ARTISTS' RIFFS ON SUELLEN GLASHAUSSER

REMEMBERING SUELLEN

BY JUDITH KRALL-RUSSO

It was September (maybe October) 1974, and I was in New York City visiting museums and art galleries to find out what was new and interesting. The Folk Art Museum, at that time located on 53rd St. was featuring an antique rug exhibit. The exhibit was fantastic: whimsical, humorous, superbly executed: just wonderful. Feeling inspired and delighted I left that museum and went over to the American Craft Museum, which was only a few doors away. I was bubbling with excitement because the exhibit was so good, and I was "dying" to share my enthusiasm with someone. As I entered the museum, I noticed the new textile teacher from Montclair State College, to whom I had been introduced a few weeks earlier. I barely knew her, but I felt desperate and needed to talk to someone about the rug exhibit. I approached her, introduced myself (hoping she remembered me) and burst into a monologue about the fabulous exhibit of antique rugs.

The woman was Suellen Glashausser.

We have moments in our lives when our path takes a definite direction, and that day in the Craft Museum was a path-changing moment for me. As we talked I discovered that Suellen and I lived only a few miles from each other. She had started a women's artist group that met each week and invited me to attend. Since I was a newly graduated art student from Montclair State College I was both hesitant and excited to be a part of this crowd. Originally the group consisted of Suellen, Pam Scheinman, Sue Beatty, Kathleen Galante, Mary Anne Carlano, and me. Later, Anna Salibello, Sherry and Lucia Bennet, and Faith Heisler joined our circle. Suellen, in a way, was our leader, always informing us of new art exhibits and

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encouraging us to enter our artwork into shows, and telling us about new books or magazines. We all shared news and information, but she always had a little pile of articles and pamphlets to circulate among us.

Each week we met at someone's house to do artwork, talk, laugh, complain, rejoice, and eat desserts. There were always desserts, mostly chocolate, and as there were always desserts, there was always an incredible amount of creative energy that channeled into the most amazing artwork and friendship[s]. From Suellen I learned to see candy wrappers, twigs, and paper coffee cups in a new creative light. Each item had its own beauty and creative potential, and I learned to look at everyday items in a new way. For a time I created artwork using large mustard yellow or bright orange plastic bags from Stern's Department Store. I hoarded the bags; they were a treasure.

I wonder how anybody could not love or be inspired by a woman who lived in a plaid living room and cherished plastic and tin jewelry, but turned up her nose at the "real stuff"; or a woman who would serve you plain ravioli for dinner…I mean plain…no sauce, no butter, no cheese, but then serve a dessert of dense homemade chocolate cake with real whipped cream. It was the yin and yang of her personality.

ABOUT SUELLEN AND WORK

BY DEBRA RAPOPORT

Nothing is discarded; everything is considered!

I keep my eyes open…. as I look, I collect, I glean.
Then I manipulate, I incorporate, I edit, I refine,
I transform.
And….then… there are the glory(ous) details!

During my forty years of Art Making, I have primarily used reusable, ordinary and found materials and have transformed them into personal statement of Assembling Building and Collecting (A/B/C). Suellen and I both loved collecting parts and pieces of "everyday life," especially if it could be collected in multiples. These common items were relics of our community, travels, and existence. As precious personal objects, they spoke about who we were and how we saw life. Although mundane, their value and preciousness wasn't always obvious to others. We would often exchange and share our finds. Labels, containers, hardware, stationery supplies, fabric scraps, food, botanicals, and clothing parts—these were always intriguing. The excitement came in deciding what to do with them. I feel that we lived with them and allowed them to speak to us and show us how they wanted to be used in our lives and work. These "finds" would further explain and define the creative and individual direction our lives would take. Dressing up, non-stop, was always a part of this collecting, layering, and exposing our art to the public.

Food and packaging were something Suellen and I were also in love with. Asian packaging found in California was something we hunted for. Traveling in France and/or visiting Suellen there, we ventured out to find unusual wrappers of fruit, gorgeous labels and sacks/paper of any sort. These were

always very precious. Although we both loved working with, incorporating, and eating food, here's where we differed! Suellen always pursued her expertise and fascination with French Cuisine. I was always after Whole, Fresh, and Natural food. We would often laugh about this. One time Suellen said to me "one day you are eating ONLY grapefruit and the next time I see you, you are eating steak tartare!! The only thing consistent about you is your inconsistency!"

You see that I have never forgotten this! These were some of the joys of journeying through life with Suellen.

IT'S OUR PLEASURE TO SERVE YOU[1]

BY LORE LINDENFELD

I just have a very simple statement that I would like to make concerning things that I've thought about when I've thought of Suellen.

