



Ellen Harvey  
 New York Beautification  
 Project (details), 1998-2001  
 oil on graffiti sites in  
 New York city  
 each 5" x 7",  
 Photographs: Jan Baracz



Ellen Harvey  
 Mirror (detail of installation at  
 Pennsylvania Academy), 2005  
 four 9ft (2.74m) x 12ft (3.66m) rear-  
 illuminated panels each consisting of  
 sixteen 36" (91.4cm) x 27" (68.6cm)  
 plexi-glass mirrors attached to aluminum  
 frames containing fluorescent lights,  
 acrylic paint on wall, video projection  
 (60 minute video projected onto 9ft  
 (2.74m) x 12 ft (3.66m) hanging screen),  
 two 60 minute videos on flat screens,  
 Photographs: Aaron Iglar



Ellen Harvey  
 The Museum of Failure (installation  
 view Whitney Museum of American  
 Art): Collection of Impossible  
 Subjects (rear-illuminated plexi-glass  
 mirrors in aluminum frame hand-  
 engraved with a salon-style hanging  
 of empty ornate frames), 2007  
 8 ft (2.44m) x 12 ft (3.66m),  
 Photograph: Jan Baracz

This is an interview with artist Ellen Harvey on August 26, 2007.

JACKIE: Ellen, I'm intrigued with the way you combine an intense conceptual practice with public projects and a gallery career. I think you're a great role model for a lot of artists who want to follow a diverse practice. So, I'm curious about some of the realities of that. Let's start with the book documenting your New York Beautification Project.

ELLEN: The reason I made a book was that one of the most compelling things about the project was all the crazy stuff that happened doing it – all the stories that you would never know about if you just saw the photographs. I also thought that with a public art project like this, you never really know why it happened, how it happened, or how anyone even heard of it. So the book not only has the story of what happened at each of the sites, but also talks about how I distributed postcards and maps and, how to my surprise, people started writing about it and even pretending they'd seen it and writing about it.

JACKIE: Pretending?

ELLEN: Once there was a website of the project, some people started to write about having come across the paintings on the streets when it was fairly obvious that they had just looked on the website. I thought that was hilarious.

JACKIE: How did the piece come about?

ELLEN: I was asked to make a piece for a one day art e p of curators called Mayday Projections, which doesn't exist anymore, organized it. I was really excited because it was the first time that I'd been asked to do something outside of a regular gallery space. And so, I thought, "Well, what can I do?"

JACKIE: And your work at that time was realist painting with a conceptual edge?

ELLEN: I was making paintings that were all about the idea of painting as an obsolete technology of representation whose only remaining function was as an art signifier – which is a convoluted way of saying that I was exploring a lot of clichés of painting. But while I was happy playing fast and loose with the subject matter of my work, I hadn't ever made anything that was not a physical painting in the traditional sense. So, I started by painting all the lampposts in the park gold, because they were all dilapidated and I thought, "That's paint too."

JACKIE: Where was the park located?

ELLEN: Highbridge Park, at 181<sup>st</sup> St, on the west side of Manhattan. It was a pretty scary park—it was where stolen cars went to be stripped—that the New York Restoration Foundation had renovated. The volunteers found a headless torso in a bag while they were tidying up.

While I was painting the lamp posts, I started looking at all the graffiti and I thought, "Well, that's painting also. Why don't I make some graffiti for the park." So I thought about what kind of graffiti the park might like—something pastoral and romantic. That's how it started. And then, once I'd painted the first one, I knew I wanted to keep going, because it raised so many interesting issues for me, like, "Who gets to mak blic art?" "What makes one thing art and another graffiti?" Because, the oil painting is obviously illegal pigment just as much as any sprayed image. . .

JACKIE: Right. Even though it was a landscape painting, it was just as much graffiti as the graffiti it's on.

ELLEN: The only difference is that I use oils and of course I don't fit into the traditional graffiti-world demographic either.

JACKIE: Absolutely. And your references to the painted landscape tradition are different.

ELLEN: Yes. The aesthetics are a bit of a joke—I thought that if I was going to have a tag, then this would be my tag. Something utterly uncool and unthreatening. I also wanted something that people would see as being "art" even if they weren't in the art world. The landscapes are all either direct quotes from paintings or very directly reference that cliché.

