

CONTEXTS

CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAMELA SCHEINMAN AND CHARLES GLASHAUSSER ABOUT SUELLEN'S APPROACH TO ARTISTS' BOOKS¹

Charles Glashausser: Suellen's books grew out of our stays in Berkeley and Paris. We married right after college; we first lived in Paris for two years and then in Berkeley for two years before coming here to Rutgers in 1969.

Pamela Scheinman: And she had never made a book before that?

CG: Oh, no. In fact, she didn't make a book until 1980 or so. At Manhattanville, her senior thesis was a woven, room-size installation. So she had done art before going to Paris, and she wanted to try new techniques. She considered various art schools there, but nothing was really suitable. She learned French at the Sorbonne, and at the same time she painted. Our apartment was not heated, but it was big, so it was a typical art-studio type situation and she could paint there. She also went to an applied art school for a time, where she learned various techniques, such as making rugs and bookbinding. Maybe that was the start of her making books. I don't really think it was, because it was very traditional bookbinding, with the leather covers and sewing pages together and making it all into a serious book. But in some sense that was the germ of her books.

Then, going to U. C. Berkeley, she went back to weaving, which was very much in fashion, certainly in Berkeley in the sixties. Ed Rossbach, her mentor there, was the guru of weaving in the United States. Her master's thesis was another installation, entirely woven, which we set up in our apartment in Berkeley. It took up the whole living room. She loved her other teachers there, Lillian Elliott and Joanne Segal Branford, as well as a whole troop of friends. Ed Rossbach turned out to

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be the world's most gentle person.

PS: I've been reading about Joseph Albers, and I think Rossbach was also the kind of teacher who inspired experimentation, and emphasized knowing your materials.

CG: Exactly. This was a good start for her using whatever she found, because Rossbach could wax eloquent and incredibly sensitively about ordinary objects. You unwrapped a present and he would say, "Just look at that paper, look at that ribbon." This struck a chord with Suellen. Certainly many other people have remarked on her similar qualities. In fact, she started using found objects in all her work, and certainly later, when she got to actually making books. In the meantime she was weaving, but also experimenting with other forms that weren't strictly weaving. She was uncomfortable being called a weaver. She didn't quite think of herself as an artist in the traditional sense of a painter or sculptor, but she used elements from all of these things in whatever she did. Just look around this room and you see things she did back then. In 1975 we spent a year in Munich. She loved the fact that Munich had all these wonderful plastic bags printed with all sorts of images. Here's a pipe right here. I can't tell what these more abstract images are. But these are bags you just pick up in the store and use. I was never a pipe smoker, but I think she just liked the shape and the colors and things of this sort. The bag has become a framed plastic image that she altered in various ways, but it doesn't count as a book.

PS: But it was stitched together.

CG: It *was* stitched together. These pieces are stitched together. And obviously this isn't woven either. But it uses elements of all of these things. It's framed art but it's got elements of textiles as well.

PS: So that whole idea of cutting and piecing started then, with the bags?

CG: Yes, oh, there's another one over there. And again, they are all stitched. She had a large plastic bag collection and she would play with them like this. These were the predecessors to actual books.

PS: Do you know what she said about them? Did she like what she did? What did they mean? Why did she do it this way?

CG: Not really. Those are issues I might have brought up. But what she cared about was how the finished product looked.

PS: Or how she even came up with the system for putting them together?

CG: No. She, she just did it.

PS: But she sewed well?

CG: Oh, absolutely. She learned to sew when she was a kid. And she could just whip out the sewing machine and do whatever she wanted with it. A lot of the sewing was handwork and hard work, some of it very tedious, in particular, some of the books. But you also saw her big freestanding sculptures, which were sewn. It was in-and-out, in-and-out, in-and-out, and sometimes the cloth was very hard, so very hard on her fingers.

PS: Of course, weaving can be tedious too.

