

Barbara Ellmann<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

Barbara Ellmann, a New York painter and freelance teaching artist, describes an innovative concept that combines her work as a fine artist and as an aesthetic educator into an exhibition's unusual design. She discusses the experiences that led to her exhibition and the ideas that have developed over thirty-five years of painting and teaching. As an educator at The Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum and having observed the distance between curatorial decisions and the location of educational experiences she questions how else art could be presented to the general public and to student groups. *AN OPEN BOOK*, work by Barbara Ellmann is an attempt to break the wall-text conventions of explanatory and didactic language by providing instead visual support materials for visitors to explore in the exhibition itself. On reflection both obvious and a surprise to her was the discovery that a lifetime of work as an artist had led to the innovations visible in this exhibition.

### **ENCAUSTIC; TEACHING ARTIST; INSTALLATION**

I have known all my life that I was an artist of some sort but it wasn't always clear if I would be a dancer, or a musician, or an actor, or a painter. I was lucky enough to grow up in an environment where I was given the chance to find out how I would develop and which of these forms of expression would take hold of me. I was curious and then influenced by some extraordinary people. Not my immediate family, but some family friends-- not artists

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Ellmann nasceu em Michigan, nos Estados Unidos. Atualmente vive e trabalha em Nova York. Suas pinturas foram expostas em galerias e museus de todo o país e além fronteiras, incluindo o Museu de Arte Haslla Mundial, Museu de Arte de Bellevue, o Museu de Arte Montclair e o Museu de Arte Parrish. Ellmann é professora de Artes no Lincoln Center Education desde 1980. É também educadora no Museu de Arte Moderna, e no Museu Whitney ; ela ensina oficinas de encaustica para a empresa R & F Handmade Paints em seu Ateliê em Long Island.

exactly but to my mind artistic.

Their thinking was quirky, they traveled, they collected objects that appeared exotic to me – souvenir spoons, embroidered ribbons, Japanese screens, Cambodian sculptures, French chocolate wrappers. Professional dancing came first and, like performing, teaching came along with it. As an artist in the schools I was working with teachers and students. So when I retired from dancing with a New York modern dance company I found myself hired by Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts' education program. I have remained at Lincoln Center Education since 1980 where I am a practitioner of aesthetic education. When I am asked, I explain that I teach others—from 4-year-olds to forever-year-olds – how to have deep and meaningful engagements with works of art. My serious painting began a few years prior to this, professional dancing had an expiration date attached to it. I had seen those fine photographs of an elderly and infirm Henri Matisse cutting glorious shapes out of hand colored paper and I decided that was the way to go.

I fell for encaustic painting, working with pigmented beeswax, and so began what I have come to understand as my mature creative work. I am exploring a broad range of imagery in my painting that is in response to my lived experience. As I move through the city, its rush and complexity enter my mind with abstract references to people, architecture, and events. There are things to notice everywhere, and to live and work here means an abundance of information coming at me daily that needs to be sorted, categorized, and filtered for use in my work. The motions of shapes pushing, squeezing, leaning, and bulging and the expressive nature and vitality of color are constantly in view. As these experiences enter my painting they are transformed, edited, expanded upon, and layered into my abstract vocabulary of color, line, and shape.

When I reflect on my working process I can't help but think about my part-time work as an educator. Whether at Lincoln Center, the Museum of Modern Art, or the Whitney Museum, the process and pedagogy of teaching in order to stimulate the viewer's encounter with works of art have expanded my

understanding of what is involved in making a great painting or sculpture. I have been deeply affected by studying the work of other artists and looking for the organizing principles, the outstanding details, the working methods and techniques that they have employed in their work. Deconstructing the work of others has helped me to construct my own work and to describe, analyze, and interpret what is happening in front of me while painting. The cliché that those who can't, teach, does not apply here. Close to my life as a painter has been my teaching and I have been committed to developing both roles with equal passion. Painting has been in ways more personally rewarding, for some unknown part of yourself is revealed to you while you work. Indeed teaching has been more performative for me and its successes are instantly felt and mirrored back by my excited students displaying and reporting the aesthetic experience they have just had. A friend of mine describes this as making the world a safer place for art. It is my artistry that makes me so effective in my teaching—my enthusiasm, my creative ideas for inventing art activities, my ability to listen and my eagerness to respond—all emerge from my artist self.