JACKIE: But you know, the subject of paintings and the way they are framed are like windows opening up into an ideal landscape. Was that part of it?

ELLEN: Well, partly. It was an aesthetic choice, obviously. I was thinking about the bubble lettering of graffiti and how objects look when they've been placed on other objects. Square things just aren't as enchanting. And everyone likes landscapes, especially in the city where people are so starved for nature.

I was going for enchanting because I wanted to see if I could get the aesthetics to trump the illegality of the thing. In some ways the project was an experiment in creating a social consensus. Each painting took several days, so they had to be sufficiently appealing to the largest possible number of people for me to be allowed to do them. I didn't ask permission, but I did get caught all the time.

JACKIE: So, you'd go and select a spot, lay down the gesso coat, and go back later to paint in the landscape?

ELLEN: Yes. Each painting represents several days of standing out in broad daylight breaking the law. In a way, the project is about what happens to graffiti if you radically change its aesthetics, medium, and of course, the demographic of the artist. Being a white woman in your thirties makes criminal activity considerably less risky than it would be otherwise. It's really a project about who gets to be an artist in our society.

JACKIE: How did the book, New York Beautification Project, come about?

ELLEN: It became a book, because Greg Miller had started an art press and I was talking to him and I said, "I have an idea for a book." At the time, the photographs and the narratives were in an exhibition at the Austrian Cultural Forum that Barbara Clausen curated, and I suggested that he go to see it. He went and saw all the people compulsively reading the narratives and realized it would be a great book.

JACKIE: It's a beautiful book on the project.

ELLEN: Thank you. Much of the credit must go to my friend Jan Baracz who designed it and did most of the photography. He's an artist himself and he did a beautiful job I think. It was exactly what I wanted. Actually, it was better than I had hoped.

In many ways, the book was the culmination of all the ways I tried to distribute the project. While I was working on it, I showed photographs of the first fifteen paintings in a show at Smack Mellon. For that show, I also made little photocopied maps to give out to people. The maps were to let people know where the paintings were—they were also an outreach program of sorts—if you felt there was a location that you didn't own that you thought needed beautification, you could call me up and I would beautify it—although only one person ever called. I suspect that those maps were what led to the project first

being mentioned in the New York Times. There's a column there called FYI where people can ask questions about the city and someone wrote in to ask about a landscape that they'd supposedly seen on a pillar. I don't know who asked the question or how the New York Times found me, but once they did, the press coverage just snowballed. . . It was great because it was so unexpected. I also felt really vindicated because there was a certain amount of skepticism on the part of my gallery at the time. Actually, not skepticism, more justifiable anxiety about how I was going to survive if I spent all my time making paintings that couldn't be sold. After all, the project was pretty fun about a year and half with breaks in between when I would have to work to support myself. The first one was in '98 and I only finished in 2001.

JACKIE: Before 9/11?

ELLEN: Before 9/11. After 9/11, I did a project where I sat out in the street and did free portraits of people post 9/11. But they had to fill out forms saying what of they thought of their portrait.

JACKIE: I saw that project.

ELLEN: But the distribution of the New York Beautification Project started kind of by accident. I really started it thinking no would ever be interested in it. But once the ball started rolling, it really rolled. It's a piece that became really well known in the graffiti community as well.

JACKIE: Were you embraced by graffiti artists or was there any dissention about what you were doing?

ELLEN: The graffiti community seemed pretty supportive, even if they thought I was a bit mad. I'm in a movie about New York graffiti artists in which I'm basically the comic relief. I'm also in 1NY, a book that Kelly Burns put out, that documents interventions on the street. Somebody tracked the pieces down and photographed them.

Because it was a project that I felt so strongly about, I tried to distribute it as widely as possible. Apart from the little photocopied map I initially made for the Smack Mellon show, I also ended up making a real map of the entire project with a grant that I got from Artists Space. I also made a website, and postcards that I distributed through those postcard holders that you see in restaurants.

JACKIE: Oh yes! The ones that advertise various services and products that are generally placed near the restrooms.

ELLEN: Yes.

