







Requiem for September 11th, 2002 installation view, transfer drawings on handmade paper, sizes variable

## INTRODUCTION

***History is a pack of lies about events that never happened, told by people who weren't there.***

– George Santayana

With imagination and conviction, Czech-born artist Tatana Kellner brings together her diverse background in painting, printmaking, photography, and papermaking. As a mixed-media artist, Kellner's artwork is strongly informed by early life experience in communist-era Prague, growing up in a family where both parents were Holocaust survivors. At an early age Tatana Kellner learned to question hidden agendas of government and news propaganda. Appropriately, the primary source material for her work is the media, in the form of newspaper text and images. Kellner's artwork often brings to light the discrepancy that exists when events represented by the media are at odds with an individual's experience.

Tatana Kellner's current one-person exhibition titled Embarrassing Facts is featured at Kean University's CAS Gallery from January 27 through March 12, 2009. The show is actually Part II of our presentation of Tatana Kellner's artwork. Part I was installed earlier this academic year. For two months, her landmark work Requiem for 911 graced the atrium of the Center for Academic Success building, to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. The forty-five banners, each one sixteen feet long and four feet wide, include a New York Times photograph of each individual who lost their life that day. The current exhibit showcases work Kellner created about the political landscape in the United States since that time. These artworks are often charged with frustration and honesty.

On behalf of Kean University, I want to thank Tatana Kellner for her efforts involved in planning the exhibition and lending all the works being shown. For the installation of this show we are grateful to our student gallery assistants, Tracey Sperling, Stephanie Natiello and Joya Thompson. Special thanks to President Dawood Farahi and Holly Logue, Acting Dean of the School of Visual and Performing Arts. We appreciate their support for the growing exhibition program and the opportunity to investigate the work of Tatana Kellner.

**Neil Tetkowski**

Director of University Galleries  
Kean University









## BIOGRAPHY

Tatana Kellner was born in 1950 in communist Czechoslovakia. Her parents were both Holocaust survivors. At a very early age she learned the vital necessity of questioning what is put forth to us by the media and our government. In 1969 with her family, Kellner emigrated to Toledo, Ohio. She studied art at the University of Toledo, completing her BA in 1972, and earned her MFA from the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York two years later.

