

Roth, Moira. Ed. *Rachel Rosenthal*. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press. 1997)

Annie Leibovitz' extraordinary photograph of Rachel Rosenthal stares out at us from the front of this book devoted to Rosenthal's work. The photograph, 'Rachel Rosenthal, Soggy Dry lake, California, 1991', has the artist buried up to her shoulders in desert earth. She stares back at us, and beyond her, plains extend into foothills. This photograph of a bald elderly woman, naked in the earth encapsulates much that is important about Rosenthal's work. In particular her uncompromising analysis and exploration of the figure of the ageing woman, and her work with eco-theatre. Rosenthal's most interesting work brings these two thematics together and ellipses the ailments of earth and female body into shifting metaphors of each other. The book is an important addition to writings on Rosenthal. It combines critical and biographical writings on the artist, with interviews and texts by Rosenthal herself. Moira Roth's introduction leads us through Rosenthal's extraordinary biography and performance history. This is useful since so much of the later writings refer to work which uses elements of this early biography as material. Early glamorous details of Rosenthal's upper class French childhood (one of 'privelege, secret traumas and theatricality'), was followed by her family's departure from Hitler's Europe, first to Brazil, then to New York during World War II. Rosenthal, then, was always an emigré. Her subsequent wanderings between Paris and New York after the war, and her involvement in the art worlds of 50's New York before her move to the west coast, evoke a nomadic femininity that is a powerful vein in her work. The themes of earth and homeland, corporeal and worldly continue to fire Rosenthal's work into the nineties.

Perhaps the most interesting critical essay is Bonnie Marranca's 'A Cosmography of herself: The Autobiology of Rachel Rosenthal.' Marranca deftly handles her theoretical project, and situates Rosenthal within what she terms the 'autobiological' - a particular alignment of the personal and the global characterised by Rosenthal's work. The reviews and essays in this section provide critical counterpoint to many of the other sections of the book. One can follow threads of connection - the letters to Barbara T. Smith / Smith's review of Rosenthal's early autobiographical work *Charm*, and Roth's description of Rosenthal's childhood in Paris are one such cluster. In the letters to Smith, Rosenthal describes in aching detail the culinary performances of her childhood - 'there were incredible layer cakes, pound cakes, fruitcakes, chestnut cakes, tarts, St. Honorés, icecreams, chaussons fourrés, chocolate and vanilla soufflés, petit fours, croquembouches, profitrolles, éclairs, mille feuilles, and truffles . . . she became a poet, a sculptor, an architect, an acrobat, an inventor, a dancer, a landscape artist!' In Smith's review of *Charm*, Rosenthal performs another version of these delights - 'We have been watching Rosenthal eat with increasing compulsion and less and less elegance, devouring dozens of napoleans, petit fours, strudels, pastries, brought by the maid. (Eventually she rips into a whole cake with her bare hands and stuffs her face).' This sugary excess,

shifts tenors from autobiographical detail to the staging of a familiar feminine crisis of self-worth navigated in nutrition or the lack of it.

But it is as the 'Crone' figure of her later work that Rosenthal is most memorable, and from whose stance she collapses boundaries of earth and female body - the moving of geological plates and the shifting fissures in the human skull; her troubled knees and the ailing earth. Many of the writers in this collection document this work insightfully, and unravel some of its philosophical and political implications.

*Rachel's Brain* (1987) is the only performance text in the collection, and it gives textual insight to Rosenthal's consistent twinning of personal and global identity / crisis. The text is a collage of connected scenes focusing on the brain and its political, corporeal and worldly contexts. This is something of a sprawling performance document which suffers from its author's performative absence. Nonetheless, its figuration of the brain as personally belonging to Rachel / symbolic of humanity's severance from the earth makes interesting reading with the other texts in the collection. In it, Rosenthal ritually liquidises cauliflowers (a simple metaphor for the brain) and ingests their bitterness. She also buries a cauliflower in earth. In the letters to Smith which immediately precede this text, Rosenthal describes the dishes she ate as a child, but has never tasted since, amongst them is Julie's 'beignets de cervelle' - brain fritters. Such chilling juxtaposition is thematic of Rosenthal's work overall - an interrogation of embodied identity filtered through autobiography and ecological / political consciousness.

Three images stay with me from this collection; Marranca's description of the artist as 'author, director, spectacle, signaling through the hot air of global warming, if not its flames', the artist drawing '60' on her bald head in *L.O.W. Gaia* (her age at the time of the performance) and Rosenthal's stilling gaze on its cover. This is an important collection, which does Rosenthal justice and goes a good way towards giving her the critical response she deserves.