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Comfort, Conversation and Community:

The Role of The Museum in Art Education

by

Jennifer Roma Flint Eiserman

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ABSTRACT

From 1996 to 1997 I participated in *Reading Rilke: Works By Artists Inspired by "Letters To A Young Poet"*. Fourteen artists, The Nickle Arts Museum, and visitors worked together to explore the work of the artist and the work of art. This dissertation examines the significance of *Reading Rilke* to art museum education. Through a hermeneutic interpretation of the texts resulting from the project, I identified three elements fundamental to art education in the museum: *comfort*, the ability to give strength or make comfortable; *conversation*, the act of living among; *community*, the act of sharing.

The museum provides *comfort* when it gives artmakers and viewers role models and templates for aesthetic experience. Comfort in aesthetic experience also means that we feel cared for. If we are artmakers, we need resources and support to accomplish our work. If we are viewers we need "attentive" spaces wherein we feel valued.

Once we feel *comfortable* in aesthetic experience, the challenge of the art museum is to maintain our involvement. *Conversation* is the element that engages artmakers and viewers in dialogue, within an atmosphere of reciprocity, providing them with experiences of being included. *Reading Rilke* revealed that we facilitate aesthetic experience when we establish a caring dynamic. We can design art exhibitions collaboratively and provide mechanisms that facilitate *conversation*.

Community becomes the foundation of aesthetic experience. The art exhibition bears witness to artists grappling with the same issues viewers strive to

comprehend. The art exhibition becomes a place we can meet with others to share our experiences.

My interpretation of *Reading Rilke* suggests that art museums facilitate *comfort, community* and *conversation* when mentorship opportunities are available for both artmakers and viewers. Further, it confirms that viewers need a role in exhibition design more integral than they have thus far experienced in museums. *Reading Rilke* points to the need for further research into the role of mentorship in art education. It also affirms that art museums need to investigate viewers' involvement in exhibition design. Both these conversations are important for museums that educate through art.

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Finally, I want to thank the Master of Fine Arts students and the artists who gave so generously of themselves during *The Reading Rilke Project.* I also thank Arthur Nishimura for his enthusiasm and support during *Reading Rilke.* I was privileged to work with these gifted colleagues.

DEDICATION

To The Creator, who set me on the path;

To my family who taught me how to walk along it;

To my husband, Terry Reynoldson, who kept me company along the way;

To my children, Allana and William, who reminded me that mine was not the only journey.

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The focus of our attention will be upon how to meet the other morally.

Nell Noddings (1984). *Caring: A Feminine Approach To Ethics and Morality.*

INTRODUCTION

I am an artist and an art educator. As an artist, my work is the result of meditations on a theme. I learn about the content through the activity of my work. The pieces that result from my work are documents of my journey in understanding. I hope that they initiate journeys of understanding for viewers. As an art educator who works in museums, I teach novice viewers the skills they need to understand through works of visual art. I help viewers to develop their ability to engage in aesthetic experience. My responsibility to expert viewers is to help them to engage in quality aesthetic experiences. In other words, my role as an art museum educator is to provide the necessities for journeys of aesthetic experience. As an artist, I challenge myself to find the best media and techniques to explore the content I choose. As an art museum educator, I seek the best environments and teaching strategies to support visitor learning. This dissertation is the result of the convergence of my work as an artist and my work as an art museum educator. I want to understand the museum's role in art education.

My work on the subject of this dissertation began many years before I initiated graduate studies. It started during my internship at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan. I asked visitors participating in a Sunday afternoon tour to first look at the works and jot down their associations, ideas and questions. I explained that we would then use these notes as a starting place for our tour discussion. This approach was my attempt at a non-authoritarian, inclusive tour format. Every person on the tour left without participating. One woman said, "We don't want to talk about what we know, we want you to tell us what you know." This incident happened eleven years ago. I have puzzled over it since. Why did

the visitors not want to participate?

I have explored this question in my professional practice and my academic work. My most recent inquiry was an exhibition project that Arthur Nishimura (Art Department, University of Calgary) and I worked on between April, 1996 and November, 1997. *Reading Rilke: Works By Artists Inspired By "Letter To A Young Poet" (Reading Rilke)* involved twelve Master of Fine Arts students, four artists from the Calgary community, Arthur and me, The Nickle Arts Museum and visitors. Our goal was to interpret Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet* (1984, trans.). We conceived the project as a collaboration of learners, coming together to understand something about the nature of artmaking and the processes of understanding through art. We grounded it in the work of educators,[1] philosophers,[2] artists[3], art critics and theorists[4] who firmly believe in founding learning and aesthetic acts on principles of inclusion, dialogue, responsivity and mutuality.

From the beginning this work, although not intended to be a feminist inquiry, shares much in common with feminist philosophy and educational approaches. In searching for ways to understand why my attempts at conversation and inclusiveness did not work eleven years ago, I examined literature that explored the nature of inclusive, dialogical, responsive approaches to teaching and learning. This literature is found within a feminist discourse. Thus, this study is intrinsically feminist in that it seeks to understand how art education in museums can be inclusive, dialogical and responsive. It is, however, also postmodern in these same attempts. It is postmodern in its attempt to deconstruct experience and understand how

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[1] Dewey, 1938 ; Eiserman, 1995; Fenstermacher, 1986 and 1994; Getty Centre for Education in the Arts, 1991; Hernstein Smith, 1978; Mullen, 1995; Paley, 1995; Parsons, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1978; Springer, 1996; Worts; 1995; Wunsch, 1994.
[2] Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Dewey, 1934/1964; Gadamer,1960/1997 and 1992; Jardine, 1994.
[3] Burns, 1995; Chicago, 1974-79 and c. 1985; Hughes, 1994.
[4] Cameron, 1997; Dissanyake, 1988; Gablick, 1991.

Reading Rilke became what it was. In this last, this study is also hermeneutic. It is an attempt to describe a theory of "the real experience that" *Reading Rilke* was (Gadamer, 1960/1997, xxxvi). I am trying to understand "what happen[ed] to us" during *Reading Rilke*. I am approaching this understanding with

> *[a] new critical consciousness...tak[ing] the habits of thought and language built up in the individual in communication with his environment and plac[ing] them before the forum of the historical tradition to which we all belong.* (Gadamer,1960/ 1997, xxv).

For the past two years, I have been writing a dissertation ideologically grounded in feminism and postmodernism and methodologically hermeneutic.

In writing this dissertation, I have approached the content as an artist. I have tried to understand the significance of *Reading Rilke* to art museum education through the writing process. Thus, this dissertation is a document of my journey of understanding. In its format, I have tried to retain a map of my journey through the material I examined. The dissertation charts the course of my understanding of what *Reading Rilke* means to art education in museums.

I also chose to present the material in a way that might reflect a viewer's experience of the *Reading Rilke* exhibition. If you visited the exhibition, you entered the gallery ready to experience the works presented there. You may have had some knowledge and understanding of the work of Rainer Maria Rilke. Perhaps you had none. You may have been familiar with the work of these artists. Perhaps you were not. You would have had very individual expectations about the experience of this exhibition.

You would have moved from piece to piece, experiencing each separately. However, you would have carried your understandings of the previous works into your

experience of the next work you viewed. Meanings would echo, link, clash. The understandings you brought with you into the gallery may have been challenged, confirmed, reconsidered. As you experienced the works of *Reading Rilke,* you experienced an internal dialogue[5]. Perhaps you were with a companion and you verbalized some of this internal activity. Slowly, as you toured the space, the significance of *Reading Rilke* emerged for you. Your understanding might have continued on the drive home as you contemplated the experience further. Perhaps the process of understanding took weeks or perhaps years as you re-experienced *Reading Rilke* in the light of new aesthetic experiences, new visits to art exhibitions.

It is this slow, unfolding of understanding that I am attempting to represent in the organization of the material in this dissertation. Thus, in this introduction and in Chapter One, I discuss my context. I familiarize you with the world I lived in while I wrote. In Chapters Two through Four, I examine stories told by each of the works in *Reading Rilke.* I give you an opportunity to experience them as you might have if you had visited the exhibition. As Christopher Robin said to his father in Milne's *The World of Winnie The Pooh*, "Of course I remember...but it isn't a real story unless it's told. It's just a remembering." (Milne, 1957). I want the experience of the works to be real for you. I do not want them to be simple re-memberings of events. In Chapter Five, I gather up the understandings that emerged as I examined each story, much as you might have done if you had driven home from the museum. I then meditate on the significance of these

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[5] See Fairchild (1991) for an excellent discussion of the stages of cognitive activity that accompany aesthetic experience. See also work within cognitive pyschology that explores the metacognitive structures that organize our interpretation of "texts". Researchers like Kintsch (1988), Martin and Briggs (1986), Newell (1990), Sprio and Jehng (1990), and Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) explored how these "internal dialogues" are structured by meta-cognitive processes and how these processes structure learning.

understandings to art education in museums. Also in Chapter Five, I outline future conversations suggested by this study.

Further, I explore my materials through the metaphor of "conversation." I believe this is appropriate for two reasons. First, the internal cognitive activities described by Andrea Fairchild and others[6] in their work on aesthetic experience are similar to a conversation. According to these researchers, past experience and understandings are in dialogue with the present experience to form new understandings.

Second, a dissertation is a "discussion" or "discourse". (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964). Discourse is "To talk, to converse; *to discuss a matter*...to address" (Ibid., emphasis mine). A dissertation thus implicates an other to whom I am writing; an other with whom I am exploring an understanding. Thus, the nature of writing a dissertation is conversational.

In developing this metaphor, I examined ethnomethodological literature that explores the nature of conversation. Heritage (1984), Nofsinger (1991) and Psathas (1990) described the ways that two people enter into a relationship through verbal exchanges. This literature described the intricate dance two speakers engage in through articulated and implied meaning. Often, we communicate our needs and our understanding to another through subtle, culturally agreed upon cues. These seemed to support my belief that I could appropriately represent the relationship between an artist and her work (or a viewer and a work) through the metaphor of conversation.

As I was embarking on a hermeneutic examination of the materials from *Reading*

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[6] See also Sheldon Annis (1981), John Harker (1988) and Abigail Housen (1983) for a discussion of the cognitive activities that accompany aesthetic experience.

Rilke, I explored hermeneutic literature (Di Censo, 1990; Jervalino, 1990; Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989; Ormiston and Schrift, 1990a, 1990b; Wilson, 1989). The work of Hans Georg Gadamer seemed to resonate most closely with my experience of "understanding", both as an artist and as an art museum educator. Therefore, Gadamer's philosophy became the foundation on which I built my theoretical framework. I discovered that for Gadamer also we gain understanding with someone about something (1960/1997). Understanding from Gadamer's perspective does not focus on the object of the understanding, but on the subjects involved in the understanding and the medium: the *Mitte* (the meeting place) where understanding occurs. Those who meet lend themselves to the emergence of the *sache* (subject matter) and come to an agreed understanding about it (Gadamer, 1960/1997). Gadamer describes "understanding" as a dialogue, a conversation.[7]

There are elements common to all conversations that I will address in the dialogue of

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[7] Although I am alone in this office and you are alone in your chair, we are both involved in active, separate conversations. I am in communion with the documents from *Reading Rilke*; you with this text. There is an "other" to whom we pose questions, to whom we answer, in the form of the objects before us. Friedman (1956) wrote about the ideas of Martin Buber:

> *Genuine dialogue, according to Buber, can be either spoken or silent. Its essence lies in the fact that "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them." The essential element of genuine dialogue, therefore, is "seeing the other" or "experiencing the other side...One must take up the nature of the other into one's own thinking and think in relation to it."* (Scudder and Michunas, 1985, p. 25)

These objects have their own histories, they record distinct experiences, they present a particular view point. In this sense, they can argue with us although they are not sentient beings. Thus, although I am alone in this writing and you are alone in your reading (and you or I might be alone with a work of art) I believe you and I can still be said to be involved in a tertiary experience of understanding. I suggest that we can read Gadamer's description as, "one person coming to an understanding with *an "other"* about something that exists in both their worlds." I believe this restatement of Gadamer's definition encompasses both Buber's ideas about the "other" that we imaginatively construct, as well as Gadamer's notion of "worlds." The work of art, the written texts I studied, or this text that you read provide you and me with a construct for the "others" to whom we will talk internally. These "texts" need to share something in common with your world and with mine, or either you or I will not be able to establish a relationship with these texts. There will be no understanding.

