought us into her life-to-art methods of production.

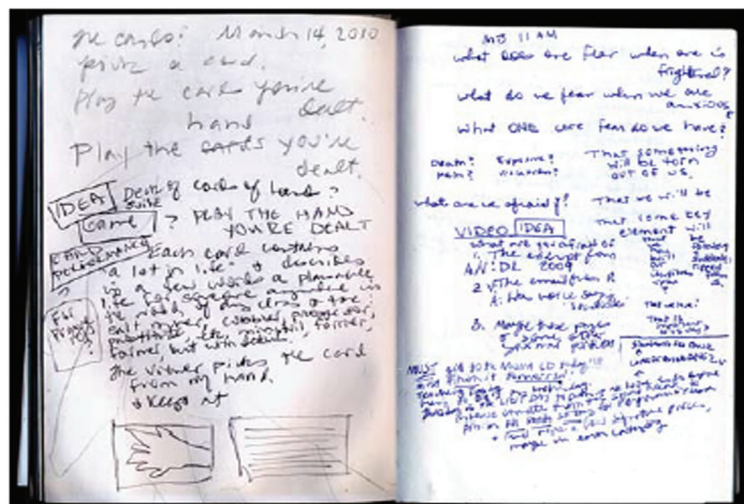
Her work is surreal, originating as it does from personal fears, dreams, and a world that does include daily events, but even though she writes the date on which her pencil touches her pages, there are otherwise no natural boundaries. No usual time frame: the past and present appear simultaneously as memories and plans; no usual reality: perception and imagination mix as reportage and fiction. She accomplishes this Special Rosenthal Infinite Universe by carefully controlling design and balance, text and image, hand and camera, information and imagination. She is an artist who recognizes and shows us the chaos of real life by throwing all its parts up in the air, letting her subconscious catch them like some kind of juggler, but then throwing them all up again in some other way so they falls to Earth as art.

Rosenthal's live presentation only added to the surreal experience. Was it her sonorous voice commanding total attention, equally childlike and imposing, with its inflected intonations and little raspy catch? Her zany, electric, frenzied energy? Her wild, curly red hair? Or her palms spread wide apart with the fervour of a preacher playing air-accordion? Her body speaks the words before she says them. She says she writes more fluently than she speaks, "Words come out of my fingers better than out of my mouth," she says. Whatever it was, I did not begin to understand Rosenthal until I allowed myself to let go of my own reality, and enter her psyche with her, which is what Tom Breseman, the curator of Lettrétage, had in mind when he invited her back this season to show her *Journals*, six months after her videos there last February, *Existential Word Play*.

"Rosenthal's journal pages are not typical in that they do not describe daily events in nice, even lines. The term "journal" isn't adequate. Rather, the pages are filled with events, dreams, descriptions, impressions, quotes, puns, games, ideas, lists, diagrams, etc., that assist her compulsive art-making, even though she says she keeps separate *Project Books*, *To Do Books*, and volumes she calls *Completed/Save*. The *Journals* are more like sketchbooks, even though most of the sketches are in text, although non-linear in thought, sequence and graphics. Like sketching at many locations on a page to build up a drawing, her jottings keep roiling until insight springs, and then magically turn into an idea for an art project in publishable form, or video, or performance. What becomes so apparent when we allow ourselves to enter her page, willingly leaving our own sense of "normal" behind, is that her inimical positionings, no matter how Dada they look, are not meant to obscure communication, not constructed as pretense to avant-gardism, not fashioned in a whimsical way, but are formed precisely to aid

communication: they are a way of separating and defining elements that would, if presented in a more usual, linear, form, actually be amalgamated chaotically.