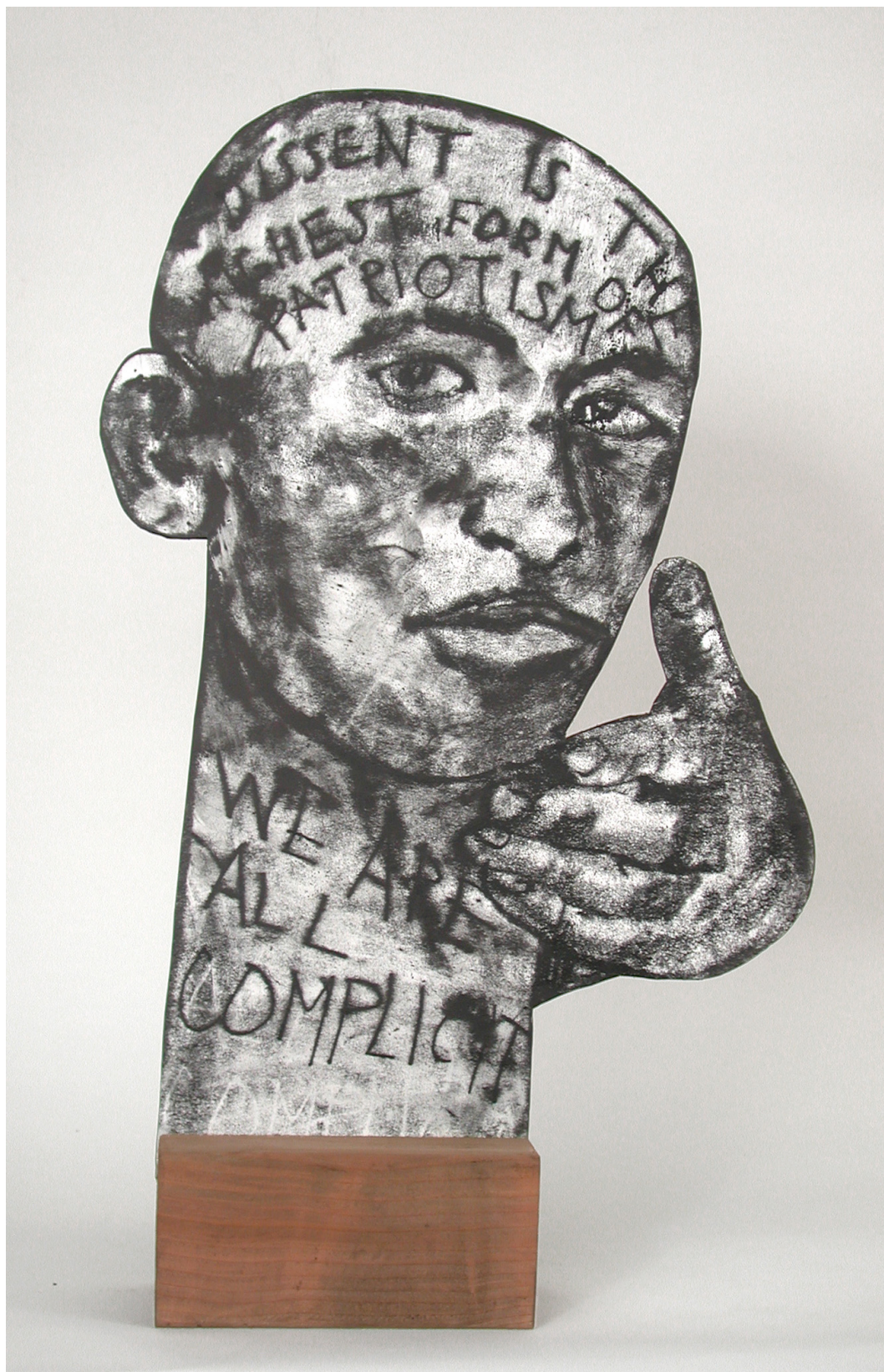
Kellner's early childhood dream to be discovered as an artist has been fulfilled in many ways. She has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including Individual Fellowships from the New York Foundation on the Arts, Photographers' Fellowships from the Center for Photography in Woodstock, New York, an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Empire State Crafts Alliance, and the Ruth Chenven Foundation Award. Kellner has also been awarded several prestigious residencies at places such as the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, Artpark in Lewiston, New York, and the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Her work is held in permanent collections, including The Tate Library in London, U.K., the Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Library and the Museum of Modern Art Library in New York City. Her work has been exhibited in many solo and group shows, in venues throughout the United States.

Tatana Kellner is the co-founder and Artistic Director of the Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, New York. Since 1974 she has worked with this not-for-profit organization to provide alternative studio space for women artists to create new work and to share their skills.