Reading Rilke was designed to provide all the participants with opportunities to connect with other people in a conversation about learning through works of art. It enabled participants to experience a concrete example of the kind of internal conversation that occurs between artist and materials or viewer and artwork in aesthetic experience.

this dissertation. All conversations involve at least two people talking about something. Gadamer (1960/1997) recognized this when he discussed the dialogical nature of understanding. This dissertation is a conversation between the documents resulting from *Reading Rilke* and me. Conversations are about something (Heritage, 1984). Gadamer (1960/1997) believed that the subject matter (*sache*) of the conversation emerges in the conversation. As an artist this is very sensible to me. In preparing this dissertation, my conversation with the *Reading Rilke* documents result in "something." Something arrives from the texts to which I must attend. It is in the process of writing (in the conversation I am having with the *Reading Rilke* texts) that the subjects to which I attend emerge.

All conversations happen somewhere (Heritage, 1984). There is a territory in which the conversation takes place; a place where we can locate the conversation. I located my dissertation within the literature that speaks to its purpose: aesthetic philosophy; art education; learning and museum studies. Finally, I believe that conversations also have a movement from one place to another within the locale they inhabit. As speakers tell and respond, the conversation moves somewhere. Even if it ends up in the same place it started, what the speakers understand or how they understand it has changed. We travel within the territory of the conversation and things claim our attention. To these we will attend until it is necessary to move again.

This dissertation maps the movement of the conversation I had with the *Reading Rilke* texts and their territory: the role of the art museum in supporting understanding through art. It describes the moments of attention in this conversation. Thus, there are four parts to this dissertation: The Meeting Place; The Speakers; The Subjects of Attention (Comfort,

Conversation and Community); and The Understandings and Future Conversations.

There is a Middle English meaning to the word conversation that is important to this dissertation,"The action of living or having one's being in or among."(Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964). I return to it periodically over the course of this discussion. This sense of community with, or being a member of (*of belonging*) is extremely important to this conversation. As a conversation, this dissertation also explores how one lives in the community of art, in conversation with it: that which enables one's conversation or impedes or renders mute the dialogue. These considerations are fundamental to the role of the art museum in the conversation.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE MEETING PLACE AND THE SPEAKERS

The Meeting Place

> ***Conversation**: Middle English, The action of living or having one's being in or among.*
> ***Community:** Middle English, A body of persons living together and practicing community of goods.*
> ***Comfort:** Middle English, To strengthen; to encourage; to support.*
> ***Discomfort:** Middle English, Undoing courage; discouragement.*
> *(Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964).*

The definitions of community and conversation share the notion of being together. Thus, I propose that when we do not take part in a conversation, we are not members of the community involved in that conversation. Gadamer's distinction between binary understanding (someone understanding something) and tertiary understanding ("one person coming to an understanding with another about something they both understand," 1960/1997, p. xvi) demonstrates the links between conversation, understanding and community. So long as we understand something by ourselves, there is no need for community. However, if understanding requires conversation, community becomes a necessary condition for understanding. When art museums design exhibition programs within a binary definition of understanding, the viewer can either understand or not understand the content of the exhibition. Her inclusion in the community is predicated by whether she understands. This "all or nothing" approach to learning leads to a great deal of dis-comfort for viewers (Getty Centre For Education In The Arts, 1991).

I propose that by adopting Gadamer's tertiary definition of understanding as the basis for exhibition program design we can alleviate the risk of dis-comforting viewers. By

creating a place that encourages conversation we create opportunities to include viewers in the community. They can be comfortable.

The etymology of the words "comfort" and "community" inextricably links these two words:

> *com-fort: together strong*
> *co-munite: together strengthened*
> (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964).

Comfort and community are essentially the same words. Remember the Middle English definition of conversation is "to live or have one's being in or among". Thus, Gadamer's tertiary notion of understanding links comfort, community and conversation. As I attempt to describe "the real experience" that *Reading Rilke* was, I pay close attention to what it reveals about understanding as comfort, conversation and community. This is the meeting place of my dissertation, my understanding.

The meeting place of this conversation has four elements: Understanding; Asking For Answers, Finding Questions; Aesthetic Experience; and The Meaning or The Meanings of a Work of Art. Each element provides a point of meditation to allow the purpose and questions of the dissertation to arrive.

Understanding

The Late Middle English definition of the word "understand" given by The Shorter Oxford Dictionary is, "To stand under"(1964). In lending myself to the emergence of the concept of "understanding" I broke down the English word: understand. A poetic image emerged as I meditated on these two words and their relationship to each other. "Under" is a location beneath; it reflects an authority that guides, a process occurring, or a result (Shorter

Oxford English Dictionary, 1964). It seems to be a strong flowing current of experience that lies beneath the surface of a "stand." A "stand" is a position, a situation or a place. It is a matter sure of itself, committed to a course (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964). Its attitude seems unchanging. Therefore, "to stand under" must imply that we subject ourselves to the force of the current of experience. Understanding must have something to do with a process of relationship in which the guiding authority subsumes us.

This image of "understanding" relates to Gadamer's notion. Understanding is not something one can achieve. In fact, this image seems to reveal that understanding is about tearing from one's grasp what one thought was firm, solid and dependable. Understanding happens when, in the stand, a fissure appears through which the meanings and associations beneath flow. Understanding seems to me to be a disruption rather than a neatly constructed tower. Understanding to me is not the building of the Tower of Babel. It is the process of sorting through the rubble left when the tower falls.

Thus, if we are not strong and courageous (en-couraged), the process of understanding can lead to dis-comfort. Comfort occurs when we are together, when we are in community. Thus, to understand, one can not sift through the rubble of the tower alone.

In the design of *Reading Rilke*, we tried to create a community that could sort through the rubble of "art education" together. The Master of Fine Arts students, the Calgary artists, Arthur and I worked together to create the exhibition. We invited viewers to participate in our conversation, in the community of *Reading Rilke*. We tried to create a comfortable place to understand. The first questions arise: How was our invitation to participate in the conversation received? **What comforted or discomforted the participants in their**

understanding? What does this reveal about the role of the art museum in the conversation of aesthetic experience?

Understanding is not about the concepts that we use to dam up the river of experience and tradition. The concepts are the "stand." They contain for a brief moment what is "under"neath them. Understanding is what happens when the dam springs a leak and the contents of the concepts begin to spill out. We understand by experiencing the flow of tradition and authority that lies inside the concept. Gadamer wrote, "...understanding is never a subjective relation to a given object but to the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood." (1960/1997, xxxi). So, when a viewer experiences a work of art, the viewer can do one of two things: The viewer can identify a dam to contain the flow of her relationship with the artwork. There are many dams that Western art history and criticism have created for our relationship with the work of art: There are styles that adhere to periods that we can identify (for example, a work may be Baroque or Impressionistic); there are approaches to subject matter that we can label (for example, Abstract, Romantic, Classical, Non-objective); the viewer can build a dam around the content of a work of art (Still-life, Landscape, Portrait, Abstract Field Painting). Gadamer would call this kind of experience *Erlebnis*. *Erlebnis* is a knowing, a possessing, rather than an understanding. It is the "stand". It is a dam.

Alternatively, a viewer can engage in what Gadamer would call *Erfahrung*. Gadamer's translators defined *erfahrung* as "...the ongoing integrative process in which what we encounter widens our horizons but only by overturning an existing perspective." (1960/1997, p.xiii) In *erfahrung,* the dam cracks and out spill the waters. The shape of what

we knew is different. The water takes us up into itself. We feel its current, its tidal pull. We are subject to its power and jostled by the flotsam that it contains. We become a part of its greater force. We are the experience, until we put a dam around it again. We are experience, until we take a stand. But in those moments when we understand, we experience the connectedness of all that makes that experience what it is. We relate to "the history of its effect" (Gadamer, 1960/1997, p. xxxi). We are aware of how thought and language build up within us during our communion[8] with the environment. We are aware of their links to the traditions of our community.

In the design of *Reading Rilke*, we tried to provide viewers with the waters of understanding, not just the dams of knowledge. We tried to give them an experience of understanding in which they encountered this connectedness, this communion. We provided them with artifacts of the effective history of the work, including the "art" objects that finally resulted from that work. We invited viewers to come to an historically effected consciousness of the work of the artists.

The experience (*erfahrung)*of this dissertation catches me up into it as I try to describe a theory of "the real experience that [learning] is" in an art museum (Gadamer, 1960/1997. xxxvi). This way of proceeding, this methodology, characterizes my study as hermeneutic. It is an act of understanding. It is a moment in which I stand in the rubble of the tower that was my knowledge about art, art museums, learning, and aesthetic experience. That which is underneath these dams of knowledge moves, seeps out. The dams break.

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[8] "Middle English: Sharing or holding in common; participation; community."(Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964).

Asking For Answers, Finding Questions

In a conversation, we often find ourselves asking for answers to questions we pose. It is one way of ensuring that others in the conversation pay attention to us and respond to us (Heritage, 1984). However, when we approach a work of art looking for an answer we are not engaging in a responsive, conversational relationship with it. We are removing ourselves from the conversation. By looking for an answer we approach the work of art from an empirical stance. We look at the work as a scientist looks at a specimen. From a Cartesian perspective, we test hypotheses about the specimen. We try to strip away all the variable, subjective elements of our perception, leaving only the universal idea. We assume Descarte's philosophy of doubt and of questioning. Is this what aesthetic experience is about? Gadamer would say "no." Aesthetic understanding is not about finding answers to questions. It is about the phenomenon of understanding that I described above. It is about the experience of being swept up in the current of meanings and traditions connected with the object.

Aesthetic understanding is not about removing oneself from the experience and casting a dubious and critical gaze on it. Gadamer insists that a work of art is not about curiosity. "The important thing about an object of curiosity is that it is basically of no concern to the spectator; it has no significance for him" (1960/1997, p.126). Hence, an object of curiosity does not involve us. By contrast, the viewer of a work is present in the experience. She lives in the experience. She is involved in the conversation. Gadamer recognizes the viewer's need for distance. However this is not a removal, it is "the distance necessary for seeing, and thus makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented" (1960/1997, p.128).

When the work of art claims the viewer's attention, where does it direct that attention? If, on a journey something unexpected happens, we attend to it. It is not the answers to our questions that give us pause. Questions capture our attention. Dissonance theory describes this dynamic (Martin and Briggs, 1986). When we receive an answer we can accept it and place it neatly into our world or we can reject it. It disturbs none of our understandings. However, questions require us to examine our worlds and extract answers from them. To reject the question is possible. We maintain our stance. We remain unmoved. We protect our distance. We give the unexpected no attention. Our conceptual dams are intact. We might say that the viewer, thus engaged with the artwork, is not seeking an experience of understanding. The viewer, thus engaged, is not comfortable, not involved in the conversation.

As I have mentioned above, Gadamer describes the work of art as play. It is play that emerges. Our participation in the work of art makes play present. As viewers, our participation is viewing. According to Gadamer there is no play if there is no viewer. Thus, the work of art claims the viewer. It requires that she view it. Aesthetic experience is about accepting that claim and about honoring one's responsibility to it. When we accept the invitation to play *with* the work, we become involved in the community of which the work is a part.

If Gadamer characterizes the work of art as play, he does not suggest that our activity as players in this game is frivolous. Play is serious stuff. Think about the profound importance that play has for children. Think about a play, in which actors re-create a drama for spectators in the audience. The play does not occur if the audience is not present. As a

member of the audience, one's role is to watch attentively. Think about religious festivals, sacred forms of play. If we participate as a worshiper, our presence is not a trivial thing. And think also of a favorite board game. Immersed in the game, we want to win. Thus, the claim that the work makes in the game is serious. Further, we play most games with others. Children play dress-up, role playing games together. A dramatic performance requires at least one actor and one spectator. Religious festivals usually require several worshippers to enact the rites. Most board games are social activities requiring at least two people. Play is an activity we do in community.

The aesthetic experience is not a thrill ride. "...[I]t is not an experience of an adventure producing a temporary intoxication from which one reawakens to one's true being; instead...the spectator in fact deepen[s] his continuity with himself." (Gadamer, 1960/1997, p.133) Gadamer describes aesthetic experience as a return to the world and one's place in it:

> *The player, sculptor, or viewer is never simply swept away into a strange world of magic, of intoxication, of dream; rather, it is always his own world, and he comes to belong to it more fully by recognizing himself more profoundly in it. There remains a continuity of meaning which links the work of art with the existing world...*(p. 133)

The aesthetic experience is about seeing oneself as a part of the world. It is about understanding one's relationship to the presence of the artwork in the past and to its presence now. It is about bringing these two moments together such that the work of art is continually alive to the present moment. The work of art is not simply an artifact from the past or a contemporary document; an object of curiosity. It is a way of being in the world of which we are a part. It is a way to community.