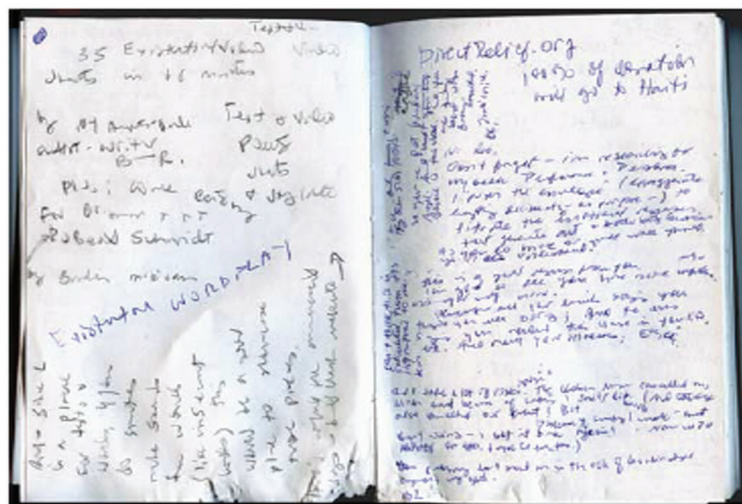
What I mean is that what looks at first to be chaotic, on second look makes more sense of the parts as discreet units, as well as related connectivities; separating elements on a page, and utilising the double page as a single space, is Rosenthal's way of maintaining the integrity of the individual pieces, but balancing them by making them appear simultaneously, yet on seemingly different planes, or moving at different speeds, directions and distances from us, but still all there at once. When we look around many of the *Journals*' double pages, we can see her turn life into art. The process seems to be: 1. Real event noted. 2. Insight develops. 3. Art project idea springs. For example, on 14 March, 2009, we see her *Hand of Cards Cardgame*, with a deck of cards in the shape of her hand develop from an exhortation to herself to bear up under whatever the day has brought ("Play the hand you're dealt.") and later that day, confronting her anxiety again, the first germ of an idea for her video *Secret Codes*. As of this writing, *Hand of Cards Cardgame* is still under development, but *Secret Codes*, an image-text video in English, German and Yiddish was completed and premiered at Directors' Lounge in Berlin within the year. This is a very prolific artist.



Journal entry of March 15, 2009 by Barbara Rosenthal

Her publisher, Visual Studies Workshop Press, is known for promoting original forms, and Rosenthal's offset books, especially *Clues to Myself* (1981), *Homo Futurus* (1986) and *Soul & Psyche* (1998) which relay edited journal-text, all visually resemble the *Journals*, too, in that elements often don't run straight on a page; text blocks might be slanted, upside-down, in the margins, or partially obscured; or letters might be missing from words. In *Homo Futurus*, the words often pretend to be just texture, partially obscured by elements like newspaper clippings, photographs, postcards, etc. she calls "trompe l'oeil" that seem to have been dropped onto the pages. These outside sources, often reporting failed attempts by fraught individuals, such as nuns, aerialists, caged animals and threatened plants, who

not only add visual elements to the artistic composition of her thoughts on the page, but also validate her personal worldview, which is definitely bleak, and filled with dark humour. I am especially partial to her disturbingly eerie *Surreal Photographs*, such as *Lone Tree*, *Gramercy Horse-Post Shadow* and *Swallowing Forest*; they serve as dissonant notes which reinforce the uneasiness one feels while reading her prose, particularly the one-page fictions such as *I Killed Jesus Christ*, recently republished by *Wood Coin* magazine, or *Father's Real Family*, or *Icy Cold*, all from her book *Sensations*, which played as audio at Lettrétage while the photos were projected when the audience entered. When we do allow ourselves to enter her world, and get our bearings, and actually read or hear the text, we are rewarded with breathtaking, and extremely tightly worded philosophy: "Life Has A Life Of Its Own," being my favorite, but also some even more disconcertingly apt, like "All History -- documentation, journalism, diplomacy, thought, art, culture, etc. -- serves only to influence behavior of single individuals at single moments."