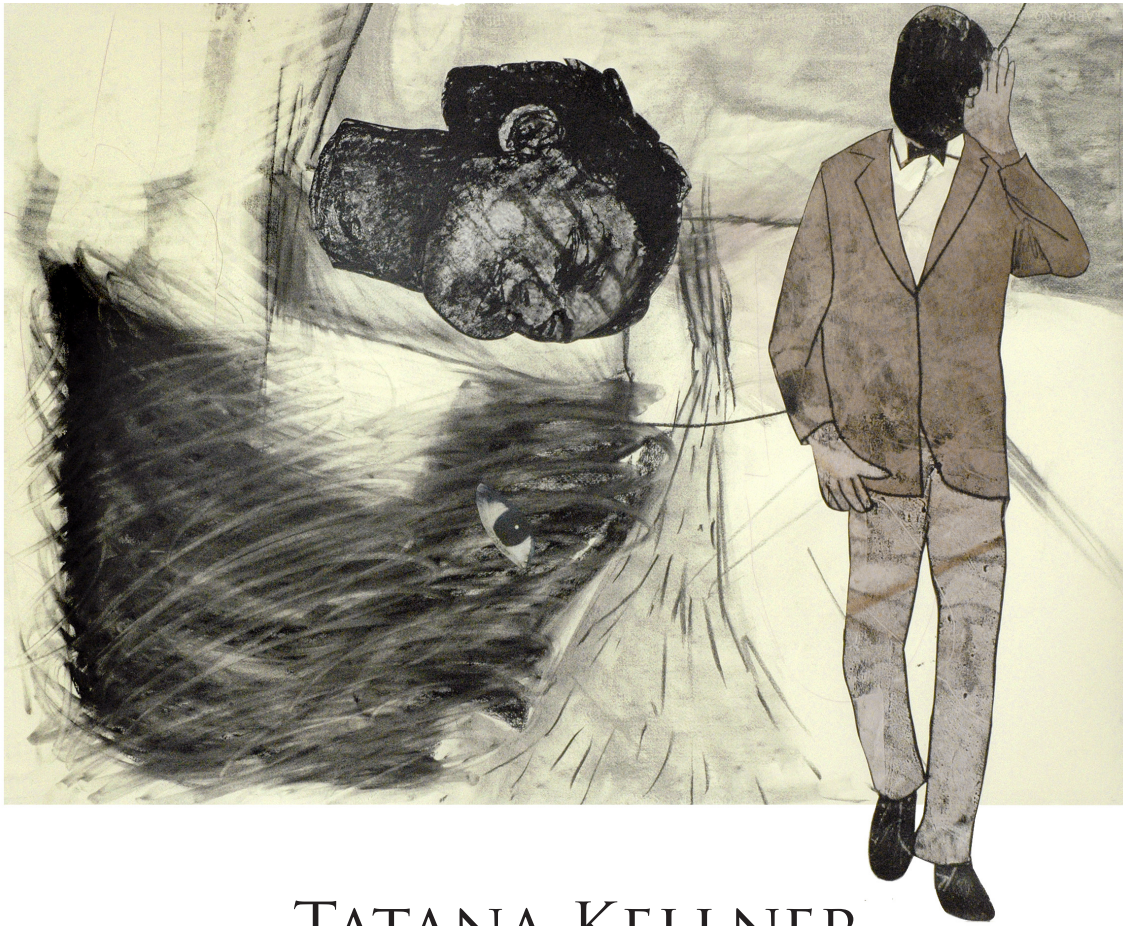
### **Neil Tetkowski**

Director of University Galleries









# TATANA KELLNER

## “EMBARRASSING FACTS”

Confronting History and Repairing the World

Tatana Kellner is a photographer, printmaker, artists' bookmaker, painter and mixed media installation artist, whose work is based on, in her words, “personal history and contemporary events.” The co-founder and Artistic Director of the Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, New York, she has been actively engaged, since 1974, in providing an alternative space for women artists to create new work and to share their skills. She has described her own artistic work as dealing “with issues that personally touch my everyday life. These include: living in a rural environment; being a woman and an immigrant; reaching maturity; the death of friends and family members; the joy of

being alive; and the frustrations of living in a less than perfect society.”<sup>1</sup> The latter concern has been the focus of much of her recent work, as is amply demonstrated by works in this exhibition. Her expansive interests have led to richly-conceived and powerfully expressive works, utilizing a broad mix of media, processes and formats, which address topics ranging from the Holocaust and Jewish history, to women's domestic labor, to September 11th, to protesting recent government misdeeds and the resulting human suffering.

For Tatana Kellner, history is not about statistics or vague generalizations; it is individual, personal and, ultimately, political.





