

Projects 36 : Erika Rothenberg : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 11-August 25, 1992

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erika rothenberg

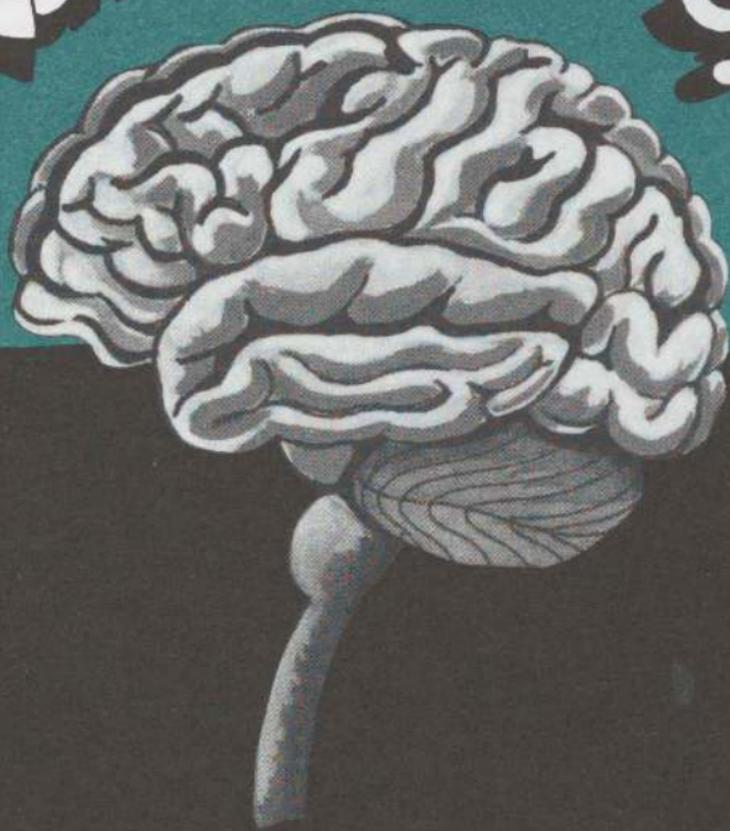
projects

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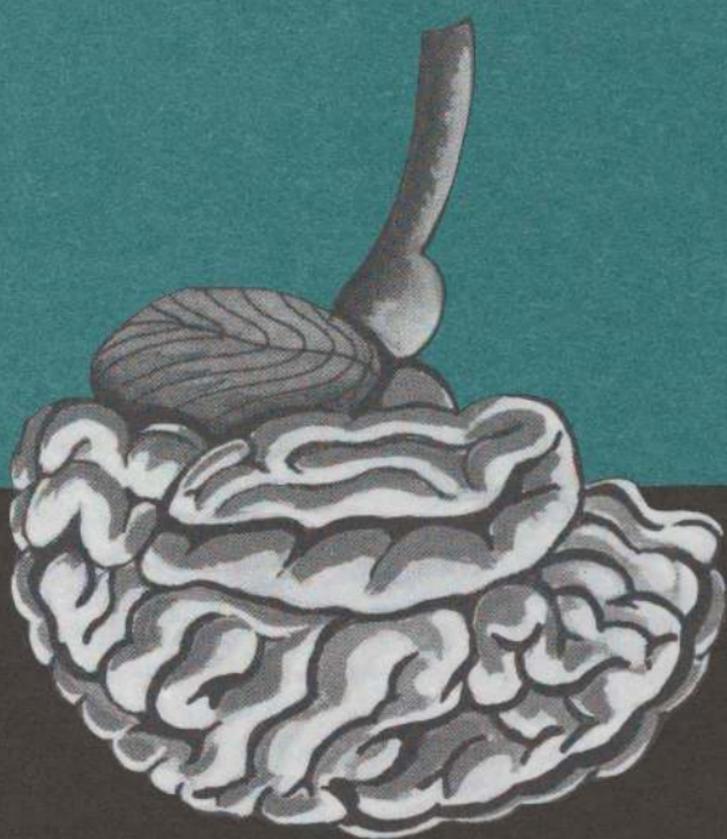
New York

July 11 - August 25, 1992

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of humor...**



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That our *products and services* must enrich people's lives and enhance their relationships.

