

ANN TORKE



THE OUTLOT

One 8½" x 11" sheet of paper holds both the content and the mystery of Ann Torke's *Outlot* project. Headed "Geneva Girls School (Illinois Youth Center)," the sheet contains a list of names and dates. It is a cemetery roster and none of the young women on it lived to be older than twenty-one. None of the infants on it lived longer than one year.

Labels with names and dates on them are common currency in the art world. Until recently—now, many museums give extended text panels describing art works in more detail—they were all the information you had other than the artwork itself. And you wouldn't think that a date could tell much, but it does, especially when you combine the lifespan dates with the date an artwork was made. For example, compare Hans Hoffman (1880-1966) with Arshile Gorky (1904-1948). The mere fact that Hoffman spans from the nineteenth to the twentieth century makes him seem more historic, more authentic, while Gorky appears a bit unfinished. It affects

the way we perceive the artwork. Hoffman's 1935 figurative work, *Japanese Girl*, although made when he was fifty-five, older than Gorky was when he died, is seen as early work, while Gorky's *Organization* (1933-1936), made when he was in his early thirties, can be viewed as a reasonably mature example of his Surrealist inspired abstraction. Then, there's the confusion surrounding a work by Dutch artist Geertgen Tot Sint-Jans (c. 1460-1490): *The Glorification of the Virgin Mary* (1490-95). The dates here raise questions—obviously the "circa" should be taken very seriously—but still they imply an artist who died at the age of around thirty, creating his greatest work at the end of his life.

In looking at the dates of such artists as Hoffman and Sint-Jans, two ready-made narratives spring to life: the traditional one of an artist who lives into his eighties, becoming a respected master and mentor for others, and the more romantic mythos of the artist who dies very young, perhaps never realizing his potential, but whose work is valued all the more for its rarity.

We like to quantify and numerically arrange lives, especially in the case of artists; it makes the inexplicable easier to absorb. Even when dates have no context, no other history to go with them, we have ready-made stories to pour into them. This is certainly the case with the twenty-two young women and twenty-eight babies of Ann Torke's *Outlot*. Their public records are now sealed for their "protection," but obviously there was little enough protection when they were alive. Even the oldest of the group, Hazel Cronk, only made it to twenty-one, not doing nearly as well as Geertgen Tot Sint-Jans, who was dealing with a fifteenth century life expectancy. The



dates on the wall of this installation, just like any other exhibition, are loaded with significance— even more because they are so mysteriously truncated.

Did neglected outbreaks of disease, lack of sanitary conditions, malnutrition, generally abusive treatment, or a combination of all these and similar factors create the premature headstones? Were the girls already sick when they arrived and the “school” used as a place for them to die at the state’s expense? With the infants’ headstones, the questions multiply, because they are clearly from a later time—there are no corresponding headstones of women who could have been their mothers or contemporaries of their mothers. Where are the mothers of these infants and under what circumstances did the babies wind up at the “school?”

The most loaded and shocking date of all is 19—the century when most of these deaths occurred. These were times of relative prosperity for America, but the lifespans and where the deaths occurred imply conditions we’d normally expect to find in the early nineteenth century pages of *David Copperfield* or *Jane Eyre*. And yet, as we begin the twenty-first century, we still hear that America has a dismal record of providing health care for its young people in the lower social stratas and that our infant mortality rate is still considerably higher than most of our fellow “first world” nations. Surely, other forgotten cemeteries, filled with dates like 1979-1999 and 1998-99, exist throughout America, probably near the “youth correctional facilities” that have replaced places like the Geneva Girls’ School.

During her exploration of the cemetery site, Ann Torke found other markers of the presence of

these long-dead young women. But even without these relics—kitchen equipment, enamel bowls and pitchers, milk bottles—and even without elegant, clearly inscribed tombstones, the crudely carved names and dates she found are more than enough to form a compelling narrative. In the art world, as on the stock exchange, as in most aspects of life, quantification lies at the heart of almost every story.

Torke uses quantification as a narrative structure in her *Daytime TV* project, as well. Here, commercial slogans—only those aimed at women viewers—are reduced to 12-point type printed on acetate strips—a 65-foot-long strip contains a day’s worth of commercials. Torke has chosen a dry but still horrifying physical metaphor for the amount of sheer babble we all absorb, day after day. When all the sets, sound, light, design, performance, editing—the thousands and occasionally millions of dollars that can go into a video advertisement—are taken away, it comes down to an idea, a slogan, written on a piece of paper.