JACKIE: Wow! That is smart!

ELLEN: I had enough money for a run of about 500 or something. It was very small, but I really wanted it to be like a tourist attraction. I also ended up showing the maps and postcards at P.S.1., because I was in the studio program there. In the end, there were a lot of alternative ways to experience the piece—perhaps in part to make up for the fact that nobody was even vaguely interested in buying the prints at the time.

JACKIE: You made limited editions of photographs of the paintings? How? Pigment prints?

ELLEN: Yes. I made an edition of five. Now I think there's only one set left, but it took a long time before anyone was at all interested in buying them.

JACKIE: Let's move away from New York Beautification Project and talk about your website which encompasses all your work. How do you use it?

ELLEN: I use my website as a way of reaching people who might not be able to see my work either in person or have access to my work otherwise. I also use it as a way of saving myself a lot of work sending out packages. Because I work on a very project by project basis and I do a lot of very diverse work, I needed a place where I could show the entirety of my work. Before, when I just had the New York Beautification Project on the web, that would be the only project people knew and then they'd be disappointed when they realized that I also did a lot of very different work.

JACKIE: So, you wanted to create a bigger picture of what your practice was about.

ELLEN: Yes. And I wanted to control it. In the end, it's my work and no gallery will ever care as much about it as I do. I didn't like being dependent on them and their selection of which work to present. They also often don't update their sites that frequently and they understandably don't have the space or resources to present everything. As you can see my website has grown to ridiculous proportions, but it was an ambitious website from the start.

JACKIE: I like that about it. That you can go back in your history, which is fabulous.

ELLEN: I thought, "why not have everything there?", so that you really get a sense of what I've done.

JACKIE: And I relate more to some projects than others. You also start seeing the themes in your project that reappear.

I see that you write up a project description to help the viewer interpret what they are seeing on the website. How does the written information correspond with the visuals?

ELLEN: I want to give the viewer something that approximates the experience of the piece. And so, if there's a piece of information that you would get from physically experiencing the work, I try to put that in. And then some work also requires additional information that might be in a label or in a press release, so I will put that in. The idea is to give the viewer

just enough so that they can have the experience. I try hard not to put in any interpretation or commentary the way I might do in a presentation. Of course, some of that sneaks in occasionally. I'm too fond of my own jokes.

JACKIE: Well you're allowed to have your point of view. That also introduces you.

ELLEN: The problem is that people tend to prioritize the artist's point of view. I really want people to feel free to respond in their own way.

JACKIE: So, you want to get out of the viewer's way.

ELLEN: I feel very strongly that the works that I've been happiest with have lent themselves to a wide variety of uses and interpretations and I don't want to get in the way of that.

JACKIE: And you say curators find you through your website?

ELLEN: Curators have found me through my website. Also, a lot of curators that I've worked with in the past will just check out the website to see what's been going on. Or at least I assume that they are. I don't know how else they'd know about certain work.

JACKIE: It's a way to stay connected.

ELLEN: It's a way to stay connected. Other artists can check things out and, when I teach, I can direct students to the website. It just makes my life a lot easier. I have one catalogue that has an overview of projects. It's great, but it's limited by comparison—it's also already out of date . . .

JACKIE: This one, your catalog for the Mirror project at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

ELLEN: Yes, this one.

JACKIE: I wish I had seen the Mirror installation in person. I know that space. Your piece must have been incredible.

ELLEN: It was a beautiful theatre. I was very happy with it.

JACKIE: I know. I love—I mean this is an amazing building.

ELLEN: Yes and the piece was a drawing in light of the building but as a ruin.

JACKIE: And this is exactly what's on your website too. This view.

ELLEN: Yes.

JACKIE: When you document your work, you seem to work with the same photographer over and over again. Does he pretty much know what to do or do you still direct it?

ELLEN: I really trust him. It's the same artist that designed the book, Jan Baracz. We've been friends for a very long time. I'm a huge fan of his work and we know each other's sensibility very well. So, basically, we discuss what I want and he goes and does it if he thinks it will work and when he doesn't, he does something else, he's generally right.

JACKIE: And you don't depend solely on an institution to document your work.