That *creativity and quality*—in our concepts, products and services—are essential to our success . . .

That distinguished *financial performance* is a must, not as an end in itself, but as a means to accomplish our broader mission.

(From Hallmark Cards, Inc. press kit)

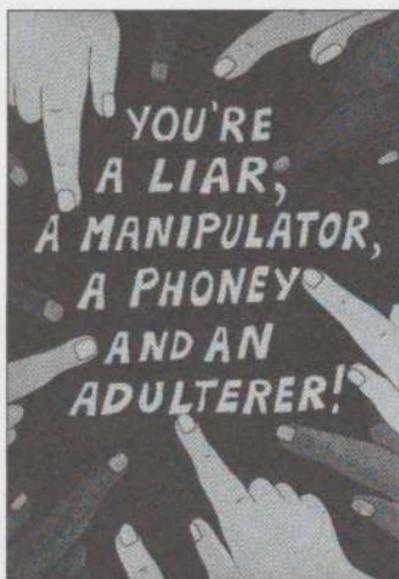
Every year, Americans send some 7.3 billion greeting cards. We spend about five billion dollars on them. There are cards to mark more than one hundred professional, familial, and other personal occasions, for sale at over 20,000 retail outlets. Donald J. Hall, Chairman of Hallmark Cards, Inc., the industry leader, maintains that "Buying a greeting card is a very difficult decision for most people. . . . It not only reflects them and their personality and their relationship with the other person, but it has to reflect that other person. I think choosing a card is one of those chances a person has to reflect the kind of taste they want to show to someone else in a most unique kind of personal way" (*Sky*, November 1988, p. 60).

In fact, this "unique kind of personal way" in which people reach out to others is the calculated result of the combined efforts of designers, copywriters, and market researchers who rally to pinpoint that special turn of phrase that will express what is often so difficult to say. Such calculations provide a point of departure for the satire in Erika Rothenberg's *House of Cards*, an

installation of approximately ninety painted satirical cards that probe into the private and public vices of contemporary American life. Rothenberg's intentionally manipulative cards are the rude twins of generic greeting cards. Opening them is lifting the lid off a Pandora's box of embarrassing situations and unspoken prejudices, which most of us would prefer to ignore. Instead of offering congratulations for a Niece's Confirmation or for Nurses' Day, they underscore child abuse, or the sorry state of health care; they address public education and welfare, serial murder, and corruption in politics, and they take an amused peek at the art world.

Following the standard greeting-card format, the front of a Rothenberg card either announces an occasion or introduces a puzzle. But whereas the inside flaps of store-bought cards may offer a sentimental banality or a witty, harmless punch line, Rothenberg's messages deliver something more like a punch in the stomach. Each visitor walks into the exhibition with a set of experiences, beliefs, and aesthetic preferences, and since most of the cards address someone in the second person, the viewer is repeatedly compelled to compare his or her opinions with the wide range of viewpoints expressed in the cards.

Rothenberg's tone ranges from the mock-banal to the profoundly moving. Some cards are direct: "Thanks Boss! . . . For your affirmative actions!" Others are violent: "Instant American Protest Kit," which comes complete with a miniature American flag and a match; or cruel: "Get well soon . . . or I'll kill you!"—illustrated with a hand about to pull a plug, suggesting the stigma placed by our