In *Reading Rilke,* viewers who entered the gallery out of curiosity met with a stiff

challenge. The works and the documents of their past claimed a great deal of attention. One could not walk through the gallery keeping oneself aloof from the work and hope to understand it. *Reading Rilke* required viewers to be present and actively participate in the exhibition. The project gave viewers an opportunity to live with the presence of the artworks as documents of their effective history. *Reading Rilke* invited viewers to bring their worlds to the works of art. The artworks demanded that viewers find links between the world of the art museum and the world beyond its walls. What happened when the works included in *Reading Rilke* claimed viewers' attention and invited them to be part of the game? How did viewers respond to the invitation?

A second question arises: What is the responsibility of the art museum to address the activity of viewers not engaged in understanding? What of viewers who do not want to play? What of viewers who refuse the invitation or fail to answer? I believe these viewers fail to answer the questions posed by works of art when they do not have the words to answer. They decide not to play the game because they lack confidence or do not know the rules. **What does *Reading Rilke* reveal about the sources of en-couragement and strength that we draw on when we participate in the conversation of aesthetic experience? What does *Reading Rilke* tell us about how we learn the rules?**

Aesthetic Experience

When we visit an art museum to view works of art, we often want an answer. The question to be answered varies from person to person and visit to visit. But we want an answer. And we want to know how to get to the answer. We want the truth and we want a

method. Each experience of art uncovers a truth and a way to it. It is a truth Gadamer would have defined as what is "right here and now " (Gadamer, 1960/1997, p. xxxviii). It is a situated, grounded, historical truth. It is not a universal Truth. The difficult thing is that we cannot predetermine what is "right here and now" by a set of oughts or shoulds. The truth reveals itself during the experience, and the way opens up during the conversation.

Carol Gilligan (1977; 1987) and Nel Noddings (1984; 1988) framed the question of "What is true?" as an ethical dilemma. They asked, "How do we know what is right?" They revealed that we can approach this question in at least two ways: We can ask, "What is the rule I need to apply in this situation?" Or, we can ask, "What are the specific conditions of this situation and how can we ensure that no harm is done by our decision?" The former approach is abstract, conceptual and judicial. We base our actions on a set of *a priori* concepts. It is a search for Truth. I suggest we can characterize this approach as an *erlebnis* response. The latter approach is concrete, situated and caring. It is a search for truths. I suggest we can characterize it as an *erfahrung* response. A judicial response requires us to apply abstract concepts to experience. A caring response requires that we live in concrete experience and understand it.

When we step over the threshold into the art museum, a reality confronts us to which we must respond. We arrive at the moment with the sum of who we are at that moment and meet what is there. We can prepare for the meeting. We can even plan for it, but this is an *erlebnis* experience: a knowing. We are deciding what dams we will use to contain our experience. Understanding, *erfahrung*, happens when those plans fail us, when something unexpected occurs. At that point we must be open and ready to live in the experience.

In her seminal work *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory Of The Literary Work,* Louise Rosenblatt describes and clarifies this relationship between text and reader. Fundamental to Rosenblatt's "transactional" approach is the idea that the work resides in the reader's relationship to the text (the printed symbols on the page). The poem is not the typeset black marks on a white page. It is the "living" experience of the reader interpreting the text that points to the poem. "'The poem comes into being in the live circuit between the reader and the text" (1978, p. 14).

Another important aspect of Transactional Theory is the difference between the efferent reading and the aesthetic reading. Rosenblatt suggests that people's approaches to reading differ. We can relate to the text at a distance, decoding the symbols and relating these to commonly held concepts or rules about their meaning. The concepts we hold about the text carry us from the text to the concepts we hold about its subject.

We can also live in the reality created by the text. The reader creates the poem, the work of art, when he turns his attention inward to his experience of "the journey itself" (p.28).

> *The reader's primary concern is what happens during the actual reading event...[when]he...pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him...the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text* (p.24-25, my emphasis)

The distinction Rosenblatt makes is important when considering how we understand through works of art. We abstract the text by adopting an efferent stance toward the objects. It is something removed and at a distance from us. Gadamer's concept of *erlebnis* shares common features with Rosenblatt's "efferent stance". Gadamer describes *erlebnis* as the

result of "aesthetic differentiation". In this process the viewer assumes an ontological distance from the work of art and experiences the work as something without meaning to her existence. Through aesthetic differentiation, the work of art exists in a world without consequences to our normal, daily existence. We predicate our contemplation of its beauty on the distance between the world of the art object and that of our daily, practical, lived-in worlds. Thus, understanding is about the work of art, directed toward it, away from the grit and grime of our existence. Rosenblatt called this attitude toward the work of art "efferent."

Gadamer's notion of *erlebnis* and Rosenblatt's "efferent" stance are not identical conceptions. They do, however, share the understanding that there is an attitude toward the work that keeps our being at a distance and directs one's gaze completely toward the object. It is a binary mode of understanding that involves some-one understanding something. These attitudes do not create comfort. There is no sense of conversation in community.

When Gadamer described *erfahrung* he was thinking of an attitude, a pre-disposition toward the art object similar to Rosenblatt's idea of "aesthetic" stance. Both authors understand the viewer and work of art as engaged in being together. Meaning and understanding result from relationship, from what the artwork arouses (Rosenblatt) or brings into play (Gadamer) for the viewer. In the work of both writers, artwork and viewer inhabit the same world. I find it interesting that Rosenblatt used the term "aesthetic" to describe the living, dialogical relationship between artwork and viewer, while Gadamer used "aesthetic" in a critical way. Gadamer uses "aesthetic" to describe a truncated, handicapped relationship to the work of art. Gadamer coined *erfahrung* to describe the full, lively relationship between work and viewer rather than re-defining the term "aesthetic". By so doing, Gadamer retained

the effective history of "aesthetic," originating in Kantian philosophy, that adheres to *a priori* concepts of what is right. Rosenblatt's use of the term, on the other hand, reclaims an older, ancient Greek, understanding of the word "beauty". Gadamer (1960/1997) described the Greek concept as a sense of harmonious relationship in a specific context.

Panofsky (1955) also reclaimed the term "aesthetic" when he wrote: "Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically" (p.11). However, unlike Gadamer and Rosenblatt, Panofsky locates the aesthetic intent solely with the creator of the object. Rosenblatt and Gadamer saw aesthetic intent as a function of both the creator of the work and the viewer. For example, even though Van Gogh intended his paintings to be aesthetic objects, the viewers' willingness to live in the world they create brings them alive. Panofsky also described Rosenblatt's notion of "reading" when he tried to differentiate between the natural and human sciences. "The humanist," Panofsky wrote, "has to engage in a mental process of a synthetic and subjective character: he has mentally to re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations. It is in fact by this process that the real objects of the humanities come into being" (p.14). Panofsky called this "intuitive aesthetic re-creation."[9] Noddings might call it "caring", as the process entails "feeling with." These are notions that Gadamer develops in Truth and Method wherein *erfahrung* becomes the mode of understanding in art and all human sciences(1960/1997). An aesthetic experience of a work results in understandings located in the viewer's lived experience of the object, that exists in her present as a result of its history.

John Dewey's understanding of the aesthetic experience (1934/1964) provides us

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[9] He cautioned the historian, however, against confusing the viewer's aesthetic re-creation with the original work of the creator. Panofsky reminds us that works of visual art are subject to physical change. What we see today may vary significantly from the original creation.

with a further description of how the lived experience is central to the work of art. Dewey distinguished between the art product (e.g., a landscape painting) and the work of art (e.g., the experience of the painting). This distinction resonates with Gadamer's ideas about the way a work brings a world into play. Dewey (1934/64) wrote, "The first is physical and potential; the latter active and experienced" (p.632). There is a decidedly hermeneutic aspect to Dewey's poetic definition of the artwork:

> *When the structure of the object is such that its force interacts happily (but not easily) with the energies that issue from experience itself; when their mutual affinities and antagonisms work together to bring about a substance that develops cumulatively and surely (but not too steadily) toward a fulfilling of impulsions and tensions, then indeed there is a work of art...But an esthetic experience* [*sic*]*, the work of art in its actuality, is perception* (p.633).

Similarly, when Dewey describes experience as constituted when a living creature interacts with its environment to re-establish a harmony lacking in its existence (attempting to resolve a tension) he is thinking with a Gadamer-like hermeneutics. As with Gadamer, Dewey distinguishes between different kinds of experiences. He grapples with a dilemma basic to the human sciences: Can we understand in a way that values our living-in-the-world? Gadamer answered the question by demonstrating that Modern "aesthetic consciousness" separates our life-world from that of the artwork, but that *erfahrung* returns the work of art to life. Dewey answers the question by distinguishing "experience" from "an experience". Time marks an experience. It has a "flow" or movement "from something to something". Emotion unites the distinct parts of an experience. An experience comes to a conclusion (rather than just ending). We can see Dewey's notion of an experience reflected in his definition of a work of art. Aesthetic experience, the work of art, has for Dewey the character of an

experience. All "real" experiences are for Dewey "esthetic" [*sic*]. The problem is that too often we only "experience" things. We do not perceive them. We do not subject our experience to the rigorous attention required to "select and organize those features that make any experience worth having as an experience..." (p.634). Dewey believed the arts specialize in the selection and organization of features for us; preparing them for "commensurate perception" (p.634).

Dewey posited that the work of art operates in the realm of imagination rather than of physical existence:

> ...*the meanings imaginatively summoned, assembled, and integrated are embodied in material existence that here and now interacts with the self. The work of art is thus a challenge to the performance of a like act of evocation and organization, through imagination, on the part of one who experiences it.... Imaginative vision is the power that unifies all the constituents of the matter of a work of art, making a whole out of them in all their variety* (emphasis mine, p.642).

This resonates with Gadamer's description of the way works bring the viewer into the play in which they engage. Both writers explore the understanding that the work of art requires. Viewers must actively participate with the work. Indeed, the work (or play) of art exists in the viewer's world, not that of the art object. I like Dewey's articulation of the narrative sense that aesthetic experience takes. It reflects the conversation of understanding that is art. Time marks a conversation. Its movement has direction from something to something. It has distinct parts and has a conclusion (we get somewhere). Like a conversation, unexpected things arise from the discussion and we attend to these. We must live in the conversation that is happening. As in conversation, the discussion ends at an appropriate place.

Dewey's understanding of aesthetic experience also resonates with Gilligan's and

we attend to the details of the particular situation. We "feel with," and act appropriately within the context of the specific situation. Noddings (1984) described Dewey's educational philosophy as "caring".

The Meaning or The Meanings of a Work of Art

When we visit the art museum, objects confront us that require our attention. They ask us to live in the world with them and to enter into the conversation they offer to us. No one can tell us exactly what that conversation will be about. This lack of precision or predictability, in the sense used by the natural sciences, can lead to exaggeration. We adopt an attitude of absolute subjectivity and claim that the work of art can "mean whatever I want". This ambiguity finds its origins in Kantian philosophy and a popular misinterpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1964, trans).

When interpreting Kant's work it is important to remember what Kant was trying to achieve. As Gadamer (1997) points out, Kant was not trying to develop a philosophy of art. Gadamer reminds us that Kant applies his "pure aesthetic judgment of taste" to objects from nature, decorative architectural elements, village folk dance, etc. Kant was trying to find a way to identify a universal experience in the face of the new Cartesian ideology of doubt. With Kant's pure aesthetic judgment of taste, the individual could participate in a universal experience through a purely subjective experience not based on the vicissitude of empirical knowledge.

His critique illustrated a transcendental theory of experience. Kant isolated a form of experience -- the aesthetic -- and a mode of discernment -- taste -- that exist apart from the

uncertain world of cognition. Kant believed that through taste and the aesthetic experience, we can apprehend a higher purpose. We can participate in a universal experience. Humans can know what it is to be moral through the analogy of the Beautiful to the Good. Kant, while validating the importance of subjective experience, created a mechanism through which the individual could know the universal. Aesthetic experience provides us with a mirror to hold up to humanity. Art "presents humanity to itself" (Gadamer, 1960/1997).

Gadamer (1960/1997) described the way in which those who came after Kant developed the aesthetic side of Kant's analogy, letting the moral side fall away. It is this lopsided development of Kant's ideas that constitutes modern aesthetic philosophy. Through this one-sided development, modern aesthetic philosophy defines the successful art object as one that does not live in the daily life of the viewer. The more mysterious the alchemy of the object's existence, the more successful a work it is. This stand culminated in ideas like Bell's "significant form". The viewer perceives a work's meaning through the appropriateness of the formal elements' relationship to one another. There is an ineffable quality to this experience. The work of art is the result of the inspired genius who is able to go beyond the single, historical interpretation of an experience. The genius apprehends the ahistorical, non-cognitive implications of experience. When we claim that the work speaks for itself (and it means whatever the viewer wants or needs it to mean) we are assuming an exaggerated, over-simplified interpretation of modern aesthetic philosophy. This is not a conversational attitude toward the work. It is gagging the work; it is damming up of the understanding process of aesthetic experience with the concepts brought to the experience by the viewer.