ELLEN: No, in fact I've often been unhappy with the results they have documented my work—either the resolution isn't high enough or they've picked an angle that I dislike . . . One solution would be for me to become a better photographer, but I'm a dismal photographer.

JACKIE: Well, you're lucky. If you have good help, I mean, there's nothing wrong finding a good partner to help you.

ELLEN: It's only a problem when I travel. When I travel, that's when it becomes a real issue, because then I don't have Jan with me, so then I'm stuck trying to photograph things on my own and wishing I were more competent.

JACKIE: And, I notice that you do a lot of lecturing about your work. How do you prepare for a lecture about your work? Do you practice it?

ELLEN: I did at the beginning. Now I tend to think about a theme that I am particularly interested in at that moment and then I'll focus on projects that are related. When I give talks to younger artists, I try to talk a little bit about how some of the projects came into being, because I remember when I listened to artists talk, I'd think, "Well, how did you get into that exhibition? Why were you asked?" It's funny, but now I don't always know. Earlier on I always knew exactly how I had ended up in any particular exhibition.

JACKIE: And how did you get started? Was it through a community, word of mouth?

ELLEN: Largely through the kindness of other artists.

JACKIE: So, it was your community?

ELLEN: Yes. That was probably the most important thing.

I remember, there was an artist very early on who once said to us in a lecture that it's your peers—some of whom will go on to be successful—who'll be your greatest resource. I was very struck by that. It's often almost impossible to approach people who are already successful anyway . . .

JACKIE: Right. You know, well that's what I tell my AIM artists. I say, "Look to your left and look right. These are the people that are going to help you in your career. Not necessarily someone I bring in to talk to you."

ELLEN: It's very true.

JACKIE: What's your relationship like with your galleries?

ELLEN: It's very good. I'm working with three galleries right now and they all bring very different things to the table. Some of them have more access to very large art fairs, other ones are very gifted sales people, some are better at press relationships – but the important thing is that they all believe in and support the work. They're very individual relationships – both on a personal and a business level. I'm enjoying working with all of them. For a long time, I didn't have a gallery – I went through three galleries in rapid succession, two of which disappeared on me and then it took a couple of years before I found someone I wanted to work with again.

JACKIE: Galleries have a habit of doing that.

ELLEN: Yes, which is a big reason why I think it's important to put up your own website. It's important to not be too dependent.

JACKIE: Two of your galleries are in Europe?

ELLEN: Two are in Germany: Magnus Müller in Berlin and Galerie Gebruder Lehmann in Dresden and one here.

JACKIE: And which one here?

ELLEN: Luxe.

JACKIE: Oh nice.

ELLEN: They all have very different styles as people and as institutions.

JACKIE: Do they fight over your work? Who gets the work first?

ELLEN: I tend to make work either for particular exhibitions or for art fairs, and so the work is generally consigned to a particular gallery from the get-go. I very seldom make work that doesn't have a destination. It can become tricky when more than one gallery feels that they have a claim to a piece of work. But, in general all my galleries are very supportive of each other. From my perspective, the occasional logistical problems are far outweighed by the benefits of working with more than one gallery

JACKIE: Yes, one closes, you've still got the other two.



ELLEN: You also have more people disseminating your work. And you have access to a larger international audience. I always tell young artists to try and show in as many countries as possible. An art career inevitably has ups and downs and if you're only showing in one country, you are much more vulnerable. Think of all those artists who were famous in the United States in the 70's and then spent a couple of decades showing primarily in Europe before surfacing here again.

JACKIE: Or even to show elsewhere in the United States . . . I don't really believe you can live anywhere and have an art career anywhere.

ELLEN: For a while, I was showing much more in Europe than in the States and now it's sort of 50/50. I've really enjoyed it, because different art markets or communities often have very different points of view. A work that nobody might like in one place might have a great audience somewhere else. Also, it's very refreshing to travel because you learn about wonderful art work that never penetrates the New York art world. Go somewhere else and all the art stars are suddenly different. It keeps everything in perspective. For your own sanity and happiness it's a great thing.

JACKIE: How have art fairs changed the art business?