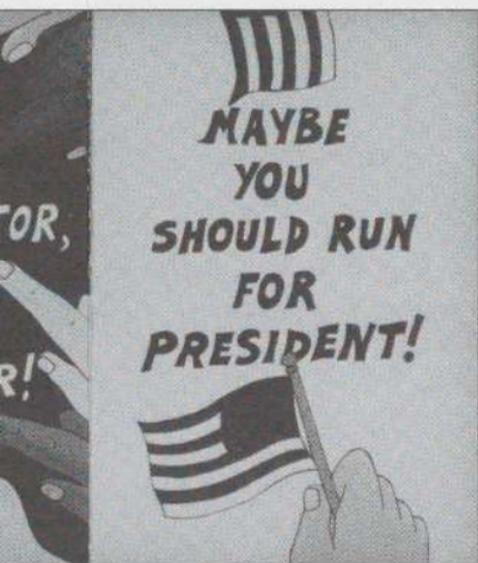
society upon people with prolonged illnesses. Some cards are cunning: "A message from your ex-lover . . . are you sure you want to run for president?"; and others use humor to examine abuse. In a card that reads "You know what I've been wondering since I raped you? . . . Are you always such a lousy lover?" Rothenberg indicates that rape is not only a criminal violation, but also an expression of misogyny. The speaker in this card interprets the victim's lack of cooperation as deficient sexuality.

Cards that take on child abuse, crime, joblessness, homelessness, and abortion explore the transformation of private misfortunes into public metaphors. Victims (and offenders) find themselves in the columns of the Metro section or the Business section of newspapers; if the abuser or the victim is well known, they might even make the paper's front page. Perverse celebrity further exploits victims by depriving them of private mourning. Rothenberg traces much misery to cynical legislation and opportunistic policy. Cards addressing the forthcoming elections challenge political opportunism, and others expose the invasive and patronizing demeanor of our foreign policy, which too often destroys the integrity and

cultural heritage of third-world countries in the guise of progress. In one card, a perplexed African family in traditional garb stands in front of a suburban house with a picket fence. The picture is completed by a (white) newspaper delivery boy on his bike. The text promises: "If you work hard and uphold good moral values . . . someday your country will be as happy as ours!" Rothenberg's barbs point at the myth of suburban euphoria, framing idealized visions of American life to reveal them as little more than clichéd slogans.

The cards are painted in gouache on paper with few, simplified forms, little shadowing, and flat, high-key color. Their prosaic appearance mimics the schematic style of advertising illustration Rothenberg learned in her eight years as an art director in a New York advertising agency. There she also mastered such advertising formats as page layouts, billboards, posters, and television commercial storyboards featuring upbeat, "happy" people. An intimate knowledge of advertising tactics and a fascination with the advertiser's skill in manipulating us despite all we know inform Rothenberg's early artistic career. *Morally Superior Products* (1980-82), a series of drawings in which she first employed the formats of print advertising and storyboards, pokes fun primarily at the political left. The seemingly complacent characters offer testimonials to packaged goods that promise instant, miraculous solutions to society's ills. "Cold Power" is "The only detergent that supports unilateral disarmament." "Progresso" is "The sauce that fights racism." Ideology is turned into commodity in these works, which lampoon both advertising's implicit pledge to change our lives with consumer goods and our willingness to go along with such pie-in-the-sky notions. Rothenberg does not criticize the "do-gooders" for wanting to change the world. Rather, she teases those of us who believe naively that we can eliminate suffering if we buy products whose manufacturers promise to donate some of their profits to charity.

Rothenberg cites Pop art as the most direct influence on her work: "As a child growing up in New York, that was the art you saw. It got so much media attention. I took it as a critique of society, but it





was so quickly coopted and eaten up by society that a whole generation of artists—who are my age, and knew about this art growing up—began to desire a new way to criticize society.” But the

stylistic resemblance of the boxes and cans of household products featured in *Morally Superior Products* to Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans and Brillo Boxes camouflages some fundamental differences in approach. Warhol's early blow-ups of newspaper advertisements and comics are cool, detached, merciless, drained of color and volume. Rothenberg's art, by contrast, is user-friendly, accessible, connected. Warhol wanted to be seduced by his subjects. Beyond the self-irony implied in many of his works, he ultimately identified with the winners, with celebrities. When the works evoke agony, it is the glamorous agony of Jackie Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, and Elizabeth Taylor. In *Most Wanted Men* (1964), his series of silk-screened blow-ups of dangerous criminals, he endowed his lowlife subjects with the aura of stardom. Rothenberg, on the other hand, identifies with the schlemiels of the world. In several works, she associates the desire for celebrity with a certain desperation. *Freedom of Expression National Monument* (1984), a public project placed in downtown Manhattan, was an oversized red megaphone into which passersby could shout their opinions, complaints, and feelings. *The Celebrity Simulator* (1988) was an installation comprising a podium with a battery of microphones and a camera transmitting the image of the speaker onto a television monitor. Viewers could come up to the podium and watch themselves speak on TV. Everyone can be Dan Quayle for fifteen minutes.