Gadamer points out that some of the greatest feats of Western art occurred before we

defined aesthetic experience this way. In the West, we have known art that is not about Beauty, either as an analogy to the Good, or as an ineffable truth. We have inherited this ambiguity. While we know that we interpret texts within a tradition (that works are historically affected), we insist that the meaning of the artwork is arbitrary, "subjective". We believe that a work of art "can mean whatever I want." As I have shown, the meaning of a work of art is not arbitrary. The meaning a viewer comes to understand is the result of the relationship between the work of art and the world of the viewer. The artwork presents the game for us to play (Gadamer, 1960/1997) or the meeting place for the conversation. Both games and meeting places have well-defined boundaries and rules of conduct. Hence, although no two instances of the playing of a game have the same moves, nor the same outcome, there are right ways to play the game; there are also wrong ways. Similarly, with a conversation, no two discussions of a given topic will exactly replicate one another. Different subject matter emerges and we draw different conclusions. Despite the differences, a conversation about apples and oranges is about fruit and one about steel and concrete is about building materials. It is difficult to confuse the two. Viewers come to understand a work of art differently from one another. However, we can recognize in all these understandings a conversation on a common topic. We can identify a game commonly played.

Reading Rilke was an attempt to illustrate how we interpret texts, the role of subjectivity and the nature of universality in interpretation. Thirteen artists interpreted *Letters To A Young Poet* (Rilke, 1993). As we shall discover, common themes emerged within very individualistic approaches to the interpretation. The text did not mean just anything the artmakers wanted it to mean. Further, viewers' experiences of the exhibition show a shared

experience of the meaning of the project. Read as a text, the exhibition elicited some common reactions; viewers who did not know each other shared its meaning. *Reading Rilke* demonstrated how individuals share in a common understanding, a "communal sense" (Gadamer, 1960/1997) of the significance of works of art. The final question has arrived: **What was the nature of the conversation, "the action of living or having one's being in or among" in *Reading Rilke*?**

The Meeting Place

The preceding discussion has revealed the fertile ground on which the meeting place of our conversation occurs. Through it a purpose or direction for this dissertation arises: **To understand the art museum's role in the conversation of aesthetic experience; to describe a theory of "the real experience that [learning] is" (Gadamer, 1960/1997. xxxvi) in an art museum.** As I attempt to describe "the real experience" that *Reading Rilke* was, I pay close attention to what *Reading Rilke* reveals about aesthetic experience as comfort, conversation and community.

I would like to gather together the questions that arrived for us to explore, to understand, as we embark on our conversation about what learning is in an art museum. These questions gather around the themes of comfort, conversation and community that characterize the meeting place of our conversation:

1. Questions of Comfort
   a. How was the invitation to participate in the conversation of *Reading Rilke* received?
   b. What comforted or dis-comforted the participants in their understanding?
   c. What does this reveal about the role of the art museum in the conversation of aesthetic experience?

2. Questions of Community
   a. What does *Reading Rilke* reveal about the sources of en-couragement and strength

we draw on when we participate in the conversation of aesthetic experience?
b. What does *Reading Rilke* tell us about how we learn the rules?

3. Questions of Conversation
What was the nature of the conversation, "the action of living or having one's being in or among", in *Reading Rilke*?

The Speakers

In the conversation that is this dissertation there are many voices. Represented by texts from the *Reading Rilke* exhibition project, the speakers include:

Rainer Maria Rilke;
Franz Xavier Kappus;
Prof. Arthur Nishimura, Art Department, University of Calgary;
Master of Fine Arts (MFA) students of the University of Calgary;
Artists from Calgary;
The Nickle Arts Museum;
Viewers of the exhibition;
Me.

The conversation involving these speakers starts and ends with Rilke. In my first year of doctoral studies I became enchanted by Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet.* This slim volume contains the letters written by Rilke, a German neo-Romantic poet of the early twentieth century, to Franz Xavier Kappus, a young military officer considering life as a poet. Rilke wrote the letters with a generosity of spirit, humility and wisdom that intrigued me and resonated with truths I have learned in my journey as an artmaker.

At the same time I attended a graduate seminar for MFA students. Often our discussions addressed the artist's relationship to the viewer and the purpose of exhibitions. As I read Rilke's letters and sat in the seminars, I began to ask myself if it would be possible to use a text like Rilke's to teach people about being an artist and making art.

I approached Arthur Nishimura, Associate Professor with the Art Department at the University of Calgary and the leader of the seminar, with my idea. After a number of conversations, Arthur and I hit upon the idea of organizing an exhibition that asked the MFA students to respond to the "Letters" with works of art. Through critical interpretation of Rilke's text in their chosen medium, the students could learn something about their

understandings of art and about being an artist. There were twelve visual art students in the MFA program at the University of Calgary when Arthur and I approached the group with our idea. The MFA program did not require the students to participate in this project. We distributed copies of *Letters To A Young Poet* to the students and asked them to read the text before they decided to take part in the project. Eight students committed to the project.

We also asked a number of established artists[10] in the community to participate in the project. We hoped that the more established artists would form mentor[11] relationships with the students, as Rilke had with Kappus. We hoped these might further challenge and support the students' development.[12] Arthur and I approached six artists from Calgary about participating in *Reading Rilke* and four chose to join our group.

We asked the artists to record their working process during the project. We wanted to exhibit these records with the works of art to dispel the mystery that often seems to surround the meaning of works of art. We asked each of the artists to provide a means for viewers to respond to these records and to the works. We wanted to encourage viewers to be active participants in the meanings we were constructing about Rilke's "Letters", about the work of artists and the works of art.

Arthur and I submitted a proposal for *Reading Rilke* to The Nickle Arts Museum in the autumn of 1996. The Nickle Arts Museum is part of the University of Calgary, although governed by its own board of directors. Its mandate is to serve the community of

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[10] We defined "established artist" as professional artists working outside the university context who had worked for ten to fifteen years in the field and had received provincial or national recognition of their work in the arts community.

[11] Throughout this dissertation, mentorship will refer to relationships in which a more experienced individual initiates a novice into a community. According to Wunsch (1994) the mentor teaches the novice the language, rules and etiquette of the community. Further, the mentor challenges the novice to question her understandings and, eventually, even the mentor's own authority.

[12] Analysis of the interviews with the participants will reveal whether in fact these relationships occurred and if so, the nature of the mentor relationships that existed.

the University of Calgary by collecting and exhibiting artwork of local, regional, national and international significance. The Nickle Arts Museum's mandate requires the museum to address the needs of the university's academic program through its activities. The Nickle Arts Museum accepted our proposal. *Reading Rilke's* design met the museum's goals of developing cross-disciplinary exchanges through art exhibitions. It also provided the museum with an opportunity to explore museum practice. This latter activity is becoming increasingly important in museums. The colonial context in which museums were founded is becoming increasingly problematic. Postmodern aesthetics is replacing the modern aesthetics that structured art museums' activities in the past. Museums are reflecting on what they do, how they do it, and why.[13] *Reading Rilke* provided The Nickel Arts Museum with the opportunity to explore the nature of the museums' relationship with artists, the work of art and viewers.

We installed the works, records and response devices at The Nickle Arts Museum (NAM) February through March 1997. In total, 580 visitors came to The Nickle Arts Museum during the *Reading Rilke* installation. It is difficult to determine exactly how many casual visitors viewed *Reading Rilke* because the museum's records do not specify which exhibitions visitors attended. According to NAM staff, casual visitors usually view all the exhibitions on display (T. D. Reynoldson, personal communication, March 1, 2000).Thus, I assume most of these 580 visitors participated in *Reading Rilke*. The NAM's attendance records indicate that University of Calgary students visited the exhibition as part of their coursework for classes in German, Museum Studies, Art

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[13] See Bourdieu (1993, 1991, 1990), Gablick (1991), Hooper-Greenhill (1998), Lavine and Karp (1991) for excellent discussions of the contemporary context in which art museums find themselves and how museums are using postmodern approaches to practice to find direction for their work.

Education, Visual Art, Creative Writing and History. The visitors responded to the works through the devices provided by the artists and in the comment book provided by NAM.[14]

The project generated a wealth of data. I have notes taken during meetings of the group and audio-cassettes of group meetings. I have the records of the artists and the responses of the viewers. I reflected in a journal over the course of the project. I made audio-cassettes of interviews with the artists. These "texts" begged sensitive and critical interpretation so that the significance of the project might emerge. It is with these that I entered into conversation.

I wrote fifteen stories based on these texts. Each story has several voices that speak in it. The voices vary depending on the story; not all stories explore the same subject matter. Generally, the stories consist of my interpretation of:

the work;
the artist's journal;
the viewers' responses;
the interview with the artist;

and are presented in this order in each story. (Although, again, all the voices are not present in each story and sometimes the stories are interwoven.) Each story concludes with "Understandings" I reached through my interpretations.

I organized the stories into three chapters: Comfort; Conversation; and Community.

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[14] I am saddened by the fact that this dissertation will explore the experience of a group of nameless, faceless people who visited the exhibition. I will be examining the remarks of those who, for the most part, did not identify themselves. Unfortunately, in this exhibition, as in so many, we talk of "viewers" on the one hand; and the individual, fully realized personalities of "artists" on the other. I will include many quotations from visitors in an attempt to give the individuals who participated in this project their voices. Hence, "viewers" to *Reading Rilke* included all people who entered the gallery and participated with the exhibition. They included the artists who created the works, university classes who visited as a group, students who visited to fulfill an assignment, individuals who attended the opening, people who visited casually, staff of The Nickle Arts Museum. "Viewers" include adults and children. I can make no real differentiation in the purpose or age of viewers; those responses that I have documented do not record such information. In reading through the many, many responses of viewers, I felt it best to take them at face value and interpret them in the context in which I found them. These include the "journals" of the artists, a paper written by a student, anecdotal information relayed to me by a visitor him- or her- self or through word of mouth.

"Comfort" looks at how we gain confidence and find en-couragement to take part in the conversation of aesthetic experience. "Conversation" explores themes of dialogue, reciprocity, inclusivity and care in aesthetic experience. "Community" describes the ways that a work of art can connect our understanding of something to someone else's understanding of it. Together these three chapters comprise the subjects of attention in my conversation with the texts from *Reading Rilke*. They describe how understanding can occur through aesthetic experience in an art museum.

CHAPTER TWO:
COMFORT

***Com-fort:** Middle English, To strengthen, to encourage, to support.*
(Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964)

In the stories of *Solitude, Hush Now, Vier Dinge (Four Things),* and *We shall always be realistic in the eyes of our friends* we hear about the ways our ability to enter into the conversation of aesthetic experience is encouraged. We hear that learning through art in a museum requires artists and viewers to be literate in the language of the visual arts and able to join an on-going conversation competently and with confidence. *Solitude* tells the story of an artist and viewers finding their voices and learning the appropriate language to use in the conversation of aesthetic experience. *Hush Now* describes the kind of space novices require to learn. "Attentive quietude" characterizes this space. The space provides support that allows the learner to experiment with her newly found voice. *We shall and always be realist...* explores the importance of sharing experience. We learn that when we do not share we are uncomfortable. However, when we do share we create a comfortable environment for all participants. *Vier Dinge (Four Things)* describes "attentive solitude". We learn how to create solitude by our active participation with the work of art. We come to understand that solitude created by our engrossment in experience is comforting. It enables our learning through the work. We learn that listening skills are as important in a conversation as are those for speaking.

Cathy, *Solitude,* 1997

Figure 1. Installation of *Solitude.*

In *Solitude* we hear the story of those who are without voice, who feel alone and isolated when they visit the art museum. We learn that knowing the words to use and using them with confidence are the first comforting acts required for novice artmakers and viewers.

The Work

Cathy wrote to explore her experiences. For Cathy, this writing became extremely important to her work. Early in her program, Cathy incorporated text that communicated her emotional life into her "stitched" works. However, Cathy usually obscured this text in some way so that it became a formal, linear element rather than a mode of communication.

Throughout her MFA program, Cathy struggled with an ambivalence about sharing her writing openly. This ambivalence was obvious in the installation she created for *Reading Rilke.* A lidded box contained the stitched cloth included in *Solitude.* I was not sure whether

Cathy wanted me to open the box and explore its contents further. Cathy tied the handbound book closed with a bow. Did Cathy want me to open it and read the words contained within? I did open the box and discovered more stitched clothes. I opened the book. I read it and I wrote in it. I was not sure if I was trespassing into a private realm. I believe this is an experience many uninitiated viewers have when they visit art museums. In a study of the epistemological development of 135 women, Belenky et al. (1997) identified this sense of ambivalence in the women they characterized as "silent." Those who are silent obey blindly. They are unable to trust in their own abilities. However,

> *In their experience, authorities seldom tell you what they want you to do; they apparently expect you to know in advance."* (p.28)

This situation leads to dis-comfort. The silent need to know what to do; they need guidance. Yet, they also feel that they should already know what authorities expect of them. In the face of this ambivalence, the silent either cease to act, or act impulsively. Thus, I experienced the need for authoritative direction when I participated in *Solitude*. At first I did not act, then I impulsively lifted the lid. I was uncomfortable in these acts, afraid that I was behaving inappropriately. Cathy's piece for *Reading Rilke* made real for me the experience of that silent viewer without experience, without confidence.