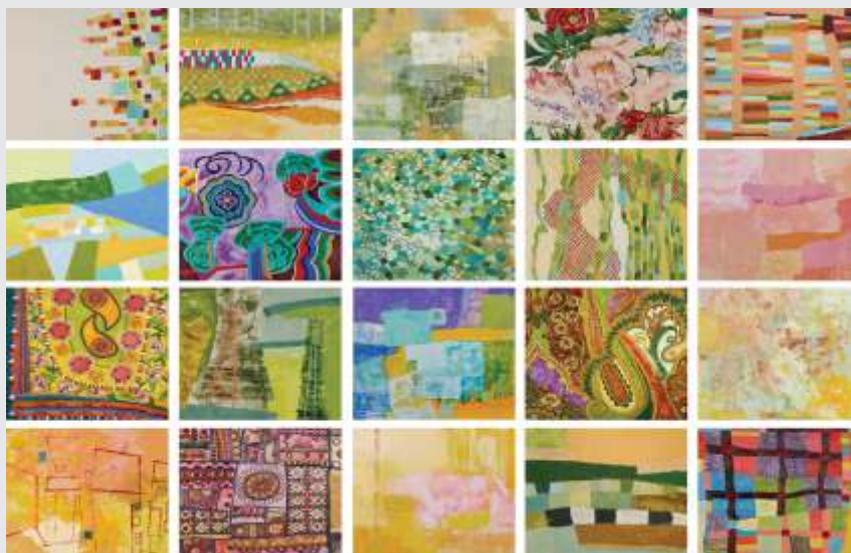
In 2013 an independent curator, Sophia Marisa Lucas, suggested organizing an exhibition that would combine my painting with my teaching and posed the question to me of what that might look like. I had never presented myself as an educator to the fine art world and was worried how that would be received. My reputation as an educator has taken me to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Seoul, Mexico City and all over the United States but my professional standing as a painter has not been as far reaching. So it was worth trying to bring the two parts of myself together to see if that would create a new and expanding interest in my painting. We worked on the exhibition together over the next few months and created AN OPEN BOOK, work by Barbara Ellmann.

The exhibition appears without wall text, and was created to be read and understood entirely on visual terms by following your own inquiry into what is before you. The title is in itself an invitation. While it suggests a frankness and transparency, it also implies the action involved in taking in the material presented. It asks the viewers to respond to the work in their own

also implies the action involved in taking in the material presented. It asks the viewers to respond to the work in their own way, making sense out of patterns, associations, contrasts, and connections to their own experiences. The paintings are displayed in large grids, in groups of individual panels with up to thirty discrete parts.

These groupings become communities where the interactions between panels converge, collide, and conflict. The viewer is encouraged to identify and discover an entry point into the work, letting the eyes navigate their own pathways, across and throughout the grid. Looking at the differences and similarities among the individual panels leads one to imagine associations and make personal meaning. The viewer is drawn in and opens up to the many possibilities and ways of understanding my work. What is the viewer reminded of? Where has the viewer seen this before? What is this like? All of these questions are encouraged by the exhibition's design.

The viewer's response becomes a central concept in this plan. Lucas in her curatorial statement describes it like this, "Ellmann has invited visitors to take on a critical role in this exhibition, as makers of their own aesthetic experience. AN OPEN BOOK is in part precisely about this collaboration. Her work and the viewer's response are a key subject of the show – an experiment in mutual exploration of the reflexive natures of artistic practice and aesthetic education; instruction and learning; experience and perception; subject and object."



TURNING TOWARD, encaustic on 20 wooden panels 24"x24" each, 2013



OUR BELIEFS, encaustic on 30 wooden panels 24x24 inches each, 2013

WHERE TO STOP, encaustic on 30 wooden panels 24x24 inches each, 2013





PICTURE IT, encaustic on 20 wooden panels 24x24 inches each, 2013



GAMEBOARDS, beeswax and mixed media on kitakata, each 10x10 inches, 2001-2013(detail)

In AN OPEN BOOK, the curator and I brought together four multi-paneled installations of paintings made up of 100 individual sections and a large group of 230 wax-dipped drawings. In addition to the artwork was a room full of related contextual materials to encourage active viewing and participation. It was the inclusion of these materials that was an unusual exhibition choice to make, where traditionally “educational” materials appear separate from the artwork all together. Why is that?