I would like to reflect on Suellen's creative inventions; her transformation of ordinary objects into unique visual discoveries. Often using found materials, changing their identity from trash to treasure. We marvel at the richness of her ideas that have lost none of their vitality despite the passing years.

Suellen was a fiber artist at all times. She stitched, sewed, folded, appliquéd, sometimes combining all of these processes. The intimate format of the book lends itself to intriguing details. In an exhibit for the Center for Book Arts, she used a flattened out paper cup already printed with the Greek Goddess holding a sign, "It's our pleasure to serve you," and a little bit of ruffled material below. [see fig. 1]
With her creative eye for improbable combinations, Suellen is still charming us with her graceful gestures.

SUELLEN AND THE TOPAZ MAN

BY DEBRA WEIER

I moved to Central New Jersey in 1984, from Hoboken. I was very involved in the art scene in New York at the time, and I really didn't want to leave the area. When the State Museum in Trenton sponsored a show of contemporary art, I went, largely to meet people. I saw this really tall woman whose hair was sticking up all over, streaked with purple and magenta. She had a little girl with her, maybe four years old, wearing a beautiful little silk dress with big polka dots. I thought, "that woman looks interesting, I think I'll go introduce myself to her."And that, of course, was Suellen.

We were both making books at the time. I don't know how long she had been making books and I don't remember ever talking about her first book. Before making books, she made large sculptural wall pieces with paper and lightweight, ephemeral materials. Books—and paintings—came later. I own one of her books, *Topaz Man*, which Charlie gave me after she died. [see fig. 2] He let each of Suellen's close friends select one artists' book from her unsold works, and I wanted this one because I remembered seeing it in her studio when she was making it, and I remembered her talking about it. *Topaz Man* is made from a stack of postcards she picked up somewhere in Paris and then sewed into a book format. Each page is the same image, which she altered in different ways throughout the book with paint, stitching, and collage. It is an interesting example of her work in a number of ways.

What I particularly like about it is it's just so over the top, so ultra sexy; it's a "roll your eyes advertising" kind of sexy. His shirt is unbuttoned down to his navel, exposing his bushy chest and six-pack abs, and his hair comes down to his shoulders. He reminds me of the Marlboro Man, only more so. I see it as a kind of caricature. It's funny. I think that's probably what also attracted her to the image. And

it's also interesting because here a man's sexuality is being commoditized rather than a woman's. I see it partially as a feminist comment.

Another aspect of her work this book brings forth is that she was a collector, a collector of flea market items, ephemera, and detritus that she often used in her work. I remember her speaking about her work at a book arts conference at Rutgers [1996], and she passed around ziplock bags full of paper clips, postcards, labels, anything she found visually interesting. These were her art materials. It seemed like she was showing us another way to view the world we live in. I feel there was a bit of pop influence, but pop more in the way Rauschenberg worked than, say, Andy Warhol, because of her process. She would find things that struck her visually, bring them to her studio and then, while working on a piece, she'd think, "Oh, this'll work, let me throw this in." Warhol's art is premeditated: the concept comes first and then he makes the piece. Suellen worked on a more intuitive level.

I don't really believe there was any overriding concept for *Topaz Man*. I think it originated in sort of a nonsensical, nonlinear, intuitive realm, where a lot of Suellen's best work began. Art doesn't always have to be A + B = C. Maybe it shows a little Dada influence, a little Duchampian influence, some intuitive juxtapositions. Part of its point is you cannot reduce it to a concept without analyzing it to death and you shouldn't do that because she didn't when she was making it. She was always sharpening her observations by looking around for stuff, the stuff that surrounds and defines our culture, the stuff that is so ubiquitous we don't see or notice it, and she celebrates the stuff by creating works that bring it all to our attention.

SCRAPS

BY KAREN GUANCIONE

I was introduced to Suellen at Montclair State University, by Walt Swales, a sculptor and colleague; the first thing he said was: "Oh you and Suellen have lots in common." I had adored her from afar, and thought she was just a wonderful human being, but after his introduction, I kept thinking, why would he say we have anything in common, since he was talking about our artwork, which, from what I'd seen, I thought entirely dissimilar? Ironically, although as I got to know Suellen as a person, we were always so much in the present, concerned about concrete stuff like the flexagons that we found in the Cheez-Its, or that great garbage that we found, or a grassroots art site in Kansas—those were the kind of things we would get so enthusiastic about—we never showed together, and our careers just took different paths. Somehow I developed an understanding of her work that was different from what it really was.

Years later, in 2002, when I was preparing the memorial exhibition at the Dana Library, Enduring Delight, and I really got a close look at Suellen's books, as well as sculptures and paintings, I had what to me felt like a kind of epiphany. I realized we were using the most unlikely kinds of material in some amazingly similar ways.