CG: I think the fact that weaving is tedious was one of the reasons she moved away from it. But she also wanted to move in the direction of pure art. Well, she wasn't *really* concerned about whether it was art or whether it was craft. And she would not be happy engaging in conversations about that. She considered herself both a crafts person and an artist. She did what she wanted to do.

She didn't play much of a role in the crafts organizations but she did have her own little "organization," former students of hers and friends like *you* who met once a week. That went on for a number of years.

PS: And then it became more social and all about cakes and birthdays.

CG: That's right, but that was always a big part of it!

PS: I remember her working on books at meetings. The *Glove Book*, for example, was part of a huge craze for Color Xerox. [See fig 3]

CG: This is a notebook I found recently which lists her

works. I just wonder when the Color Xerox business came around. But certainly she has Color Xerox in her books and she was very interested in that sort of thing. She wasn't interested in doing fine craft, that's certainly true. The idea of making it perfect, of getting the books bound perfectly, was of no interest to her at all. What was important was getting her thoughts and emotions and expressions into the work.

PS: I know a crude or messy approach was a conscious decision, and I always associated that with coming from her love of folk art.

CG: She certainly loved folk art. Any enthusiasm I have comes from her.

PS: I remember particularly her making that wonderful album of a trip she took to see your son, Alexander, when she went to several folk art sites in the Midwest.

CG: Oh, yes. But of course we had visited the Facteur Cheval site in Lyons,² and we had done other expeditions of that sort. She went to Watts; she did Watts Tower in California.³ The pieces I'm showing you now are from Edgar Tolson (1904–1984), a folk artist near Los Alamos, in Cordóba, New Mexico. We met the whole family; it was wonderful.

So all these things contributed, but I don't know what exactly triggered the books. And I don't know when her first bookwork came in relation to when artists' books themselves became important. She certainly wasn't the first person to do artist's books, or to do a book and call it art; or to do a collage and put pages together and say, "This is a book," which is really what her style was. But it happened for her around 1980.

In the late '70s we spent much summer time in Los Alamos, and she needed to do something on a small scale, something one could carry on a plane, for example. I don't think she started any books in Los Alamos, but what I do remember is that she was doing mounds, typically about a foot or two around, airy chicken-wire structures, for her own show called Mounds. She would write and draw and paint and sew on these mounds. And, of course, they filled our

house in Los Alamos.

When we went to Paris in 1981 for eight months, we had a small apartment, so Suellen needed to work small, and she loved the flea markets. She explored all the flea markets in Paris. Clignancourt⁴ was the major one, of course, but she would scout out the tiny ones as well. She bought all sorts of stuff. That was the real start, I think, of her getting into books. She would find, for example, postcards and then make collages. She'd cut them out and paste them and sew them and do whatever. Then she would say, "Let's put a few of these together." Or, maybe she had seen artist's books. I don't know that she even knew the category, but she might say, "Well let's see what we can do with these."

But certainly she got lots and lots of materials from the flea markets, and, we dragged a huge amount of it back home. There were flea market themes that she loved, such as hand-tinted postcards from the twenties, cards with people—especially the Mexican ones—where they had famous movie stars or types with wild neon colors.

PS: She did like series and things that repeated, perhaps with variations.

CG: Yes, that's correct. Wherever she was, she would collect local objects. The grocery bags, the paper bags at the markets in Paris with pictures of vegetables or fruits or maybe a Marseillaise vendor, or something in different colors, and she would make a collection. We'd get back from the market and stack them up.

She loved wrappings, in general. We went to Japan in 1991. One of the things she liked about Japan was the wrapping—Japanese wrapping, and wrappers, and envelopes and how they sent things. And, of course, once you say wrappings you say Christo, and she loved Christo, too. We happened to be in Paris when Christo wrapped the Pont Neuf.⁵ We went every day to see how things were moving along. So wrapping, wrapping in general, was something that she liked. I see here in the notebook that another theme was Chinese. Visiting Chinatown in New York, or Paris for that

matter, or San Francisco, and picking up all these Chinese artifacts—especially some of the little medical things and other items from the drugstore. They all got into the books. Even things that you don't think are pretty, really. Well, they're certainly not sophisticated, but they're decorative, she would make tiny books out of them. But exactly what she liked about them—well, she liked all kinds of fringe and decoration and such, too, and would put them into books—but exactly what made a good book, what made a book *good*, why she might start one way and then change direction, I never really learned. It was a feeling, artist's intuition.

