

Nancy Grossman: Tough Life Diary

edited by Ian Berry
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Reviewed by William Kaizen

Nancy Grossman once again gets a career-spanning exhibition with her second retrospective and its accompanying catalogue, *Tough Life Diary*.¹ More than an exhibition catalogue and the broadest account of her work to date, it is both a festschrift and an archive, with new essays by critics and scholars reflecting on all periods of her work, tributes from fellow artists, and an extensive archival collection of older reviews and essays.

The title is drawn from a series of diary works that Grossman began in the late 1960s in parallel to her better-known series of leather-clad heads. These are medium- to small-scale collages featuring to-do lists she makes and then scratches out as she accomplishes various daily tasks. It is difficult to make out all the details of the lists in the reproductions of these works in the catalogue, but this is also true when seeing them in person because she leaves very few words unconcealed. Although titled with the word “diary,” these works reveal no intimate secrets. They largely consist of words whose meaning has been canceled by flurries of densely scribbled black lines indicating completed tasks. In the piece *Tough Life Diary*, which inaugurated the series by collecting lists made from 1967 through 1973, at least three-quarters of the words are illegible. Phrases that are not crossed out refer almost entirely to due dates for work, work-related tasks, and people to contact, presumably also in relation to her work. Other iterations of these works, made around the same time, share a similar appearance.

In her diary works, the “tough life” Grossman refers to seems to be a semi-ironic public nod made by a feminist artist whose fortunes were on the rise. At least from the surface of these works, her life was only tough inasmuch as she was becoming successful and had a multitude of work-related duties to accomplish. These diaries are not so much an agony



Fig. 1. Nancy Grossman, L to R: *Head Number One* (1968), wood, dyed leather, metal, paint, epoxy and thread, ca. 16" x 6 3/4" x 8", Collection of Willi Kemp; *Head Number Two* (1968), wood, dyed leather, metal, paint, epoxy and thread, ca. 16" x 6 3/4" x 8". Private collection.

column as a celebration of her busy schedule. This spirit is evident in her black erasures that playfully become explosions, arabesques, arrows, and hearts, exuberantly protuberating beyond functional tick marks.

The playfulness of the diary collages also serves as a counterpoint to the sculptures she began making at the time and continued making until relatively recently (Fig. 1). These consist of carved wooden heads encased in tightly fitted leather masks with only their noses, or occasionally eyes and mouths, left exposed. The noses are painted white, or sometimes black, and highly polished to a porcelainized sheen. Grossman takes pre-constructed pieces of leather horse tack and motorcycle jackets that she cuts, de-stiches and recombines into genuinely frightening configurations. Reins buckle across eyes and mouths. Mouths are stitched together with leather cord or zippered closed. Harness-boot rings are strapped over ears. Some feature dastardly horns or viciously pointed metal spikes. At least one has a gun strapped to its head, pointing outward at the viewer with the barrel extending from its eyes, its gaze become deadly.

Grossman's heads are gothic nightmares that, from the moment she began making them, transcended their origins in the violence of the late 1960s. Their power lies in her ambivalent positioning of the viewer both inside the mask as a trapped soul condemned to a hell of senseless confinement, and outside the mask as the quarry of whatever horrible vengeance the soul trapped inside is about to unleash. She positions the viewer as both victim and victimizer, creating a sense of pathos and ethical tension that abounds in literature but isn't widely found in the visual arts.

A number of essays in the book refer to her personal life in a diaristic manner, which she purposely avoids in her work. These biographical tidbits recur in section introductions and several of the new and archival essays. The question that nags at me is why does an artist's work have to be discussed in relation to biography? Grossman only ever flirted with the kinds of biography and diaristic art-making that were crucial strategies of second-wave feminist art. While her own reflections on her work raised the specter of biography, as when she often said regarding her heads that they were self-

portraits, the work itself never suggests this reading, and even her diary works deny the specifics of self-portraiture.

Nevertheless, for the benefit of the unfamiliar reader and in light of its discussion throughout the catalogue, I cursorily offer her biography once again. Grossman was born in 1940 to a Jewish/Italian family that owned a garment factory in upstate New York where she worked as a girl, acquiring skills she would later employ in her artwork. By her mid-twenties she won a Guggenheim Fellowship in painting and was having an affair with David Smith, who gave her a bundle of leather farm goods to work with just before he died from which she made assemblages. These led to her heads, which became icons of Sixties sculpture. She settled into a lifelong relationship with feminist critic Arlene Raven and continued to produce her heads, which take over a year to complete, until recently, when aging has caused her dexterity to falter. While tangentially related to her work, these facts shed little light on its power. The essays included in the catalogue, new and old, do so with varying degrees of success.