The beginning of Rothenberg's artistic career coincided roughly with the increased visibility in New York in the early 1980s of art dealing with social and political themes. While some of the artists working in this mode had been active in the 1970s and earlier (Faith Ringgold, Les Levine, and Hans Haacke, for example), others were just emerging. After a generation dominated by cool, abstract art, these artists chose to move onto a more direct activist course, exhibiting their works in thematic group shows and public projects organized by such groups as Collaborative Projects Inc. (Colab) and Group Material. Rothenberg, who participated in several of these group projects, shared a desire to “democratize” the presentation of art. She said, “I'd like art to be as powerful and transformative as books and movies. To do that you have to make work about the world. Because art hasn't been about life—it's been about art—it's lost that power to touch people, to make people think, to question their assumptions.” The desire to place art in the context of contemporary life, making it accessible to audiences other than gallery visitors, inspired Rothenberg and others to employ a wide range of formats, displaying works in artists' books, newspaper inserts, and shop windows, as well as on billboards and street posters.

It is not surprising that many artists of this generation focused on the media as a source of aesthetic vocabulary and subject matter, and at the same time as a target for criticism. Some of those who exhibited with Group Material, including Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke, and Richard Prince, developed styles that involved lifting images from their original media and popular-

culture contexts. Rothenberg has shared neither the practice of subversive appropriation nor the postmodernist concerns of authorship. Whereas the crisp, "high-tech" look that typifies much postmodernist work results from elevating vernacular sources to its own level before dissecting them with its theoretical knives, Rothenberg's style remains insistently "low tech," retaining a flat-footed appearance and home-spun lines, both of which enhance its urgent direct appeal.

In that respect, her work relates to that of Barbara Kruger, another artist who addresses her audience in the confrontational second person, exposing social ills, particularly misogyny. Kruger, like Rothenberg, has a strong graphic sensibility, having worked as a magazine photo editor and designer before becoming an artist; her adaptation of the advertising format consists of strips of didactic text superimposed over blown-up, generic black-and-white photographs. The meaning of her work hovers between the generality of the image and the combativeness of the text. Her presentation is grandiose and imposing, in contrast with Rothenberg's informal, familiar style. "You" is always someone else; in Rothenberg's work, if "you" is not really you, it is probably someone you know, your boss, your neighbor. The ethereal quality of Kruger's blown-up half-tone reproductions and her lofty "sound bites" contrast with the immediate physicality and the colloquial language in Rothenberg's work.

For more than a decade, Erika Rothenberg has used advertising as the source of strategic thinking and manipulation, aspiring to subvert consumerist culture through an accumulation of small, discrete gestures. She assaults the systems that perpetuate social afflictions in America, yet her sympathy toward human foibles saves the work from being preachy. Rothenberg's deliberate aesthetic pose rejects "important," high minded, detached art in favor of art that uses the vernacular, the spoof, the satire. Her work's accessibility and apparent simplicity veil an intricate set of artistic choices, including language and gesture as well as composition and color, that combine to reveal the prevalent vision of the American dream to be as fragile as a house of cards.

Edna Russak Goldstaub
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Photography

Erika Rothenberg was born in New York in 1950 and is now living in Los Angeles. Her work is currently being shown in Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany, and she exhibits regularly at P.P.O.W. (New York), Rosamund Felsen Gallery (Los Angeles), and Zolla/Lieberman Gallery (Chicago). Her public projects include a billboard for Art Against AIDS (1989) and a permanent installation for the Los Angeles County Transit Commission (1991).

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Artwork by Erika Rothenberg

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