I've been involved in a number of projects since then, but these moments of recognition, of finding living traces of Suellen in my own work, have kept occurring. And, I have also found myself in her work, which actually happened repeatedly while I was working on this exhibit, Suellen Glashausser and Her Circles. I don't think this would have happened, or happened as intensely, without the help and encouragement of Charlie Glashausser, to whom I owe thanks for giving me a push in the direction of Suellen's work. In 2001, as part

of the planning for the memorial exhibit, Michael Joseph, Barbara Valenta, and I invited her friends to make pages for what we called a book, an artists' book, which turned out to be an assortment of pieces of art from many people from all different walks of life. I was to make the box to house everything. So, I thought, I'd ask Charlie, if I could use some of Suellen's scraps, since I wanted the box to be a visual statement for the whole project; I wanted it to communicate something about Suellen.

Charlie not only let me have scraps, but he gave me carte blanche to go the studio and pick through her vast collections and it was amazing for me because here I found the same pieces (some that I recognized from her books) that I was using in my work; only they weren't the usual materials, like a particular kind of paper, or cloth. They were bits of, let's call it ephemera, for lack of a better word: little plastic doilies, plastic barrettes, buttons: all very nontraditional, from any artistic point of view. So starting then, with that box, I began to integrate small scraps and remnants of hers into my installation; and a few years later, Charlie invited me back with the promise that I could have a greater supply of scraps—and these were part of Suellen's elite collection of scraps selected from all over the world.

Talk about a kid in a candy shop!

So, for the last five or six years, I have been doing big installations with like billions of little pieces, and, I think every installation has contained at least one Suellen scrap. the art of labor, at the American Labor Museum [2003], contained piles of folded clothing, which are supposed to be like old-fashioned forgotten garments, but they're actually Suellen's clean and washed and smelling-good clothing, and Charlie's father's tailoring shears: Even when I do books, when I bump into that one little detail that's lacking I'll start looking through my famous Suellen box and there it is, the one tiny label, the postcard from exactly where I happen to be working or living at the time, that I just happen to need.

So this experience is, for me, continuing in a very unusual way and I now understand exactly why Walt said that to me about our having a lot in common: we shared a lot of influences, as I discovered; she really was into textiles and so am I; we both make grassroots art, we both do art about travel, or art while traveling; she would make books and smaller pieces when she was living in or passing through different countries; I would do the same thing. I would also use everything possible. I mean, I wash paper towels too! How many people do you meet that wash paper towels?

So, I find that as an artist, and someone curating exhibits of her work, my relationship to Suellen is constantly changing, whether in my studio, in my voluminous boxes of scraps, or here at Rutgers, among her beautiful books. If it wasn't for Charlie, this pretty amazing experience, which is kind of like a little treat, wouldn't have happened: so thank you, Charlie.

WHAT IF . . .?

BY PAMELA SCHEINMAN

The narrator of a film on David Hockney's *Cameraworks* speculates that Hockney might well be remembered best for his joiner photographs, which the artist made in the 1980s, rather than for his extensive career as a painter, draftsman, and designer of opera sets. In a sense I think many of us have a similar instinct about Suellen Glashausser. Her books hold enduring interest and seem as fresh today as when they were made in the 1980s and '90s.

I also had assumed that these tiny sparks generated her larger-scale textile assemblages and sculptural installations. Her artist's books appeared to be small experimental laboratories. It wasn't until I reviewed all the slides of her work in her Archives [at Rutgers University Libraries] that I realized how her process was just the reverse. Instead, the books distill and concentrate ideas she already had been playing with and working out for thematic exhibitions.

I started teaching at Montclair State University in 1975 when Suellen took a semester-long leave to accompany her husband, Charlie, on sabbatical in Munich. During that time she made a research trip to Turkey to study felt-making. Her sculptural work, *Mounds* (1976) grew out of that experience. She made sixty-four of them. They embody the notion of more: and, as Jean Stuffelbeem recalled when I interviewed her for a related video project, "more of something is always more."[2] By making lap-sized units, each distinct and whimsical, Glashausser not only elaborated on a simple arched form, but amassed them in various spaces from lawn to gallery. Pages and books show a similar accumulative approach.

The Stacks, reflects the influence of Jackie Windsor and the process of stacking things up. A detail of the edges suggests flipping pages. Here we see Glashausser's careful

attention to edges, often bound and sewn. She tended to treat stiff elements, for example, aluminum screening, like a flexible sheet or membrane, and vice versa. Her response to materials evolved from her knowledge of fabrics, deliberate iconoclasm and childlike curiosity. What if . . .? She not only posed the question, she followed where it led. Fences further demonstrates how rigid sticks or stakes combine with pliable cords, cheesecloth, etc. Another characteristic is Glashausser's use of repetition—not in a boring way, but as rhythm and structure. Riding on the Garden State Parkway, I would look up at an overpass and see layers of chain link undulating in moiré patterns, something Suellen clearly incorporated into a spray-painted fence that leaned against a wall. She saw things acutely and helped you see them too. Everyday things proved a constant source of wonder.