Following retrospective protocol, the catalogue moves through her work on a decade-by-decade basis, tracing her beginnings as a gestural painter, through her early relief assemblages, to several decades of her heads, to her return to collage and assemblage in the 1990s. A newly commissioned essay accompanies each phase. Art historian David Getsy does an admirable job writing about Grossman's relief assemblages, made from 1965–67. These are powerful works that directly precede her heads, and Getsy evokes a number of sources on which she drew. First and foremost was the work of Smith, who didn't live to see the work he inspired. Drawing on queer theory, Getsy gives a virtuosic reading of the bisexuality of *The Bride* (1965), a rondo whose lower element consists of a white leather seam opening onto an oxblood vaginal interior, but whose upper half features brown leather straps and swatches, making any clear reference to gender ambiguous. Getsy leads from her reliefs into the heads with a detailed account of the social role played by leather wear and motorcycle jackets in

particular, whose aura Grossman drew upon so heavily in both bodies of work.

Getsy's essay is both the longest and most developed of the new group. Writing about Grossman's heads, visual artist Nayland Blake picks up on the theme of gender ambiguity tackled by Getsy. While Blake provocatively mentions the strap-on as a significant trope in Grossman's work, he leaves a deeper discussion of identity and its prostheses hanging. Painter Carrie Moyer discusses her diary collages as a variant on process art rather than an expose of personal feelings. I agree with her assessment but wanted further analysis along these lines, which her brief essay does not provide. Two, more general essays follow. Critic Robert Morgan sails across Grossman's entire oeuvre in a discussion that ranges from Franz Xavier Messerschmitt's eighteenth-century character heads, to Arthur Rimbaud's proclamation that "I is another," to Richard Lindner's robotically sexual paintings. The new essays conclude with Grossman's personal friend, choreographer Elizabeth Streb, whose impressionistic and exclamation-filled reflections on Grossman's work are vague ("it is what it is") and serve largely to celebrate her accomplishments.

While the archival essays return to the details of her private life, they also provide some much-needed depth by situating her work in its historical context. Reviews written at the time of her exhibitions offer critical reflections made in the moment, linking her work to trending topics in the art world of the day. Two pieces offer particular depth, while spending considerable time on her personal life. One was written by Raven for Grossman's first retrospective in 1991. The other is an interview conducted by Cindy Nemser in 1975. These both dance delicately between Grossman's personal life and the broader themes evoked by her work. The latter is especially good at connecting Grossman's work to issues raised by second-wave feminism.

There are many non-biographical avenues that Grossman's work travels down that the essays in the catalogue leave un- or underexplored. These include the relationship of her work to the psychoanalysis of sexual power, from

S/M to eroticism and the pull between the Eros and Thanatos. The context of assemblage in the 1950s and 1960s, including the pioneering work of artists such as Louise Nevelson, Jean Follett, and Lee Bontecou, is also overlooked. So are her links with the political movements of the Sixties, which are largely glossed over but seem crucial for understanding the original context of her work. The psychosexual ethics of her work and the positioning of the self as simultaneously both I and other, which Morgan's essay provocatively hints at, seems particularly significant to me and could use further elaboration. This only means that more occasions are needed for reflecting on her work. Despite assembling the most comprehensive collection of Grossman's work to date, the exhibition's organizers were unable to secure touring venues for it. It is unfortunate, although not unusual, that a woman artist of significant accomplishments would still have trouble finding locations for a retrospective. But there will undoubtedly be more opportunities in the future to delve deeper into Grossman's tough body of work, beyond the particulars of her personal life.

A final note about the reproductions of Grossman's art in the catalogue. They are superb, especially the heads, which have been shot against white seamless backgrounds. Despite their black on black color scheme, they are lit so that details such as stitching and the even wrinkles stand out. The images alone will be a useful reference for scholars of her work. •

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Notes

1. The exhibition was curated by Ian Berry for the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Gallery at Skidmore College, and ran from February 18 through May 20th, 2012.