Cathy's Journals

Solitude consisted of a stitched cloth and two journals. Cathy placed the smaller of the two journals inside a closed metal box. It was about 6" X 8" X 1", with cold pressed cardboard covers and a metal spiral binding. On the cover, Cathy glued a piece of warm beige, handmade paper. To the right of centre, toward the outside edge of the cover was a

"window." This window revealed a piece of embroidered, stained cloth. The stitching in black, brown and yellow, spelled out words. "Artist", "Worry", and " *Reading Rilke*" are among the few words one could read. Inside, the book's pages alternated between translucent vellum and thin black cardboard. All but the first of the vellum sheets repeated the following quotation from Rilke's "Letters" down their full length:

> *To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours -- that is what you must attain.*
> *Solitude, vast inner solitude* (p. 67-68).

Cathy used different fonts for the two lines of this quotation and she changed them each time she represented them.

Cathy glued white pages or pages printed with digitally reproduced images onto the black pages. On these, Cathy printed her meditations on Rilke's text. In the spaces between the lines of printed text and in the margins, Cathy pencilled the same two quotations that she printed on the vellum sheets. This left no blank space on the page. Words filled the entire page. When laid open, the reader saw a fully black page to the left. To the right was a printed vellum page that thinly masked the page containing Cathy's own words. I perceive three themes emerging from the text of this little book. Through poetry and prose, Cathy explored aloneness, words, and selfhood.

Cathy questioned and wrestled with the apparent need for being alone to work as an artist. She repeated, like a mantra, Rilke's words about being alone and solitude. In response to his words, Cathy wrote:

> *I wrote in a journal only once before. Everyday for seven weeks. I was alone. In a strange place. I wrote and wrote until my hand cramped up, until I had nothing left to say. All I had was my pen and paper...But now, I am alone within myself.*
> *We live alone. We all live alone.*

I do not perceive in Cathy's words the sense of peace and tranquillity that I read in Rilke's. I believe that Cathy was not at ease with her aloneness. She attempted to fill the void (not "solitude") with words.

Words were magical for Cathy. They were not simply symbols for communication. Rather, they were a voice. They were Cathy's voice locked inside her. The only way that Cathy overcame her isolation, touched and was touched by other lives, was through words:

> *Words are all that I have, I live for them. They live inside me. Everything I do is a reflection of the words inside me. Inside I am full. So full I can hardly speak. I'm not sure which words to take, to speak aloud. I'm unsure of which word goes with what phrase...I have no control...Mostly it is just an accident. Words spill on the page, words that are mine? I doubt it. I probably stole them... I wish I had someone who could write to me and give me words of wisdom...It would be quite the experience to have someone value your words so much that they would truly listen to you...Inside of me, of all the words that are there, I only have to put them together, and when that [is] done, I will find the words of wisdom that I so desperately seek.*

Cathy related to words physically; she perceived this to be a part of their power. Cathy needed to write and to read to "actually feel the words and know that they are true". Through reading, Cathy found comfort, "Words that tell me everything is okay." Through writing, Cathy tried to offer comfort and inspiration to others:

> *I wouldn't mind being the one that offered the words of inspiration. That would mean a power, a power to change one's life.*

For Cathy, words were a form of power and control. They were a way to truth.

Cathy's small journal contained one more theme. Much of the writing asserted her self-hood, the importance of her own, unique experience and understanding. Cathy seemed to feel that she lacked validation and that she must remain silent, even though she was full of

words:

> *I think of myself as an actor on a very big stage. The world. Otherwise my voice...would never be heard. Among the madding crowd. We scream whispers because we are too afraid to cause a scene. Too afraid to hear our own cries. Then we might realize what right we really have to be on this world.*

Because Cathy did not feel that she could assert her right to be on this world, she desperately tried to maintain a world within herself.

> *I think of the world inside me. That is all I can do to exist. The world is all that I have. All that I can hold onto. No matter that I see and all that I do, my world only comes from inside. I take in all that I can. I see all that I must. At best, living here, in this place, the place inside of me, can be difficult.*

Cathy's last entry into this small book was a plea for validation, for "truth."

> *I live to find the answers, but I fear I will never know the truth. I deserve to know the truth. The truth of my own life. But...*
> *I really can't remember the question that means the most to me. The one I need to find the answer to the most. I can only say this, and hope you hear, hope you will understand...*
> *It doesn't matter. You make your own truth. You make your own truth. If only it was that easy.*

In the larger book, Cathy developed the dilemma she explored in her small journal. This book, about 9" X 11", had corrugated cardboard covers and Cathy bound it with a piece of rough hemp tied into a bow. Inside, the pages were made from bond paper onto which Cathy copied the image of rumpled paper. Cathy printed her entries onto these sheets. She began with, "The object -- to find the words. I try. But the only words I find are repeated in my head..." Two pages follow on which Cathy printed Rilke's words about solitude, over and over, line after line.

Cathy ended this litany with another page of her thoughts. She revealed that Rilke's

words no longer signify that she must retreat from the world. She perceived them to be a comfort. However, she found it hard to share her voice with others, she feared that she would no longer be in control if her words became part of the outside world.

> *I try to share, but it is hard. I fight the desire to lock them [the words] away. I fight the urge to hide everything.*

So, she did not hide this book inside a metal box. She left it in the open (although still tied shut with a cord).

> *At first I was unsure that I could share my feelings, my writing, with people I did not know...But I realize my message was simple. And it was plain.*

And she "borrowed" Rilke's words to share.

> *My message...I borrow from words of Rilke...I took them in and made them part of me.*

Cathy ended her entries into this journal with seven pages that quote Rilke's words about walking inside ourselves.

By combining the image of rumpled paper with printed words, I am mindful of the frustration I can feel when writing, trying to give voice to the thoughts and feelings inside. I start, then grab the paper and crumble it. The rumpled looking sheets in Cathy's journal have been reclaimed, however. They look as if Cathy might have picked them up, flattened them out and carefully bound them between their humble covers with rough string. Unlike the smaller journal, constructed more preciously and embellished with colourful embroidery, this journal is plain, unadorned. In the smaller journal, Cathy quoted Rilke using fanciful fonts printed onto thin vellum that veils her own words. In this journal, Cathy quoted Rilke with a plain font on the same paper that she printed her words and on which viewers later wrote.

Common to both journals are the words of the quotations and Cathy's repeated phrase that she "took comfort from them".

I perceive Cathy's journal to be an illustration of how the comfort/community dialectic works. Words move from inside our inner worlds to the outside world where we share them with another (in community). The other then absorbs the words into their inner world, giving them comfort. The circle can repeat again when the words have become our own. If they only stay inside they are a cacophony of sound that "drowns" and overwhelms. If left outside, they are decorative embellishments without meaning or truth. When taken in by another, when they provide comfort, the words cease to be embellishments and become part of the thread that sews a community together. The words are no longer like decorative embroidery on the surface. They are like the coarse, strong twine of the binding. The question posed by Cathy's journals reminds me of Gadamer's notion of *erfahrung*. The journals ask that aesthetic experience be a way to bring the "words" spoken by the artwork into one's life so that viewer and artist participate in "community."

Cathy's journals also reflect the process necessary to break the bonds of silence described by Belenky et al. One of the issues involved in silence is a sense of disconnectedness. Belenky et al describe how we overcome this disconnectedness:

> *In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who speak and listen or read and write -- sharing, expanding and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such exchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community* (p.26).

Belenky and her fellow researchers described how the absence of these exchanges results in both a dis-connection from the community and from self. We see this illustrated eloquently in

Cathy's journal.

The Viewers' Responses

Cathy called her piece "Solitude." For Rilke, solitude was a way of living in the moment, undistracted by external expectations or definitions. Rilke's solitude was a place of focused attention. For Rilke "the state of being or living alone" (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964) was necessary for aesthetic experience. It was the space in which he used his voice. However, Rilke was an articulate, confident artist. For those who have not yet developed that maturity, solitude is "a complete absence or lack" (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964). Belenky et al describe how women in silence

> *felt "deaf" because they assumed they could not learn from others, "dumb" because they felt so voiceless. (p. 24)*

Viewers of *Solitude* explored a range of attitudes. J. W. was an articulate, confident speaker who broke the solitude of the individual pieces in the exhibition. His question drew the community together.

> *Well now, who is this Rilke person?*

Other viewers engaged in heated discussion about the nature of solitude. They use their voices unselfconsciously.

> *Why must everything be REDUCED to wanting to escape, not wanting to face reality or other people, and proclaiming that to be "with yourself" is the ultimate goal of self-elevation?*
> *Is it really reducing oneself? The search is not for an escape, but for an understanding of self and balance...*
> *We must always strive, but we must also be aware of the journey, enjoying it, piece by piece, good times and bad times!*

Some viewers seemed empowered by *Solitude* and were ready to explore their inner-voice

once Cathy presented a model to them.

> *...your project has inspired me to keep a journal of my own now.*

One viewer described Belenky et al's lonely place when she wrote:

> *Solitude drove me to voicelessness once.*

What *Solitude* seems to reveal is a consensus about the dangers of premature solitude to our ability to converse.

Understandings

In her last entry Cathy articulates poignantly the needs of one who is silent,

> *I do not want to escape reality, but find a way in which my inner self and my outer shell become the same.*

Sarah, *Hush Now*, 1997

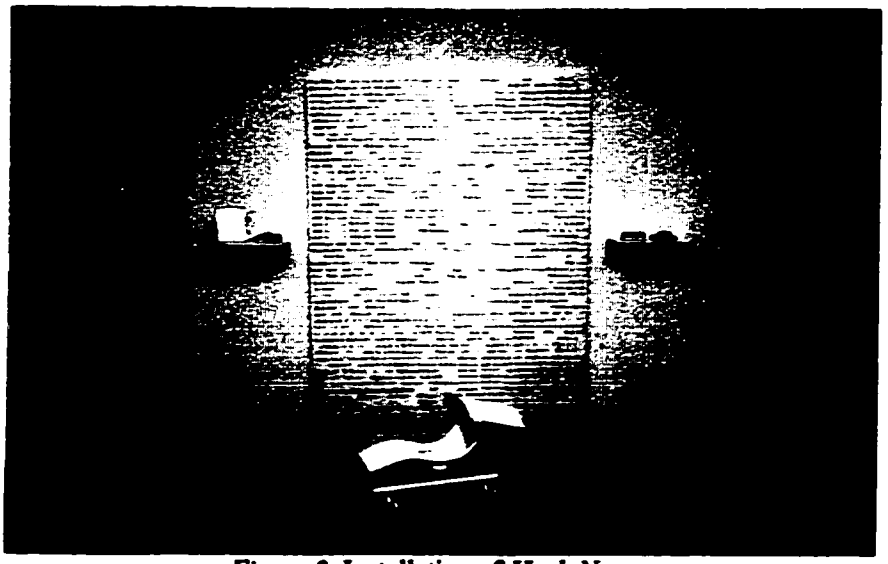

Figure 2. Installation of *Hush Now*.

Hush Now tells us about the importance of being cared-for. When we are cared-for we develop our voices so that we can participate in the conversation of aesthetic experience. In *Caring* (1984), Nell Noddings described how "feeling with" (or giving comfort) opens up a space in which the cared-for can respond. This response enables the one-caring to provide the support necessary to the cared-for's growth. *Hush Now* provided viewers with the comfort to grow. There was space for viewers (a blank sketch book) and support (the stamp) as they experimented with their voices. Noddings (1984) described this as "attentive quietude." The one-caring opens up a safe place for the cared-for to receive care.

The Viewers' Responses

The quietness of *Hush Now*, its stark contrast of white and black, its minimal presentation, seemed to provide space for viewers to respond. The simple phrase repeated over and over on the stretched canvas panel seemed to inspire viewers to explore its visual

potential. Most viewers were enthusiastic about playing with the stamp and used it as a printing device to create patterns that stood on their own, or that supported comments written by hand.

Figure 3. Reproduction from Sarah's journal.

There is a playfulness, a sense of adventure in the viewers as they responded in Sarah's journal. Most did not seem concerned with entering into heavy or sophisticated discussion. Most viewers seemed to want to discover how they could make their mark with the simple tool Sarah provided.