PS: Well I remember her working on the *Glove Book*, and mittens. We were all buying Afghani mittens. They were made from old sweaters, and they undid them and then they knit the yarn in those complex patterns. What I remember is her stitching a binding around the shape; she would do this incredible finishing on things at the edges.

CG: Yes, and we would sometimes have conversations about why. Well, you know, here I am a physicist, and I'm used to asking, "Why did this happen?" You try to explain the phenomenon. And so you want to know why artists do what they do. Well, artists do what they do, because they *want* to do what they do, she might say. Certainly she had no truck with *Artforum*, when you try to get too fancy in describing the rationale for a certain piece of art. *Artforum* seemed to be the classic of that sort; it didn't make sense. You know that in physics you give an exam question, and the students get the right answer or they get the wrong answer. They either know how to solve the problem or they don't. And you can give them an "A" if they solve it. But with art, obviously, it seems much more subjective. We would have conversations about that, and she would say, "Well, you can tell." And, uh, "How can you tell?" And, of course, often she would say, "Oh, well, Charlie, you can tell too."

We saw a Bonnard show. She loved Bonnard and that whole school, and I gather Bonnard was not universally liked. It's only in recent years that he's come into his own, I think, at least that's

the impression I get from that show. But Suellen *loved* him.

PS: Do you know why?

CG: No, that's the whole question. Maybe it's for the same reasons that I like him. He painted sunny domestic scenes in strong colors. When you come down to it, for an artist to explain to a person like me, what exactly it is that makes an artwork good, especially for a student . . .

PS: Did she do that about her own artwork though? You said something about abandoning work, changing direction. Did she actually stop making things in the middle, or was she committed always to finishing and then trying something new?

CG: She was pretty much committed to finishing, but she could change directions. Obviously, she liked some of her works better than others. Certainly, if I try to think about this now, I might agree with her. But I would never say, "This is a good piece of art, and that isn't." She did have very definite taste. She wasn't one to go into a museum or an art gallery and slowly walk around, viewing every piece and examining it in great detail. She would make a quick pass through, especially with a gallery. She was interested in what a painting looked like, how it grabbed her at the time, if the colors were right. But she could see things in composition, colors, and things of that sort that I wasn't aware of.

PS: And did the same rules apply to books? I mean, you do have some expectation of books in terms of sequence and number of pages, for example.

CG: I don't know. She certainly got into flexagons, but that's because she saw a flexagon show and she wrote to the artist and they corresponded for a time. Then she just took off on flexagons. I went to a flexagon workshop she gave once, just to help out. If I were the students, I wouldn't have been able to do it. She had very good three-dimensional perception and could figure out where pieces would end up after folding, as in origami.

PS: I remember we had a visiting artist from Japan who taught a class at Montclair State [University] in different traditions. And she went because she was really interested in

origami at that point.

CG: Yes, yes. We certainly had a whole origami phase in this house.

PS: Do you remember when the metal came in? There was flashing. Did it have to do with some household repair?

CG: Well, that's likely, because we renovated the house in about 1990, and she started the Georges Temmer Book soon thereafter. Temmer was the head of the Nuclear Physics Laboratory here at Rutgers, and people at the lab commissioned a book from Suellen for his retirement in 1992. The basic structure was metal. And then I see on my list *Fontainebleau II*; I see *Copper Book*, right around then, too.

PS: You know, that in itself seems unusual to me, that they would think up such a present for him. It's wonderful. Do you know why that was? I mean was he an admirer of her work or what?

CG: It was my friend Professor Noemi Koller who admired her work. She thought Suellen was incredibly imaginative and wanted to see what she would do for Georges Temmer with a Nuclear Physics theme.