How could it be otherwise? For Kellner was born after World War II, in Czechoslovakia, the daughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors who met after enduring the Nazi atrocities of the death camps. As with so many survivors, her parents attempted the impossible task of shielding their daughter from their horrendous experiences. In Tatana's words: "As a daughter of Holocaust survivors born

the generation after the war, I share survivor's guilt, anger and acceptance over the collective loss of those murdered. As an artist, I try to use these experiences and transform them into a contemporary context." <sup>2</sup> As an adult, after reading accounts by other Holocaust survivors, she realized how little she knew about her parents' experiences.

Kellner's desire to harness her artistic



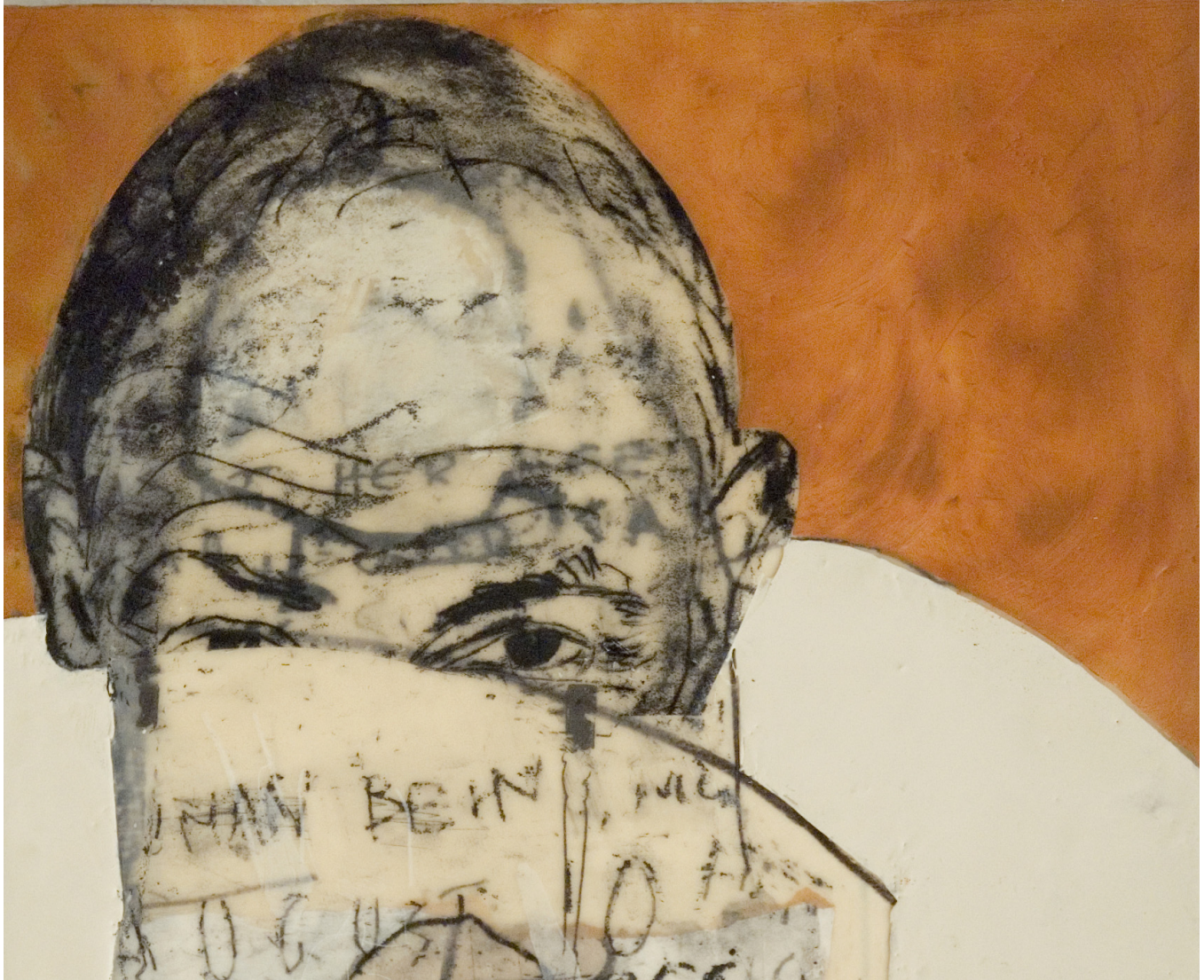


vision, in order to contribute visual and textual accounts of her parents' experiences to the collective memory of the Holocaust, led to the creation of two extraordinarily powerful, critically-acclaimed artists' books: 71125: Fifty Years of Silence and B-11226: Fifty Years of Silence (1992), memorializing the horrific experiences and ultimate survival of her mother and father. 3 Utilizing a large-scale book format, Kellner combined a verbatim transcription of her parents' recollections in their native Czech, with English translations overlaying images of her parents and ghostly photos of the death camps. Each page is die-cut around a hand-made paper cast of the respective parent's forearm, complete with the crudely tattooed number inscribed by the Nazis, which provided a constant unspoken, haunting sign to Tatana, as she was growing up, that her parents had experienced something unspeakable, the details of which she only learned about much later. As one turns the pages, constantly viewing

and even brushing those ghostly forearms, one is constantly reminded of the individual suffering, which is sometimes obscured by the sheer enormity of the Holocaust.

This ability to strike a balance between the scale of historical events and the individuals who experience them is one of the hallmarks of Kellner's work. In her work recently shown at Kean University, *Requiem for September 11th* (2002), Kellner again confronts a catastrophic historical event, one closer to her direct experience. Compiling images of the victims of September 11th from the New York Times' *Portraits of Grief*, Kellner screened hundreds of these images of ordinary people onto long trailing sheets of organza. As Kellner noted: "What spoke to me most are the victims' faces, mostly smiling in snapshots of happy times," 4 The two long rows of hanging banners, like vertical columns bring to mind the twin towers, and the ghostly smiling visages seen through a diaphanous veil, as if staring out the towers' windows, remind the