The Paper Shadows reminds me of a glassine book lent to the exhibit by Peter and Lore Lindenfeld, who pointed out how a triangle moves through space and disintegrates as you page through. The triangular, sail-like forms and the physical materialization of shadows cast on the ground seem both ephemeral and indelibly vivid.

Glashausser ranked as an innovator. One of our shared interests was in contemporary architecture, including what people call yard art or outsider sites.[3] For the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne, Switzerland (1981),[4] she created a series of classical column fragments. Lightweight and collapsible, these proved practical for shipping to Europe and installation. They also were magical and transformative. After many years the Musée de Beaux Arts (1962–1995) decided to end these biennial exhibitions. It issued a commemorative catalogue, which arrived (posthumously). To Charlie's astonishment, Suellen's Columns had been selected for the cover. In 1985, Suellen also produced four *Columns* books using images hand-drawn in oilstick, which gave them a schematic, cartoon character.

In reviewing slides of her work, I discovered many things I'd never seen. A prolific artist who showed a new series every

year or two, Glashausser surprised even her most ardent admirers. Somehow I had missed the Stage Sets. One still lay on a table in her studio when Karen Guancione and I dashed across the Highland Park bridge to borrow a few last-minute items shortly before Circles opened in the fall of 2007. The pieces show a flair for color and theatricality that Suellen brought to everything. (Others on this panel have mentioned her height, dress, and passionate obsessions.) A detail reveals meticulous puckering, pleating, and stitching, although the overall effect is stunningly bold. This same sensibility surfaces in many books, where stitches, ties, and little markings substitute for text, adding a tactile relief.

Glashausser felt equally at home with small works. Aside from books she worked on miniature wall hangings. Dishrags exemplifies her ability to find beauty in things others overlook or disparage. Again, note the edge treatment. Lindenfeld has commented on the apron ruffle at the bottom of *It's Our Pleasure to Serve You* (made from paper coffee cups, rickrack, and colored pencil). Other characteristics of her sensibility, or what might be called a style, are the way Suellen used tulle netting, the way she sewed little prickles to surfaces, the way she imposed a grid on the coarse open weave. Barbara Valenta, co-curator of Suellen Glashausser and the Book: Enduring Delight (April 2–July 22, 2002), saw the grid as a minimalist tendency. Suellen loved the work of several minimalists, in fact, but the grid clearly began with her training as a weaver and appeared in the plaiting instruction she gave as part of her off-loom textiles class. She coauthored a book on the subject, *Plaiting Step-by-Step*, with colleague Carol Westfall.[5]

Her playfulness comes through in *Picnic and Stream*, a riot of pattern, contrasting a checkerboard cloth with the lively swoosh of nearby water. And *Bush* relates to a whole series on gardens, and garden books. Suellen and Charlie visited Monet's Garden at Giverny, northwest of Paris, when it first reopened in 1980. Hearing her description of the aged gardener who helped recreate the plantings stimulated a new direction in my work; I began a series of pleated fan pieces out

of hand-painted satin with one I called *Monet's Garden*.

The slides in the Suellen Glashausser archives end with her experiments with metal. This was not her last work. She went on to shower curtains and plastic tablecloths and drawings of objects found in her home.[6] Her books have words stitched with copper threads, as well as copper and aluminum sheeting used as pages, edges, or corners. Their glint mimics precious illuminated books and ecclesiastical embroideries. What each of us knows of Suellen Glashausser appears to be just the tip of the iceberg. The complexity and interrelationships, not just with people, but actively seeking a dialogue within her own work and with the work of other artists can sustain us for a long time. Yet all explorations must constantly return to her books.

NOTES

1. This is an edited version of Lore Lindenfeld's presentation at the opening of the exhibition Suellen Glashausser and Her Circles, as transcribed by Devorah Friedman. A debilitating stroke prevented Lore from further writing.
2. Personal communication.
3. Suellen was an enthusiastic champion of visionary or fantastic architecture and compiled photographic albums of her visits to different sites, such as the tomb of Facteur Cheval in southern France.
4. Patricia Malarcher, "Crafts, A Celebration of Artists' Books," *The New York Times*, May 3, 1987. http://tinyurl.com/y9f5qjf (accessed January 06, 2010).
5. Suellen Glashausser, Carol Westfall. *Plaiting Step-by-Step*. New York: Watson-Guptill, 1976.
6. Visitors to her home would find drawings of these same objects upon the walls of the living room, stairwell, or wherever it suited her to draw them. When she got bored with them, she would paint over them and draw new objects.