Some viewers used the graphic possibilities of the stamp combined with handwritten text to convey their interpretation of the piece:

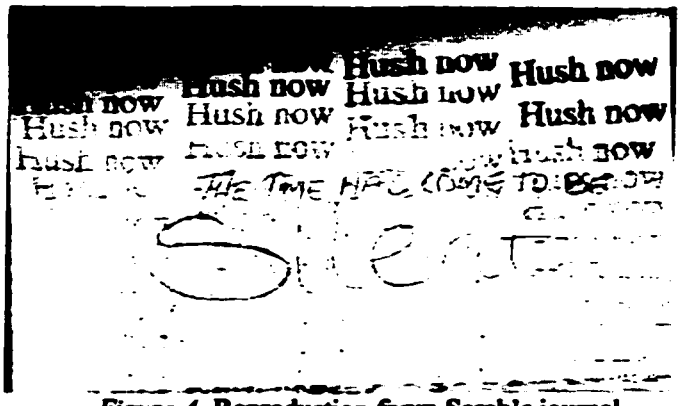

Figure 4. Reproduction from Sarah's journal.

Some viewers wanted to delve into the piece. These viewers used handwritten text to relate a personal experience or to interpret the piece.

> *Humanity has noisy energy*
>
> *How often are we told to be silent and Hush? And always at that time and place where it does the most damage.*
>
> *Hush now? I don't want to I want to speak.*
>
> *The stamp is so mechanical -- We use it so often we pay no attention to it anymore -- But we really do need to Hush now. We are like babies crying & fussing. We need to hush and listen and hear -- hear the voices within & learn -- learn to listen to the voices without.*
>
> *Isn't Rilke's collection of letters about letting his words SCREAM because he wrote what was true to him what was real*
> *READ ICCULUS*
>
> *words on paper should not have to be silent -- they can vibrate as loudly and powerfully as music as painting*
>
> *And for those who like to rock...A cradle to the grave*

I believe that by providing the stamp, Sarah gave those who lacked confidence to speak in their own voice an opportunity to participate in the conversation. The stamp seemed to give those with more confidence a way to enter into the conversation; they could use the stamp in addition to their own words. Those who were very secure seemed to use their own voices. They found their own words with which to speak. In the installation of *Hush now*, I perceive a forum that allowed most people an opportunity to join in the discussion, regardless of their ability.

In the viewers' responses we witness the results of "feeling with" in aesthetic experience. Viewers responded when they felt that Sarah was supporting them. *Hush Now*

provided viewers with the three elements Noddings (1984) described as essential by the one-caring (in this case the work, *Hush Now*):

(1)Viewers felt that there was a commitment on the part of the work **to act in their behalf**;
(2)Viewers perceived **their reality was of importance** to the work over the time they participated in it;
(3)Viewers perceived a **consistent, unfailing level of commitment** to their participation in "Hush Now."

Feeling well cared for, visitors experimented, played, argued and reflected on their experiences in the ways that they needed to or in ways with which they felt confident.

Understanding

When we comfort each other as learners we share. We share our time, our attention, our energy and our resources. This sharing en-courages, supports and strengthens us in our learning.

Sam[15], *"We shall and always will be realistic in the eyes of our friends,"* 1997

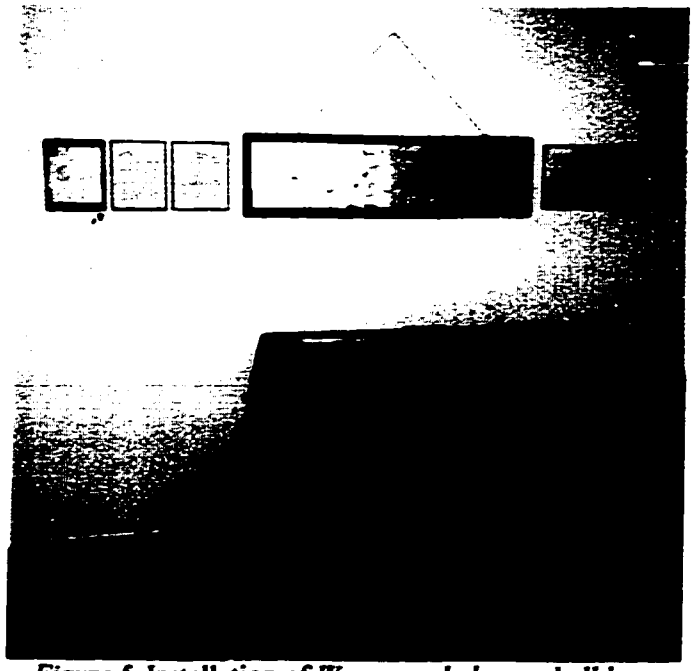

Figure 5. **Installation of *We are and always shall be...***

When we do not share our time, attention, energy and resources we can end up in an uncomfortable state. *We shall and always will be realistic in the eyes of our friends* illustrates the dis-comfort we can feel when we remain apart. It also illustrates that we can create a comfortable environment for viewers when they feel they are sharing in the creation of the work.

The Work

Sam was the youngest of the established artists who agreed to participate in *Reading Rilke*. Sam worked in many media, including sculpture. At the time of the project, Sam explored sound as a physical element in his work. Sam's sound productions were often

[15] My interpretation of Sam's experience with *Reading Rilke* is based on notes I made while Sam and I talked over tea in his home. Sam was the first participant in the project that I spoke with about his experience. This conversation led me to develop the questions I asked in my discussions with rest of the participants.

collaborations with other artists. Sam had established an apprenticeship program for students (from the Alberta College of Art) interested in learning about sound in art. He was hesitant about joining the project as he was uncertain about its value to him, and was unable to attend many of the group functions. However, adventurous in spirit, Sam decided to participate to see what would come of it. He recounted that he decided to participate in *Reading Rilke* as "...a leap of faith. I was hoping to get something out of the process, to get out of my own context."

The response that Sam made to *Letters To A Young Poet* was to write Rilke a letter of his own. He did not address any specific issue raised by the book. Instead Sam wanted to "echo" the spirit of the book itself. Sam began his letter:

> *Dear Mr. Rilke:*
> *You do not know me although as an artist you share with me the common ground of spending most of our waking hours looking inward. Looking inward to find clues to the riddle we call life, having already realized that the external world is just that, external to the self...*

Sam's letter continued in this conversational tone, exploring the nature of *Reading Rilke*, the source of creativity and the nature of "art." There is a wistful quality to the letter and several times Sam reminds himself that Mr. Rilke, to whom he is writing, is already dead. Sam interspersed the letter with quotations from his "personal notebook."

> *There is nothing that honors the living like the dead and nothing that the living can do but live to death.*

These quotations act as framing devices for his conversation with the deceased Mr. Rilke. They ground the letter in Sam's lived experience. They pull the letter out of the world of fantasy and into Sam's reality.

My Conversation With Sam

Sam found the process of writing the letter interesting. He felt disappointment, however, in the viewers' use of the mirrors he provided for their reflection (quite literally). Sam envisioned the mirrors as providing viewers with insight into their presence and role in the process of understanding texts. Instead, what resulted was "graffiti, bathroom scrawling." He did not feel that the viewers were participating in making art. He did not feel that the mirrors became artworks.

He said that he had felt rather like an "outsider." He described himself as a practicing artist, neither an instructor at the University nor a student. Thus, neither the research nor educational value of participating in the project was important to him. As a practicing artist, Sam's objective in participating in *Reading Rilke* was to participate in an exhibition. *Reading Rilke* did not pay exhibition fees, and Sam felt that he "gave more than [he] got back." Thus, Sam perceived that reciprocity was missing. This reciprocity, Sam believed, should have been fundamental to the project (given its stated purpose).

Further, Sam's experience with apprenticeship gave him some insight into the nature of mentoring relationships. Sam believed that mentorships assume a hierarchy because skills and knowledge are being passed from the elder to the novice. The non-hierarchical structure of *Reading Rilke* became problematic for Sam: "You need to have [a hierarchy] and establish it clearly or have no hierarchy. What was the role of each participant? This needed to be established. There were too many grey areas."

Despite the disappointment Sam felt with the project, he concluded that he had taken a chance. He came to some new understandings about text and interpretation and that this, in

itself, was valuable.

Sam's understanding of his experience of *Reading Rilke* reflects the ambivalence that characterized his work. Sam wanted to participate, but he quite literally did not attend most of the group's activities. Thus, he did not fully commit himself to the experience. It appears that the reality of the research project did not hold his interest; he did not live in it, nor lend his motivational energy to it. I believe that because of this lack of "engrossment," Sam experienced what Noddings (1984) called "exhaustion." Sam remarked, "I gave more than I got back." According to Noddings, this is typical of a state of exhaustion in one-caring. Without engrossment, we can not receive what the other can give and we begin to feel put upon.

Sam's experience of dis-comfort may have resulted from his uncertainty about his role in the project. Without confidence in the voice he was offering to the conversation, he could not participate fully. In this sense, Sam was "silent." However, Sam was not silent due to a lack of voice or words. Sam was an articulate artist. Sam was silent because he was uncertain about why he participated in this conversation.

Understandings

I believe Sam would have been more comfortable had he been engrossed and attentive. Sometimes we hold ourselves apart as much as we are held apart. Carol Gilligan (1977) described how important it is for an individual to take responsibility for developing a caring attitude. I suggest that it is equally important for those participating in aesthetic experience to take responsibility for their involvement. If we are not committed to the relationship, if we are not willing to live in the experience, we can expect to find frustration and dis-comfort.

Catherine, *Vier Dinge (Four Things)*, 1997

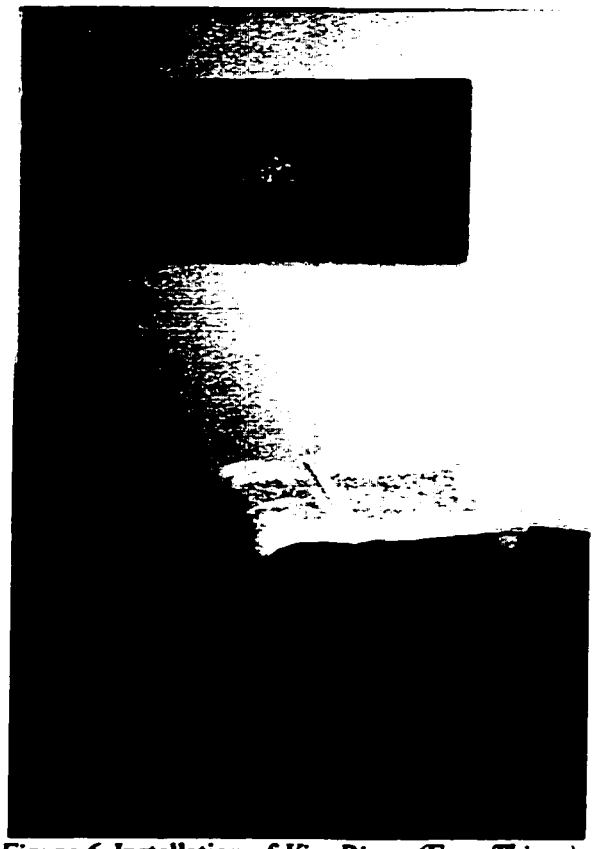

Figure 6. Installation of *Vier Dinge (Four Things)*.

Vier Dinge (Four Things) provides us with an opportunity to perceive how comfort, conversation and community all work together in understanding through aesthetic experience. *Vier Dinge (Four Things)* reveals that understanding becomes a tertiary process when we ground learning through art in attentive solitude. It then involves comfort, conversation and community.

The Work

A smallish black panel hung toward the edge of an inner wall of the gallery. Catherine

painted a galaxy of stars, dense at the centre and thinning toward the edges, on its surface. When I sat in the small school desk across the space from the painting (my knees wedged under its top) I felt uneasy with the mysterious surface I faced. As I read slowly through the quotations from *Letters To A Young Poet* recorded in the loose book on the desk top, I began to believe that the universe created in the painting represented the solitude to which Rilke so often referred. I began to understand that solitude is not an empty place, but a place full of possibility and light. The silence of solitude is the silence of waiting. It is the hush before the symphony opens. It is quietness and oneness.

As I contemplated the surface of the painting, I realized that among the stars there were four small doors with delicate bronzed handles. Unfolding myself from the desk, I walked up to the painting and hesitantly opened a small door. Inside I discovered a tiny object. This object was a simple, homey object: a chair, a vase, or a thimble. Inside the universe of possibility I found things I already knew. I remembered Rilke's words, recorded in Catherine's journal, about paying attention to small things, humble things. I wondered if we need to look at that which we already know and take for granted to understand the possibilities of the unknown.