viewer of the individuals who were lost. As she did so effectively with her parents' Holocaust pieces, she has created "a memorial to the victims...and put a human face on numbers that are unfathomable to most of us." 5

In Kellner's more recent work, she continues to serve as a witness to history, like a prophet from the Hebrew Bible, calling our attention to the failings and sufferings of people and the imperfect society in which she lives. Despite this continuity of purpose, in her recent drawings, paintings and installations, which comprise this exhibition, we note a shift in Kellner's focus, processes, media and even a subtle shift in content. After the

September 11th piece, she moved away from working photographically. As she states, "I want things to be slightly mysterious, not completely defined. That's why I don't do straight photography." 6 She also shifted away from a focus on memorializing specific events and victims, to a more general critique of society's ills, as she perceives them, a shift from recalling the past, to more direct political protest.

In her recent drawings, encaustic paintings and installations, she draws our attention to the evils of our world by focusing on the individual, both as victim, and as victimizer. However, rather than using portraits as in









*Re-consider*, 2007 installation view, transfer drawings on handmade paper, sizes variable

earlier works, Kellner creates generalized embodiments of human vices and suffering. Describing her recent work, Kellner writes: “as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, growing up in communist Czechoslovakia, I learned to mistrust authority and question official doctrines. The current political landscape with the erosion of civil liberties, the misinformation fed to us by our leaders and the manipulation of facts by the media has motivated me to refocus my artistic concerns from exploring my personal history, albeit political, to taking a direct stance on contemporary politics.”<sup>7</sup> What links more recent work to her earlier work is the emphatic insistence that, to reverse an axiom of the modern feminist movement, “the political is personal.” What also ties her work together is the constant search to find the media and processes that can convey her content most effectively, as she continues to work with multiple forms and images so that the viewer’s experience of the work builds to a powerful cumulative effect.

