

TRIBUTE

Elizabeth Cohen: Helped Students, Colleagues ‘See Anew’

Elizabeth Cohen brought the conventions of art making to contemporary technology and blended the traditional and the accessible with the progressive and conceptual. As a colleague and a teacher, she constantly helped those around her to see things anew.

Elizabeth, who died in May, joined the studio art program in 1997. Upon her hiring, she began to lead transformations to the program—those changes, combined with her engagement in art making, were instrumental to the growth of an innovative program.

She regularly taught courses that incorporated a wide variety of production processes, from sculpture to video and sound to film and media. Her course *Imagined Futures* questioned how our vision of the future embodies our needs and desires. And her invention and execution, with film and media studies students, of a weekly student-driven radio program, called *On the Bus*, proved her early commitment to the education of a broader community—one that later evolved into her role in the University’s Art New York program.

Elizabeth was skilled at the delicate balance of proximity and distance required in the one-to-one instruction that art necessitates. She and I frequently exchanged views on teaching and often discussed the progress and needs of particular students.

Elizabeth was highly sensitive to students’ needs and tended to instinctively know the best approach to take with them. Her students left the classroom with a well-developed visual vocabulary. But most importantly, they left having an example of an artist and teacher they maintain as model.

In 2001, she became director of the University’s Art New York program, in which students complete an internship and take coursework in New York City. Elizabeth again turned to revising a curriculum, fortifying the academic rigor of the then



TEACHER AND ARTIST: Elizabeth Cohen (above, right) directed Rochester’s Art New York while maintaining an active career as a practicing artist whose work mixed objects, performance, technology, and media (below).



three-year-old program. She worked tirelessly to develop, maintain, and manage the program, creating one of the finest facets of our department. Elizabeth provided instruction and professional development skills to students while also expanding the program’s relationships with collaborating institutions.

“Guided by her extraordinary vision, the program gave me the confidence, resources, and exposure to contemporary art that were defining influences on my career as an artistic director and curator,” Cori Wolff, an Art New York alumna who is now the director of public arts at the nonprofit organization ArtWorks, told me. “I loved that she viewed and treated us as professionals,

challenging us to experiment, think critically, and reach deep within ourselves.”

Elizabeth brought the same forthright spirit and intensity to her own work.

Her art successfully mixed object, performance, language, and time-based media. It synthesized technology, hand, concept and emotion—and it questioned them all simultaneously.

Attentive to how information can be manipulated by form, Elizabeth enriched her work with a keen sensitivity to materials and how they speak.

What I enjoyed most was working one-to-one with Elizabeth on projects and proposals, mostly curriculum-related. We both recognized the incongruities that arise when pressing art production within the sometimes-stifling parameters of academia. She was a lot of fun in these instances. Her sharp sense of humor often came in unexpected pokes.

And I take comfort in the fact that her daughter Katya’s inner voice was bequeathed to her by Elizabeth. **R**

—ALLEN TOPOLSKI

Topolski is a practicing artist and an associate professor of art at Rochester.