Gadamer would have agreed. In his definition of tertiary understanding, those engaged in conversation discuss "something they already know about." *Four Things* is a visual representation of Gadamer's concept. We can not remain in the desk, looking at the object and expect to understand something about it. From the desk we are too far away to see the doors that can lead us to understanding. In the desk we are not involved in the universe created by the canvas. We are in a state of dis-comfort. When we rise and open the doors, we

participate *with* the work of art; we rejoin the world and we are comfortable. Then, and only then, does understanding to occur.

Catherine's Journal

Catherine's journal is large. Catherine made the journal from sheets of handmade paper folded together to form a 1' X 2' book. The paper is a warm beige and contains pieces of grass that look like clippings from a lawn mower. The edges are softly frayed. Catherine placed the book on a small wooden school desk, isolated near the centre of the space it inhabited. A light shone down onto it. It was very difficult to bend oneself into the desk. It was difficult to read the text. Its spidery script tended to blend into the flocked texture of the paper.

The first two pages of Catherine's book contained a quotation from "Letters" and a short meditation on the quotation. The rest of the pages contained only quotations from Rilke's text. The quotations that Catherine chose contained two themes. One theme dealt with Rilke's notions of "solitude" and the life of our inner worlds.

> *Your solitude will expand and become a place where you can live in the twilight, where the noise of other people passes by far in the distance.* (Rilke, 1984, p.8)

The other theme dealt with Rilke's insistence on attentiveness to "small" things. Catherine used Rilke's words, the words in which she found meaning

> *...no experience has been too unimportant, and the smallest event unfolds like a fate...* (Rilke, 1984, p. 20)

She did not explain or comment on most of the text. Catherine chose the words for readers to attend to but she let readers interpret them for themselves.

In the gallery, the reader attended closely to the text. The book was difficult to read. I felt cramped and uncomfortable sitting in the desk. The book overhung the desk when opened. The gorgeous texture and subtle colouring of the paper distracted me. One tended to examine the paper (the context, support, carrier) rather than read the words so hard to decipher.

Catherine's journal forced one to be attentive to the small things. Rilke's words are less important than the significance they carry with them. It is not to the idea, but to the lived reality that Rilke would have had us attend. With Catherine's journal, I attended to the humble paper, flocked with simple grass. My fingers traveled over its surface -- one side smooth, one side rough -- understanding Rilke's ideas directly. My experience of the paper enveloped me. I was alone. I "live[d] in twilight, where the voice of other people passes by, far in the distance" (Rilke, 1984, p. 8) I lived the solitude Rilke described. Catherine provided viewers with an opportunity to struggle to achieve "attentiveness" and "solitude" as Kappus struggled.

What I learned while living the experience of attentive solitude was the attitude Noddings (1984) calls "engrossment." I committed myself to the journal. I committed myself to respond to its demands. I focused my interest on the reality created by the journal as I explored it; I "felt with" the journal. I allowed the needs of the journal, and the understanding it provided to nurture and renew my interest. Through my "reading" of Catherine's journal I discovered that the solitude described by Rilke need not be an aloneness. When engaged in aesthetic experience, solitude is a state that allows engrossment to occur.

Understandings

Vier Dinge (Four Things) revealed the significance of "solitude" to aesthetic experience. This is a solitude that is attentive to "small things." It is a solitude created by our active participation with the work of art. It is a comfortable silence that allows us to attend; that allows us to learn.

Understanding Comfort in Aesthetic Experience

In Chapter Two, we discovered how silence results in dis-comfort. We discovered that silence occurs because we feel excluded from a conversation. We learned we can even exclude ourselves. We came to understand that overcoming silence is fundamental to our ability to participate in aesthetic experience. We also learned that solitude can be "attentive silence" or it can be the experience of aloneness. The difference between the two states is marked by our ability to become engrossed in the experience. When we are able to become engrossed, when we participate, solitude becomes the space within which learning can occur. Thus, comfort when learning through art in a museum requires that we know how to both speak and listen.

CHAPTER THREE - CONVERSATION

Conversation: Middle English, The action of living or having one's being in or among. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1964)

Once we enter into the conversation of aesthetic experience, the question arises: What characterizes "living among?" How do we maintain our place in the community? Seven stories tell us how conversations occur through dialogue, reciprocity, inclusivity and care: *Letters To A Young Poet,* Arthur Nishimura, *Companion, Air, Address To You, Rumination* and *Resurrection.* These stories also reveal that we need to honor the conversation of aesthetic experience because it creates a sacred space. They reveal the importance of "conversation".

LettersTo A Young Poet describes the ways that artmakers can mentor viewers through their work. It describes how a work of art can guide a viewer to see something from a different perspective; understand from a different point of view. Arthur Nishimura's story tells us about the responsibility all participants have to maintain the conversation. We learn that learning through art in a museum requires the effort of artists, viewers and museum staff.

It is possible for members of a community to drift away when they feel insecure or neglected. *Companion* recounts a tale about inclusivity and attentive presence that calms the learners' insecurities, guards against neglect, and honors the experiences of all who participate in the conversation. *Rumination* provides us with an opportunity to reflect on how we nourish each other as we learn through art in museums. We discover that the staple of aesthetic experience is a generous, responsive subjectivity that allows us to learn from and

with each other in the museum. *Address To You* reminds us that living among, participating in a conversation, requires that each of us be vulnerable. When we view something from a different perspective, when we understand from a new point of view, we risk demolishing our old worldviews. *Address To You* celebrates the courage of those who engage in the conversation of aesthetic experience.

Air develops the themes of honor, respect and relationship explored by *Rumination* and *Address To You.* We see how learning through art in a museum requires that we find connections between ourselves and the work. We learn that without these connections we can not appreciate, honor or respect the new perspectives a work of art can provide us. *Resurrection* reveals the sacredness of learning through art in a museum. This sacredness is not one that sets apart, but one that unites. *Resurrection* describes how aesthetic experience creates a place for us to attend to an experience care-fully.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Xavier Kappus and *Letters To A Young Poet*

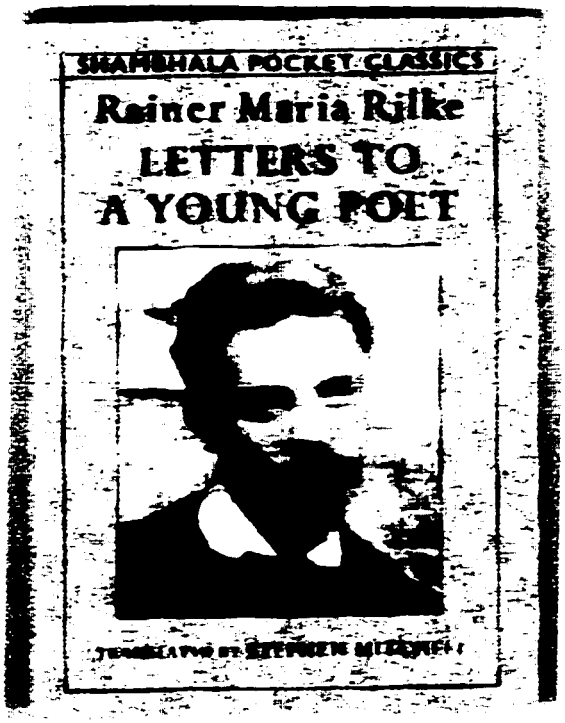

Figure 7. Cover of book used for ***Reading Rilke.***

The story of Rilke, Kappus and *Letters To A Young Poet* tells about artists as mentors in aesthetic experience and the importance of dialogue in understanding through art.

The Work

I am not a Rilke scholar. I have read very little of Rilke's work. Rilke came to my attention in the book by Chaim Potok, *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990). There I found a quotation citing Rilke as the author:

> *Surely all art is the result of having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further.*

In the MFA seminar led by Arthur Nishimura, I shared this quotation. I had no idea who Rilke was. I only knew that the quotation seemed to have wisdom and it seemed to bring

understanding to our discussion that day. Arthur asked me if I had ever read *Letters To A Young Poet.* When I replied that I had not, he hunted down his copy of the book and lent it to me. I read the little book several times, attending to each letter in awe.

The students and artists involved in *Reading Rilke* gathered one November evening in 1996 at Arthur's home for a "get-acquainted" potluck. Arthur and I invited Roman Struck to share his experience of the poet's work. Roman is professor emeritus at The University of Calgary and a reader of Rilke for at least forty years. That night, Roman shared four of Rilke's "Thing" poems with us. He described how Rilke had married a sculptor and had become intrigued by the creative process of the plastic arts. According to Roman, Rilke later secured a job with the sculptor, Auguste Rodin as Rodin's personal secretary to follow an "apprenticeship" with him (unbeknownst to Rodin!). By observing his unwitting mentor, Rilke learned how lived experience and understanding are rendered visible to others in concrete, three-dimensional form.

Already an acclaimed poet, Rilke transformed his romantic poetry of love and loss into exquisite lines that render experience and understanding recognizable to the reader. With his "Thing" poems, Rilke achieved with words what Rodin achieved with sculpture.

> *We cannot know his legendary head*
> *with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso*
> *is still suffused with brilliance from inside,*
> *like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,*
> *gleams in all its power. Otherwise,*
> *the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could*
> *a smile run through the placid hips and thighs*
> *to that dark center where procreation flared.*
> *Otherwise this stone would seem defaced*
> *beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders*
> *and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:*
> *would not, from all the borders of itself,*
> *burst like a star: for here there is no place*

that does not see you. You must change your life.
Archaic Torso of Apollo, Rilke (1982, trans.)

Rilke's poems have a conversational tone to them. It is as if he is talking to the reader about the object. It is as if he is guiding our vision, helping us to attend to the object. He is mentoring us. It is as if he is saying, "Look here; carefully, carefully. Yes, there; that's the way!" Through his words, he is inviting us to discover the objects for ourselves. Wunsch (1994) described the important role mentors have to guide and initiate novices into the language of an institution. Rilke's "Thing" poems reveal how an artist, through a work of art, can guide viewers. The artist directs our attention to qualities she perceives to be significant in an experience. In this way, aesthetic experience teaches us to be attentive to occurrences in our daily lives. Dewey (1934/1964) believed strongly in the value of aesthetic experience as a model for learning. He understood that learning through making and viewing works of art prepared students for learning in life.

"Attitudes of care" is how Noddings (1984) might describe Dewey's articulation of attentiveness, and Wunsch's description of mentorship. An artist can be "one-caring" when she creates a work of art that directs the viewer's attention, that guides or initiates the viewer in an experience or idea. The viewer can be the "cared-for" when she receives guidance and support. Rilke's work reveals that there is an important element of care in conversation.

Rilke brought to his relationship with Franz Xavier Kappus his ability to communicate experience. It is his understanding of the importance of mentors[16] that gave Rilke the incentive to respond to Kappus with respect and honesty. In his "Thing" poems, and in his correspondence, Rilke models a dialogical attitude toward understanding. His writing

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[16] According to Roman, Rilke corresponded with and mentored other young aspiring poets as well. He seems to have taken very seriously the responsibility he considered as part of being a mature poet.

models aesthetic experience as *erfahrung*. In both his poems and his letters, Rilke does not simply convey his understanding. Instead, he talks with the reader about something: either sculpture or being a poet. Rilke engages in what Gadamer would have called "tertiary understanding"; an understanding born of conversation.

Understandings

It was the qualities of dialogue and mentorship exhibited in *Letters To A Young Poet* that intrigued me as an educator. It was these qualities that became the recursive themes for *Reading Rilke*. Arthur acted as a mentor to me, and we talked about how we might use *Letters To A Young Poet* to understand artmaking. The students, artists and I talked about developing the project. The students and I took guidance from one another and the artists as we developed our responses to the book. The exhibition encouraged visitors to engage in dialogue with both the works and each other. I spent time talking with the artists and visitors about their experiences with the project. I engaged in a dialogical relationship with the projects' documents as I tried to understand something about aesthetic experience. The story of Rilke, Kappus and *Letters To A Young Poet* teaches us about dialogue and mentorship. It teaches us that these principles can help us understand aesthetically.

Arthur Nishimura

Arthur's story tells us about the responsibilities of taking part in a conversation. Through Arthur's experience we see that we can actively involve both artists and viewers in "living among." We come to understand that "to be moved" takes effort for everyone involved.