In Kellner’s recent works, she combines emotionally evocative, expressionistic images, particularly of disembodied heads and faces bearing powerfully emotional expressions. Some of this work is reminiscent of what was done in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement in Germany between the two world wars, by artists such as Otto Dix. Like Dix, Kellner draws our attention to the evils of her society through expressive distortions of figures’ bodies and faces, which symbolize the pathology of their society. Other images, such as “Civil Disobedience,” have a more surreal quality. Many of these images are combined with brief texts, such as “They Lied,” or “Embarrassing Facts, which seem as if they have been scratched into, or stenciled onto the surface, giving these images a pointed focus and a clear political perspective.

In two of her most recent installations “Not In Our Name” (2004) and “Re-consider” (2007), aspects of which we see here, Kellner focuses on inhuman acts,







such as torture at Abu Graib, which have tarnished her adopted country's reputation, and in "Re-consider", she creates evocative images of "talking heads" who spread misinformation and support government misdeeds. In both cases, the installations are comprised of disembodied expressive heads with strong graphic qualities, which evoke a strong emotional response. In "Not in Our Name", Kellner deploys rows of faces on the wall, executed in trace monoprint on paper, seemingly looking down on individual heads mounted on wooden bases on the floor. Both perpetrators and victims of torture are shown, but the focus is on the victims, some of whom are blindfolded or gagged and whose images are incised with inscriptions such as "Imminent Danger," or "History is Written By the Victors." In "Re-consider", the viewer is confronted with about 200 heads, transfer drawings on handmade paper, which seem haphazardly strewn across the floor. These disembodied heads convey a sense of isolation, futility and even chaos. As Kellner stated, she wanted to evoke "talking heads, anonymous faces and the miscommunication which afflicts us," common elements in recent political history.

Kellner's most recent installation "Iron"(2008), represented here by a related artist's book, presents another shift in medium, process and content. It uses images and text printed in invisible ink to highlight the "invisibility" of much of women's domestic labor. The images and text are only revealed by the physical act of ironing, an act that is built into the installation.

Although Kellner was certainly not raised Jewish in communist Czechoslovakia and describes herself as "a non-practicing Jew," her work, for this writer, is like that of a modern Hebrew prophet, embodying two of the most profound Jewish values: Zachor (to remember) and Tikkun Olam (to repair the world). Constantly searching for the form, the medium and the processes to make her artistic statements come alive, she reminds us of the past, heightens our awareness of the imperfections of the present prodding our conscience, and yes, perhaps repairs a broken world.

### **Martin Rosenberg**

Professor of Art History  
Rutgers University

1 Artist's statement quoted in Judith Hoffberg, *Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes*, exhibition catalog, Florida Atlantic University Friends of the Libraries, 2001, p. 45.

2 Ibid., p. 45.

3 These works have been written about extensively in the literature on the Holocaust and art. See, for example, Nora H. Lind, "In Memory: An Examination of Tatana Kellner's Paired Artist's Books, "Fifty Years of Silence," *Journal of Artist's Books*, n. 23, pp. 22-29; See also, Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, eds., *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community*. University of Illinois Press, 2002, pp. 78-83, 88-91. See also Marianne Hirsh and Susan Rubin Sulieman, "Material Memory: Holocaust Testimony in Post-Holocaust Art," in Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, eds., *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, Indiana University Press, 2003, pp. 79-96.

4 Artist's statement quoted on CEPA Gallery web-site for her exhibition "Requiem for September 11th," 2002, Buffalo, New York, <http://www.albanycentergallery.org/exhibits/kellnervonrosk/>

5 Ibid., n.p.

6 Artist quoted in Beth E. Wilson, "Portfolio: Tatana Kellner," *Chronogram*, July, 2008, p.2.

7 Artist's statement from her website: <http://www.tatanakellner.com/statement.html>.







Above: *Embarrassing Facts*, 2006 trace monoprint,, charcoal and collage on paper, 43 x 27 in.

Cover: *They Lied*, 2006 acrylic, charcoal, trace monoprint, collage on paper, mounted on canvas, 52 x 60 in.