ELLEN: Art fairs have changed it because they have just become so much more important. They didn't seem like such a big deal when I was starting out in New York in the late 90's. The thing that was important was your show in the gallery. Now, galleries that are not in big art centers make almost all of their money at art fairs. New York is still a bit different because it has such a large indigenous collector base. It has plusses because it can mean that galleries don't mind your being very experimental in your gallery show because they aren't really expecting to sell it anyway.

JACKIE: They need the sellable piece at the art fair. Do you think of it that way?

ELLEN: It's hard not to think of it that way when you go to an art fair. I mean, they're really all about luxury objects for the rich. Unfortunately, I tend to feel a perverse need to make fun of the commercial aspect of fairs. I made a work especially for an art fair called *Wallpaper for the Rich*. Needless to say, not one of my greater monetary successes. . .

I've been very torn about the art fairs recently because I made two projects for Art Basel and for the Armory for Galerie Gebr. Lehmann and in both cases the pieces are now gone. So they were seen by a lot of people but it was—

JACKIE: For a nanosecond.

ELLEN: For a nanosecond. They were seen by thousands but under conditions that were obviously less than optimal. At an art fair, you have access to an extraordinary audience of collectors, curators, and other artists but you have a distracted audience. It's good and bad.

JACKIE: Yes, everyone talks about art fairs as a mixed blessing. In what way do you think the art business is different from other businesses?

ELLEN: Everyone pretends that it's not a business.

JACKIE: That's why artists aren't trained about the business aspects. We're supposed to figure it out by trial and error.

ELLEN: Art is a very strange business: A business where people buy things and then they sometimes don't pay for them. A business where everyone is pretending that there's no money involved and yet in the end of course, as an artist, you do need money to survive and to continue making work and sometimes you can be very ill served by all this pretending. Unless, of course, you are independently wealthy. That certainly helps.

JACKIE: Well, they can always look successful because it's not important whether their show has sold or not.

ELLEN: There are different kinds of success. Of course, I want to be able to support myself and I want to be able to continue working, but that aside, money is not my definition of success. My definition of success is whether my work has an impact on the world, however small. Did someone actually respond to something? Did I change something for the better? You can't quantify that kind of success in monetary terms. I get a lot of happiness from work that makes no financial sense at all. I give a lot of my work away. My decisions are often not pragmatic. I decide to make a piece because I think, "This is a great piece. I want to see it happen. Who cares if they don't pay me?" I've made some public art pieces where in the end I didn't make any money but the piece exists, it's there, and that's what I care about.

JACKIE: Do you ever set goals for yourself?

ELLEN: I'm not sure I'm organized enough to have goals. I do have hopes. . .

JACKIE: Okay. So in what way do you set hopes? Like you hope to have a show? Or you hope to finish a piece within a certain time?

ELLEN: I think a lot about work that I would like to make for which I don't necessarily have the resources right now. Things like that. Of course, I think about showing in particular exhibitions or venues. I spend a lot of time trying to figure out who might be interested in what I am doing, following up with people. Obviously, my gallerists do a lot of that too, but a lot of those connections in the end are personal connections. I spend a lot of time trying to think of interesting new work that I could do and where it might fit, who might be interested in showing it, or helping me to produce it. Those would be my practical goals I guess.

JACKIE: How is marketing art different from marketing in other businesses and why have we created such pejorative connotation to it?

ELLEN: It has a pejorative connotation because when we think of marketing we think about something where the definition of success is financial. And for artists, that isn't supposed to be their main motivation. So if you admit to being a marketer, for want of a better word, it can sound as if you're admitting that what you care about are the material rewards of your profession.

JACKIE: We put down the people who are good at it, because there's a perception of sleaziness about it. What we're marketing is so personal.

ELLEN: There's no distance between yourself and the work being marketed. It's especially problematic in our society where for some reasons most main-stream press about artists concentrates on them rather than on their work. It's the cult of celebrity, I suppose.

But the art world can also be quite dishonest about it. Many big galleries employ PR firms, but somehow it's seldom talked about. After the New York Beautification Project book came out, the publisher hired a PR firm and it was just fabulous. It was so relaxing. All these lovely people just sitting there thinking who would be interested in writing about this book? An absolute dream. It was great to see professionals doing it.

