

Cole Swenson

I smile when I think of Etel—I imagine everyone who knows her does. And I smile to think of her painting. And as I think of it, I'm surprised to realize that I've never actually seen her painting—never seen her in the act of putting brush to canvas, or debating over the precise tone of green or blue, or choosing which among the many nuances of Mount Tamalpais to paint this particular time. I imagine each of these scenes as a painting in itself, and it sticks in my mind, just as her paintings do. And as her writing does.

Which are not the same ways, and it is only with the work of a person who, like Etel, works both in painting and in writing that one can notice in any detail just how differently painting and writing occupy the mind, how they allow two completely different sorts of imaginative expansion. And these two sorts are not at all exclusive; in fact, only with a person who works in both can we get the full effect of their potential complementarities. Etel's works do this; each one renders the other more complex, all the while building toward a more intricate whole. A single mind and sensibility responding to the world in multiple forms and media creates a whole that can't be achieved in any other way.

This is particularly rich in Etel's case because of her incredible range. I've always loved the fact that when you pick up one of her books for the first time, you have no idea what you'll find inside—it could be anything from politically charged prose to personal recollection to poetry that reconstructs language. This versatility unleashes a three-dimensionality—she's covering a lot of territory, absolutely, but it's not, as that term suggests, only a great and varied plane stretching out in all directions; it's also the huge vault of sky above it, and it incorporates all the time it takes our imagination to cross it.

Etel's accordion books have always seemed to me to occupy a very special niche in her complex of works, and in a single space, they address several of these issues. They're the epitome of the fusion of visual and verbal, and she often plays with the ritual of script, striking a distinct rhythm with the lines that make up the writing, underscoring that writing is, before all else, a sequence of lines. And when it's handwriting such as hers, we're offered a sequence that balances the intentionality that allows it to be legible with the accidental that guarantees its uniqueness and allows it to express a single moment in the writer's life, that allows gesture to remain alive on the page as a trace of the irreducible humanity of the author/artist.

The reminder that all writing comes out of gesture is a very great gift, and in these books, we are also reminded that the gestures of writing are not fundamentally different from the gestures of drawing; their proximity here allows them to open each other up into a fluid form of creation-expression that makes their distinction seem artificial, even specious. Etel's choice of the accordion structure is essential because it complements the continuum she's created between writing and drawing with its physical parallel: the page never ends; instead, it opens out, it

carries on, it extends itself, creating a literature not of discrete units but of a continuum that develops, not linearly as much as inevitably, recognizing the limitations of physicality as its conditions of possibility. In this way, her works operate gracefully within the world as given; they are an acceptance of it that yet insists upon contributing to it—and in ways that overflow the categories that might be used to limit it further.

I'm always aware, in everything that she does, that Etel is a philosopher. Longtime professor of philosophy, it is this stance toward the world that informs all her work and forms the thread that unites it all in its many variations. This philosophic bent of course runs through all her writing, but to see it also informing her formats and structures—in short, to see philosophy made physical, tangible—is very rare and endlessly inspiring.