Now this nuclear physics aspect of things—Suellen loved the transparencies I made for presentations or for class lectures. She got hold of some of them and made, well, it isn't a book exactly, it really goes on the wall. It has lots of equations from quantum mechanics, which she certainly didn't understand. But she liked the way they looked, the way they presented themselves. The hanging is called *Plus Minus*. Can you see the matrices and matrix elements and scribbles? [See fig 4]

PS: That's her characteristic writing in the middle. That's very identifiable. But where you're holding it against yourself it looks almost like calligraphy, as if she was trying to do different people's handwriting.

CG: Aha. Yes, she was interested in that, too. Right around 1990, actually, she had one of her shows in Belgium. I have the poster for it. It is just, more or less, writing, with scribbles, cross outs, lines through words, etc.

PS: Now there's an irony. This one is labeled. Everything that she did, she catalogued, she listed: she was very careful about it; but she was deliberately not careful in the same way in the work. I mean she had a definite idea, but the freedom that she injected in the work contrasted completely with that super-organized aspect of her life.

CG: Yes, she was highly organized. This notebook in my hands has all of her work labeled: when she did it, when she sold it, etc.

This one, though, this little book, has different possible book structures. I have never seen anything like it before. I mean she would do drawings, some little sketches, and diagrams for some work. This seems to be for flexagons. In fact, she must have made it for little brochures that she could hand out at workshops. It has alternative book structures. For example, on page one: "Score cardboard lengthwise to make a cradle. Elmer's glue, cradle to rectangle of cardboard. *Star Book I*: Have net fold face you. Press center and touch to..." These are complicated. Flexagons are complicated things. They unfold in magic ways and then fold back together again, and you can twist them and turn them and see different things when you're turning them different ways. Here it says, "Have an odd number of pages to have covers open up on the same side."

PS: She always did have that childlike delight in those surprise qualities. I always felt Suellen and I belonged to a transition generation. We grew up as young girls wearing girdles and loving domestic things like cooking and sewing—things that young women then rejected. Suellen was a model of both. In a way she modeled the new feminism but still kept her love of lipsticks and clothing and all those things that we associate with being very feminine and very girly. It's a lovely contrast in her personality. But her work did, then, deal with these and I think not in an ironic way, although a lot of early feminist work embraced the domestic as a way of making a statement that women's work was valid.

CG: I don't think there's any irony at all in her work. She

didn't overtly address feminism, or issues of that sort, but certainly she was a strong woman. In our early days, we were a standard couple. She was the homemaker and stayed at home, etc. She loved kids and babies. When we married I was very pleased that she didn't have to go out to work. She could work "at home" as an artist. It was just, "Isn't that nice that she can be home." And certainly I didn't cook in those days, but later, when I did cook, I wasn't interested in following recipes. But she did follow recipes in cooking. She didn't innovate. If Julia Child said to do that, then you did it that way.

PS: She did that to perfection.

CG: She stopped ironing early on, but she really liked to sew. She sometimes made her own clothes, and clothes for our two children. She loved to make Halloween costumes. Alexander and Allegra always had the best Halloween costumes, because Suellen would just sit down and sew and make new costumes. They would be perfect. This homemaker activity is reflected in her last paintings, paintings of the sink, the bathroom, the living room, a lampshade, a faucet.

PS: But all this time she was doing and looking at art. She was regularly going to New York when I first met her, almost every week.

CG: Yes, of course, and she would bring the kids in, too, sometimes, and have them do scavenger hunts and other games: "Find the first art work with a man without a head, or a flying pig." The kids loved it, and she loved it too.

PS: I remember that, at Alexander's wedding, one of his friends commented that she was the first person to take him to New York in that way.

CG: That's true; it was probably Joel Adas. Joel is now an artist. Suellen was an important influence on him.

But whether the "domestic art" she was doing had anything to do with the New York art scene, I don't know. She never said it out loud. And I always thought of it as a natural progression of what she was doing. She did domestic-type things often, and not just in the books.