Bob Seeger condemned the contemporary American bureaucratic structure when he sang, “I feel like a number, a stranger in this land.” Ann Torke does not state her case as bluntly, but she shows how art can use numbers and statistics can be made to give up equally revealing—and damning—visual narratives.

—Elizabeth Licata

Elizabeth Licata is an arts writer and curator and current editor of *Buffalo Spree* Magazine.

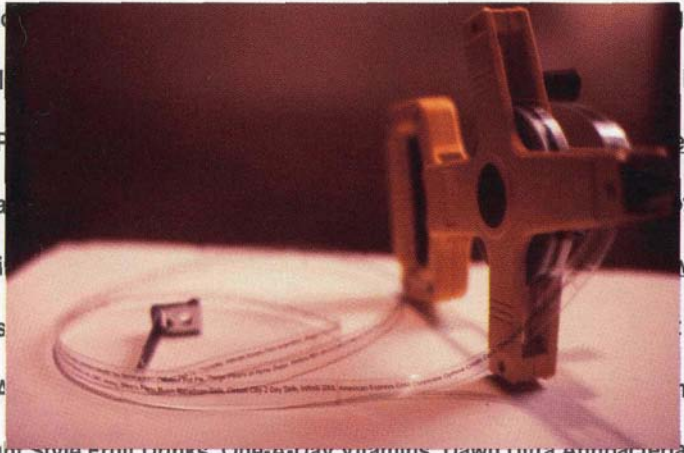


Support for the 2000-2001 exhibitions season has been provided by the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), a state agency, Erie County Cultural Funding, Members of Hallwalls, City of Buffalo Cultural Funding, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, W&T Bank, Chase Manhattan Bank, the Arts Council in Buffalo & Erie County, and generous donations from individuals and local businesses.



All New NBC Friday, F

Hallwalls 2495 Main St. Suite 425, Buffalo, New York 14214



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&T "One Rate Plan" Long Distance Service, Bisquick All Purpose Baking Flour,
m & Hammer Dental Care Toothpaste, Nicoderm CQ Nicotine Transdermal System
alt Disney's Bambi on video, Quaker Oats Instant Oatmeal, Greyhound, Colombian

Installation shot and text from *Daytime TV*

design: Julian Montague

Geneva Girls School (Illinois Youth Center)

Cemetery Roster

Annie L. Jackson	1882-1897 (age 15)
Leona Cramer	1882-1898 (age 16)
Grace Watson	1883-1898 (age 15)
Maud Dixon	1881-1899 (age 18)
Annie When	1886-1903 (age 17)
Agnes Sullivan	1884-1904 (age 20)
Bertha Lavandier	1886-1904 (age 18)
Margaret Peterson	1885-1905 (age 20)
Mamie Mills	1889-1906 (age 17)
Hazel Cronk	1885-1906 (age 21)
Lebbie Clariday	1893-1907 (age 14)
Leona Porter	1890-1909 (age 18)
Alda Smith	1895-1915 (age 20)
Zona Fuller	1902-1918 (age 16)
Gertrude George	1902-1918 (age 15)
Mabel Whitehead	1902-1920 (age 17)
Thelma Moon	1904-1922 (age 18)
Hazel Green	1905-1923 (age 18)
Idella Payton	1905-1924 (age 19)
Sadie Cooksey	1904-1924 (age 20)
Dorothy Franck	1909-1929 (age 20)
Minnie Pringle Ford	1912-1930 (age 18)

Infants

Russell Ridgeway	1923
Mary Thomas	1926
Betty Jane Dion	1930
Donald Black	1930
Paul Donald Dugger	1930
Robert Lee Upchurch	1931
Leslie Schultz	1932
John Albert	1932-1933
Yvonne Navarre	1933
Evelyn Townsend	1933
Virginia Lee Fuller	1934
Alice Smith	1935
Pauline Gibbs	1934-1935
Patricia Kelly	1936
Mary Engle	1936
Robert Mecha	1941
Donna Sue Bates	1941
Infant son of Elsie Valdez	1942
Twin daughters of Betty Carroway	1947
Infant Davidson	1957
Infant Trotter	1957
Stephanie Hardgraves	1961
Robin Lynn Spaw	1964
John Wilson	1965
Infant Wilkes	1965
Chyalonda Branch	1967
Infant Hogan	1968
Samuel Starks	1970