In my museum teaching experience where we are actively trying to involve audiences in deeply noticing the artwork on display, all that is presented is a wall label with the who, what, where, and when of the art object and sometimes a bit of art history. Frequently the art education related to an exhibition doesn't happen near the galleries. Separated by distance teaching might take place in a school, in a classroom at the university or museum, or in a studio. If the artwork is shown in these settings it is on a screen or poster, or, worse, a postcard, where the materiality, color, and scale of the original are altered. For many reasons this disturbs me. I have seen “Starry Night” reproduced all over the world where students learn he cut off his ear; but what about that great painting? Let's look at that! And in person!

AN OPEN BOOK included contextual information and educational opportunities around the corner of the wall and adjacent to the artwork's display in a non-didactic way. Again, without instructions on what to do or how to interact with these materials the following were gathered there.

First, a large format photograph of the view from my studio, where all of this work was made.



View From My Studio Window

My painting has been influenced by this place where I work, this view, the grid of the city's streets, the crowds, and the city's architecture.

An ipad with an app allowed visitors to rearrange the twenty panels that make up PICTURE IT and send their arrangement to a tumblr feed that could be accessed outside of the exhibition. The ipad was connected to a projector so other viewers could observe the process of rearrangement taking place. Throughout the exhibition these potentialarrangements were viewed by me and Sophia, the curator, and each week we selected a new configuration for the gallery walls. This very process mirrors what takes place in my studio practice and determines how individual panels become grouped into installation grids. The grids are unfixed so in each site a new grouping is formed.



Contextual Information Lab, installation view, Richmond Center for the Visual Arts

Laminated photo cards of places, patterns, stacked objects, and natural forms that have multiple connections to the abstraction that occurs in the work of AN OPEN BOOK, hang on hooks and can be transported around the exhibition to stimulate and encourage conversations about how real life experience morphs into abstraction. What is it about these photo cards that can be found in these paintings? There are many associations to be made through likenesses of color, shape, and line.



Tools and Touch Panels in the Contextual Information Lab, Richmond Center for the Visual Arts, Western Michigan University

To give a sense of the material process a number of elements were included. Touch panels that invite visitors to feel encaustic's sensuous waxy surface, a case of tools of the sort that I use to create a range of textures, a box of encaustic bricks that suggests that the paint needs to undergo an alchemical process to become a painting, and a looping film of the painting of the touch panels to further demonstrate the solid liquid solid transformation that is involved in the making of these works and how the tools are utilized to produce them.

The exhibition has been presented twice so far in Kalamazoo, Michigan at Western University's Richmond Center for the Visual Arts and in Palm Desert, California at the College of the Desert's Marks Art Center. Both of these exhibitions had their primary institutional support from aesthetic education programs -- Education for the Arts in Kalamazoo, and The McCallum Theater's Aesthetic Education Program in Palm Desert. A catalog accompanied the exhibition with an introduction by Sophia Marisa Lucas and essays by Albert Mobilio and Joseph McElroy.

It is my hope that AN OPEN BOOK, still available as a touring exhibition, will have more venues. More than 3700 people visited the exhibition in its two iterations, which exceeded our expectations. Dr Alexandra Miletta from Mercy College researched the project in Michigan; her report on student outcomes as a result of studying an exhibition through aesthetic educational experiences will be forthcoming.



AN OPEN BOOK, installation view, Richmond Center for the Visual Arts,  
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What I have observed in art classes of different kinds at the elementary, secondary, and university levels is that there are programs that teach good technical art skills of drawing and painting and other studio practices. But what type of idea is worth making art about? How do we teach students to have a new and fresh approach to making work? What can students acquire from looking at master works by artists that can shake up their conservative thinking? What kind of teaching would help to produce a contemporary artist admired as much as Van Gogh, whose work would be equally treasured 100 years from now? These are questions I am wondering about in my teaching now and I am sure that they will be showing up in my painting. What subject matter is worthy of contemporary painting? How will painting be affected by all of the new technologies that everyone has in their pockets? How might I capture the confusion of these times?

In my studio I am facing twenty new wooden panels, gessoed and prepped with a smooth layer of beeswax. I am staring at the fresh blank squares and wondering what will I do? How can I break from what I have known to something not yet clearly formed in my mind? What will I do to turn my thoughts into actions? On a train traveling in northern Scotland recently I looked out the window at

the rolling green landscape and while focusing on the distance I also saw the close-up shrubs and trees dissolve into horizontal stripes as the train sped by, a strange experience combining an image of natural landscape and green barcode. I know there is something in that.