JACKIE: What's your favorite part of being an artist?

ELLEN: The thing I value the most is being part of the larger conversation about art in our society. That to me is what differentiates a professional artist from an amateur—the desire to be part of that conversation. What makes something art? Why do we make it? Why is it the way it is? What's it meant to do? What's it for? Those are the things that keep me going. I enjoy how intimate the art world is too. It's great to have that conversation on a personal as well as a public level.

I also enjoy physically making things, although I always agonize about it.

JACKIE: You obviously enjoy physically making it, because your work is so labor intensive.

ELLEN: It is, but some of it I don't enjoy. I really wear myself out. But I love the feeling of having made a new thing that didn't exist before and then having somebody else respond to it. That to me is one of the great pleasures of being an artist.

JACKIE: So, what's your least favorite part of the business?

ELLEN: Updating the website? Seriously, my least favorite part is the anxiety of never knowing what's going to happen next. Rejection can be hard too when you're so personally invested in your work. Although, it's easier now than it was.

JACKIE: I don't think rejection ever becomes easy. A wonderful thing about working with a dealer, you don't know how many times they have offered your work to a collector who turned it down before someone said yes. They can absorb some of the rejection for you.

Do you have any tips for artists on the gallery/dealer relationship?

ELLEN: Try to get everything in writing, which is almost impossible, by the way.

Also, don't rely on your galleries to keep records of where your work went. Galleries come and go and you may never find any of that work again.

JACKIE: You have to be your own best archivist.

ELLEN: Unfortunately, I'm terrible at it. I've been planning to finally figure out where my work is for about five years, but somehow I never get around to it. There just isn't time.

JACKIE: Well, maybe you can get an intern to help you.

ELLEN: A detective, that's what I need. And some dealers won't even tell you who they've sold work to. So, besides keeping good records, have great documentation. Always spend all the money that you have on documentation. And write stuff down—have consignment agreements. But I myself don't always practice what I preach. Sometimes I do, but sometimes I'm just too busy and keeping on top of it can be impossible.

JACKIE: I know.

ELLEN: Don't expect your gallery to work for you as hard as you will work for yourself.

JACKIE: I like to talk about these relationships as partnerships. Many artists think, "I'll get into a gallery and my life will be fine, my problems will be solved." I remind them that they are just trading one set of problems for another.

ELLEN: I think you have to be very clear in your mind about your relationship with your gallery. You have to understand that they have other artists, so not all their resources will go to you and that they will devote the most resources to whichever artist they consider the most successful. There's no point resenting that. Galleries have limited resources, they need to survive and you have to be realistic about what they can do. And you have to set clear goals for them. You need to tell them what you want or need; they can't read your mind.

JACKIE: What is one of the biggest mistakes an artist can make in building their career? What's the biggest mistake you made?

ELLEN: I made tons of mistakes. I'm still probably making tons of mistakes. Not keeping good records of where all my work went would be the biggest mistake I made, because it's driving me crazy.

Another mistake can be spending your time waiting for the perfect gallery or situation in which to exhibit. I think it's very important to take whichever opportunity presents itself and to make the most of it. You can waste a lot of time waiting for Prince Charming.

JACKIE: And this kind of leads into my very last question. What three pieces of advice would you give to an artist just starting out their career? I mean you lecture a lot to students. What three pieces of advice? You've given one I think.

ELLEN: Don't wait for Prince Charming? That's one.

JACKIE: Right.

ELLEN: Two would be to make work that you really believe in and then to believe that it deserves to be known.

JACKIE: I love that.

ELLEN: Because once you've done something that you really believe in, it's much easier to go out and try to make it known. If you feel strongly about something, it's easy to communicate that enthusiasm. It's also really important to enjoy your work as you make it. Some people get so focused on success that they don't enjoy the fact that they are actually getting to do what they love.

JACKIE: Yes.

ELLEN: Court embarrassment.

JACKIE: What do you mean by that?

ELLEN: If you're not embarrassed by a piece of work that you've made then you had nothing at stake—you didn't risk anything.

JACKIE: That's a great piece of advice. Thank you so much for speaking with me Ellen. I can't wait to see your next project.