Mariage Montand [1999]: yes, that's what I want to talk

about a bit. I think marriage is a continuing theme: weddings and celebrations and decorations. But this print is what she did when she had a fellowship at Mason Gross, at the Rutgers Center for Innovative Prints and Paper,⁶ in the late nineties. The print center was crafts, for her at least; you have to do it right. They had certain techniques, and you used them. Suellen wasn't sure what she wanted to do there, and I understand that what she did was certainly different from what most people do. And it was very tedious.

PS: It was based on the site plan of a church, right?

CG: Yes, basically the print was the site plan of a church where a marriage took place, in France, probably in the '20's. Sullen had a bunch of postcards about it. All the work was done in the printmaking facilities, and I gather that that was very difficult because of the many, many pieces that all had to be lined up properly, for an edition of about forty prints. So it was real craftsmanship: not her favorite activity. She had to make copies, mostly of the postcards, and cut them out exactly to match each other. Then all these pieces had to be glued on to the print, so that each completed *MM* looked almost identical.

PS: Well, I remember she worked with Gail Deery on that. Suellen said what an incredible appreciation she got for printmaking as a one of a kind thing. You would expect it would be like a copying machine, but it wasn't at all. Each print, because of the humidity, the temperature, the roller, whatever, was different. And, of course, those people are master craftspersons!

CG: I still have several versions of *MM*. That is one of the things I'd like to hang up in my house. I'd also like to mention the photographs of her work on the walls of the house. She not only did paintings of things in the house, but she also painted on the house, on the interior walls. Here are some that she never finished. I can see a picture of the chair over there, painted on the wall, just drawn on the wall, penciled on the wall, and there's a bowl over there. But before this, in the previous version of the house, we had a whole bunch of very

different paintings, stencils of abstract designs.

PS: I know there was a whole fashion in stenciling at a certain point, but also a style of Paris graffiti was based on stencils.

CG: Well, that's interesting, yes; well, she loved graffiti, yes.

PS: And that other book you have?

CG: Good. This book is called *Columns I* (1985). [See fig. 5]

She made actual columns for a Lausanne show, originally at least a weaving biennial. I guess it was 1985. She was invited to be in the Lausanne show twice, and this time, not only did she not do weaving, but she did something in paper, six-foot-tall columns. Of course, they were sort of shaky and not perfectly symmetrical and didn't have Corinthian or Doric, or whatever, capitals on them. They were her own style of columns. So, again, she wasn't even sure whether this was acceptable for the show, to do this kind of paperwork. But her columns were accepted, and she gave them to the museum. Then, many years later, in 2000, she received a book in the mail from Lausanne, a book of works from the museum. There were some two hundred well-known artists represented there. On the cover are her *Columns*!

It was a gorgeous photograph, with a striking solid black background. Her columns really do look like authentic Greek columns in the photograph, ruins of Greek columns, some standing tall, some down on the ground. They looked terrific.

Notes

1. Edited and revised notes of a conversation between Pam Scheinman and Charlie Glashausser: the conversation took place in the Glashausser residence on April 2, 2006.
2. An extraordinary example of naïve art, *Le Palais Idéal*, "Ideal Palace," was built 1879–1912 by Ferdinand Cheval (1836–1924), in Hauterives, a commune in the

- Drôme department in southeastern France.
3. *The Watts Towers*, or as they are also known, *The Towers of Simon Rodia*, were built 1921–1954 by Sabato Rodia (1879–1965) in Watts, Los Angeles, California. They were designated a national Historic Landmark in 1990 and have become a rallying point in the city's recent attempts to build an arts community in Watts.
 4. The *Marché aux puces*, founded in the late seventeenth century, is possibly where the term *flea market* originated in about 1880.
 5. Christo and Jeanne Claude wrapped the Pont Neuf, the oldest standing bridge across the Seine in Paris, in August–September 1985.
 6. Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, renamed in 2006.