Journal entry of January 26, 2010 by Barbara Rosenthal

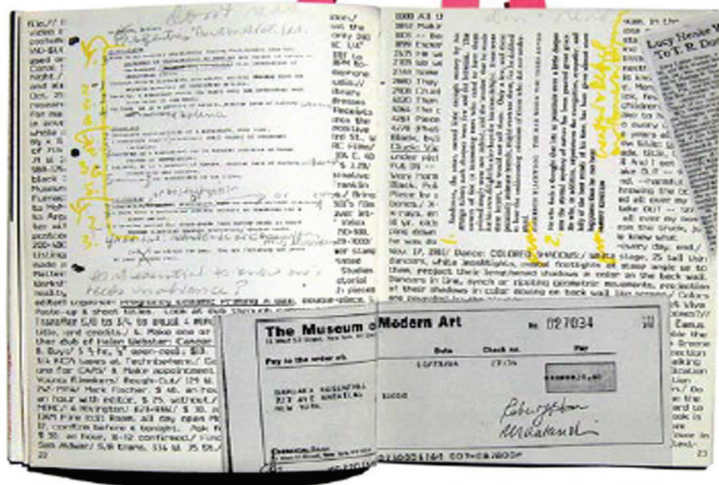
In contrast to the graphic control of her published books, however, the rawness of the *Journals* is what had the most impact on me, particularly her varied handwritings. The artist herself is very interested in her irregular graphology, which of course unlocks different psychological states (although I can't help wondering if it might also be a symptom of the chronic-pain condition she suffers from, called neuropathy, which causes her to keep her limbs in constant motion). She writes in the *Journals* about the letters as she forms them, wondering about a certain ornate "F" ("creativity?"), or stilt-like "H" ("instability?"), or "my impossibility of going back and forth to make an 's'", which does, in fact, look more like a "j." She's created a kind of shorthand mostly out of phonemes rather than of single letters, I think, and until one sees them many times they are very hard to read. Even for her, but I don't think she cares. She even states on one page that: "A clear handwriting makes me feel very, very exposed." Rosenthal has created several artworks that explore handwriting, in fact, some of which were discussed in the August issue of this publication

by Jennifer Brewin. Barbara Rosenthal is an individual who might tell you the most intimate detail of her private life in print, or appear in video casually naked, but before she issues a finished work of art she doesn't reveal anything too easily. So, in contrast to the persona she creates in her books, a much more tentative and vulnerable side of her is exposed by the *Journals*. Many of her most emotional and intimate thoughts, particularly about the other people in her life, are obscured by "poor" handwriting, and to me that's how she seemed most human.

Barbara Rosenthal is currently showing *Two Physics Videos*, an installation loop of two video shorts "Space and Time" and "Some Balls Stick, Some Balls Fall" in "Attract/Repel", a physics-based-art exhibition in Gallery 2 at the Brooklyn, NY artspace CENTRAL BOOKING, until 9th January 2011.

In the exhibition of Central Booking gallery artists in Gallery 1, the following additional works by Barbara Rosenthal are also on show: "Double-Sided Hanging Sewn Paper Blouses & Jackets Prints, Set ONE", "Sensations", "Existential Button Pin Pages", "Existential Button Pins, Irregular, Loose"

CENTRAL BOOKING
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www.centralbookingnyc.com



Pages 22-23 of the annotated copy of *Homo Futurus* that Barbara Rosenthal uses for public readings.

In building her art via journal entries that have charted her path for almost fifty years, there is this implicit understanding: that life is ever-changing, and it can never be perfect. She states in *Homo Futurus*, "Only that which exists is perfect enough to break into Reality. Everyone knows the Ideal is always fraught with flaws which cause its foil by Reality." And then she goes on to think even more deeply about why: "The flaw of the Ideal is that it does not encounter Time or Touch." The capitalisation is Rosenthal's as if to say that even concepts are merely place-holding names, not extant in any way. Her *Journals* might be viewed as formative stages in identity-building by an artist afraid of losing herself, or perhaps not ever getting to know herself, but her introspection is so intense, and so clearly worded, that the reader can't help but participate in it: her insights become absolutely shared, and thus they speak of universal humanity. She says that everything she creates is "existential", and that "all encounter is performance and persona", and she's entitled her forthcoming book (also VSW Press), *Performance & Persona* because of it. On the pages of her *Journals* we can see the notes of a normal event in a normal way give out a profound insight, and then, in a nearby text-block, the seed of an artwork she'll later produce. Barbara Rosenthal's willingness to lay bare her creative process is what was so valuable about this event.

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