My Conversation With Arthur

After *Reading Rilke* ended, Arthur and I spent time discussing our experiences. Arthur revealed that he felt strongly that he was a "facilitator" for the project:

> *I felt like my involvement really started to taper off...I think I functioned as a facilitator rather than an organizer . I think the vision of this thing was something we collaborated on and the execution of it we collaborated on to a certain point. But as it evolved from there...my involvement...shifted into the background. And that was fine...[T]hat was my interest in it, was to help you get it off the ground. That you involved me was flattering.*

Through this statement, I perceive that Arthur cast himself in the role of mentor. Certainly, the way in which he described his involvement as being quite active initially and then falling off to a more supportive role echoes Wunsch's (1994) description of effective mentoring. Indeed, while I perceived a more active collaborative relationship between us, I was also conscious of Arthur's support and encouragement; of his mentorship throughout the project. A more experienced academic, artist and teacher, Arthur knew how to get a project like this completed, and he led me through that process.

Arthur did not limit his mentorship role to me. He said that the implications the project might have for graduate students intrigued him. He explained, "I was excited to see

how it would evolve involving the graduate students. How many of them participated and so on." Our conversation that day focused on the effect that the project had on the work of the graduate students; on their conception of themselves as artists, and on their relationships with the established artists who participated. Arthur felt genuinely pleased that some students who participated in *Reading Rilke* seemed to gain a deeper understanding of their work and of themselves as artists.

> *...it seemed to give them a focal point...the freedom to explore things that they were not necessarily comfortable with in the direction their work had taken...[I]t gave them this permission to maybe do something that they wouldn't normally have done or explored something they wouldn't have done. And then...they brought it back into their work...*

He felt that it was "very good" that some of the students had maintained contact with some of the established artists a year after the end of the project. Arthur saw the possibility of further involvement of established artists with the graduate program. Presently, the University of Calgary has a "Visiting Artist" program. The Art Department invites professional, working artists to give talks to art students: both graduate and undergraduate. Following the talk the visiting artist makes studio visits which allow students a more personal encounter with him or her. The artists are only at The University for one day, however, which limits the potential for mentorship. Arthur envisioned an expanded role for visiting artists whereby a mentorship component would act as "a kind of reassurance" for students.

> *When we look at the letters [Rilke's "Letters [to a young poet]", that's what Rilke was constantly doing. He was sort of reassuring him [Kappus] and saying, "Yes, this is so, but carry on, and commit yourself, go where your heart goes."...And in a way, I guess that's what happens in a graduate program. There's a kind of a support system that's intrinsic. But it's a different kind of support system from the sort of circumstance or situation that we created in the exhibition. Where we tried to develop dialogue and a*

sense of, for the time we had, a community of artists.

Arthur was primarily concerned that the graduate students and I would grow professionally as a result of our involvement with the project. In a sense he mentored us all. Through Arthur's words, we can perceive the attitude of care Noddings described. Arthur lent his motivational energy to the project. His attentiveness to the participants and his on-going commitment to future graduate students is apparent.

Arthur's story reveals that exhibition projects initiated in a spirit of caring can provide a rich learning environment for artmakers. He mused during our discussion "wonder[ing] how something so specific would operate as a...way of drawing things together." Arthur said that his involvement in many group shows consisted of simply contributing a work of art. Often he had completed this work before the curator made the request. He simply packed up the work and sent it to the museum. Often, Arthur did not even visit the museum during the show. When the exhibition was over, the curator sent the work back to him. Arthur explained that bringing together a group of people to collaborate on the theme and design of the exhibition, and then creating the works, was something new to him. I suggest that the usual relationship of artists toward group shows is "binary" (in Gadamer's sense). A curator understands something by examining a group of works, or represents an understanding through a group of works. With *Reading Rilke,* we used a "tertiary" or dialogic approach to exhibition design. Curators, artists and viewers came to understand something about exhibiting, artmaking and aesthetic experience by co-creating a work of art. The binary approach is like a lecture; the tertiary approach a conversation.

Arthur remarked that he felt this kind of collaboration might be more common in

artist-run-centres[17] where the actual operation of the institution requires the cooperation of the member artists.

> *I guess in a way the artist-run galleries have attended to that somewhat. But I don't think it is formalized in any way to the point where it becomes a kind of signature way. It happens kind of incidentally because they're artist-run galleries and they [the artists] have meetings together, and that probably leads to other kinds of interactions outside of the political, administrative.*

Arthur discovered, unexpectedly, that the established artists maintained their committment to the project. Perhaps, Arthur mused during our conversation,

> *If it had been a longer project, if we had invited a lot more people and allowed a natural distillation effect to occur, then someone like [Sam] would not have taken part in it. He might have said, "I tried to get some things out of it, but I can't connect with this."... I wonder what that would have been like, if we had given people more time to truly think about it?*

Perhaps artists would have decided that they did not want to participate through a tertiary approach. Like Sam, perhaps not all artists want this kind of relationship, or feel comfortable with it. The six month working period that the participants had prior to the exhibition required that each of them make an immediate commitment to the project. In the end, Arthur concluded,

> *...that's a role [a museum can take on through this approach to an exhibition]. That has as much to do with a kind of mentoring and support system one wouldn't normally have.*

At this point, Arthur and I began to consider how an art museum might function to support artists and viewers. We asked ourselves, "What does a museum need to do to assume a mentorship role?" Our first realization was that there needs to be true collaboration

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[17] An "artist-run-centre" is an art gallery that is run by a board of member artists. They may sometimes have paid employees to carry out the day to day administrative tasks, but the exhibition schedule, fundraising, policy making, etc. are carried out by the artists.

between the museum staff, the artists and the viewers. I wondered if perhaps we needed to involve people in making decisions as much as possible. Arthur suggested that during the design and implementation of an exhibition, "the curator, the education coordinator...those mediating positions [between the artist and the viewer]...would take a more active role." This "active role" describes a tertiary way of understanding. It also describes the museum staff as the "one-caring." The museum staff who mentor would act on the artists' and viewers' behalf. They would acknowledge the importance of the artists' and viewers' reality. Finally, staff would provide a consistent, unfailing level of commitment to the artists and viewers involved in a project.

Further, Arthur suggested that viewers need to take more ownership for their experience in an art museum. "If they plead ignorance, it's in their hands...We could have [supplied video-tapes and didactic panels about Rilke, titled the exhibition in a more didactic fashion]...I don't think it would have made any difference."

> *I think this is going to be terribly simplistic about that whole notion of that kind of passivity that overtakes one when one puts oneself into a situation where there's an expectation to be massaged and so on. I suspect [viewers]...expected to be just as passive as when they view most art exhibitions, just to be moved with very little effort on their part.*

Noddings' description of the responsibility of the "cared-for" supports Arthur's belief. She explained how the cared-for needs to communicate with the one-caring. Without a response, the one-caring can not build motivational energy and will become unable to extend their engrossment. Their caring becomes superficial. The art museum can not continually care for the viewer without response. The art museum will exhaust its resources. Rather, when viewers participate in the dialogue, when they accept responsibility, they can expect the art

museum to care for them.

As an artist and an art instructor, Arthur has been pondering this issue of engagement with the work of art. Arthur noted that artworks do not only function "in the classical modernist sense to transfix form." Like Rilke (as expressed above in the Apollo poem), Arthur believed that a work of art calls the viewer to action. "One is left with the memory of that experience. What do you do with the memory of that experience?" Arthur hypothesized that one cannot plunk a viewer down before a work and demand that she spend a prescribed amount of time before it, experiencing it. He has noticed that there is something about people who are able to enter into the world of the artwork. He asked, "How did they get to that point?" Arthur returned to the importance of mentorship in learning how to engage in this kind of living, *erfahrung*, experience.

> *It takes someone, it takes just that kind of education. Just like it takes the education of someone going through a text. It takes the leadership of someone who can say, "Look at this text, look at how rich it can be. Look at how it connects with what you know. Look at how it implies things way over here." It takes that kind of guidance, that kind of careful education.*

Arthur's words echo Rilke's in *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, and his attitude toward Kappus in *Letters To A Young Poet*. In caring for the viewer, the art museum can act as mentor, guiding and supporting viewers as they learn how to learn through aesthetic experience.

Understandings

What I attend to in my conversation with Arthur is the importance of a collaborating community and of leadership in a "careful education" of both artists and viewers. Through their exhibition programs art museums give both artists and viewers opportunities to learn. Artists learn through the creation of the work of art; viewers through their visual experience of that work. It is important that art museums attend to collaboration and careful education of artists and viewers when considering their role in learning through aesthetic experience. Arthur's story reminds us that artists, museum staff and visitors "live among" or are part of the conversation when they actively participate. We can not say we are left out if we do not accept the opportunity to participate.

Martha, *Companion*, 1997

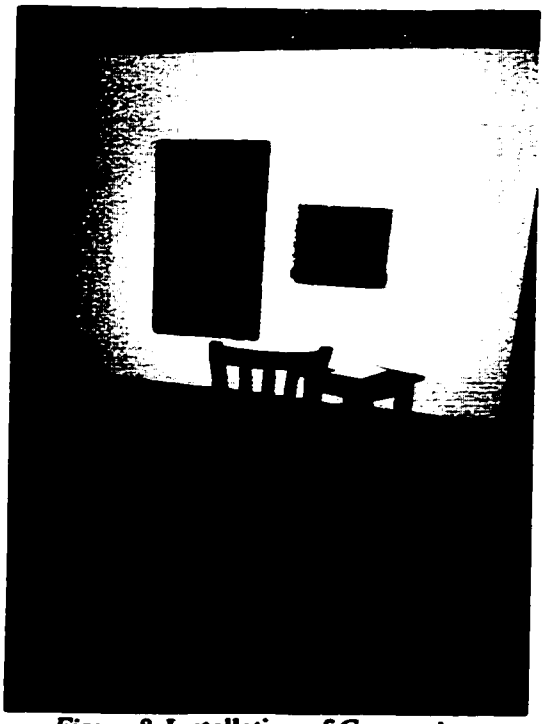

Figure 8. Installation of *Companion.*

Companion provided participants with a place to sit and talk with Martha (through her work) and with each other. Martha's piece and her experience reveal the importance of an inclusive attitude and of a presence attentive to aesthetic experience.

Martha's Journal

Martha's journal is a fuchsia, hard covered, lined notebook. Martha's first entry is dated January 7, 1997, after she started work on her piece. Immediately, she initiates contact with her reader: "You and I are creating a dialogue." Martha's first page sets out her interpretation of the dialogical function of the journals.

> *By your reading of this journal and viewing my painting, you and I are talking to each other.*

This first page also makes clear her understanding of her relationship with the reader/viewer. Martha saw parallels between Rilke's and Kappus's correspondence and the exchange she hoped to have with viewers of her piece. However, Martha felt strongly that she was in no way entitled to a special status in this relationship:

> *Let's make it clear from the beginning, however, that I do not hold the position of mentor to you. We are two people talking to each other, sharing ideas, interested in what the other has to say.*

Throughout the fifteen pages of Martha's journal, she poses questions to the reader. Martha asks us our opinions, or asks us to situate ourselves within a specific context. In fact, her last words in the journal are questions that echo Rilke's last words in "Archaic Torso of Apollo". They ask us to consider our values and the changes we might want to make in our lives. Martha's journal engaged readers in "connected knowing" (Belenky et al, 1997).[18]

These entries are extremely honest, without being uncomfortably personal. Martha does not describe the details of her life. It is enough for us to know the shape and structure of her experience, without being distracted by the intimate details of her experiences. This attention to "experience" resonates with Dewey's identification of the importance of significant experience. Dewey (1938) asked us to be attentive to our experiences, to come to understand their shape and structure, their history and the potential they hold for future action. Experiences, unattended to, become superficial markers without much value. Martha attends to her experience of "sadness". She does not simply describe a sad event in her life.

In her second entry, dated January 13, Martha wrote that Rilke's letter of August 12,

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[18] Belenky et al (1997) make a distinction between knowing that is relationship centred ("connected") and knowing that is characterized by maintaining an objective distance ("separate"). They borrow these terms from Gilligan (1982) and Lyons (1983) who use them to describe two different ways of understanding the self: as autonomous (separate from others); or in relationship (connected to others).

1904, was, for her, the most significant letter. In it, Rilke describes sadness, fate and solitude. She then reveals that she has experienced a time of "profound, transitory sadness" in her life:

> *...a time in my life when I allowed the sadness to overcome me, and by so doing, moved into my future.*

The rest of her entries in the journal are a meditation on this experience. Martha examined more of Rilke's words on sadness and contemplated how they might be relevant to her, to all of us, today. She wrote:

> *What Rilke is saying and what I've experienced is: if you let all of your joys and sadnesses become a part of you and overwhelm you, your life will become richer and you can move on to the next experience...Take time to reflect on your life experiences for they will teach you, and help you to live richly and well.*

Martha took risks in revealing herself. Her journal recounts to the reader the origins of text in her piece.

> *The text inscribed on this piece is from an entry in my personal journal...I never meant to let anyone see these words...the words I wrote come honestly from a deeply felt experience...If you're interested in reading the journal entry, I've written it on the last page of this book*

Noddings (1984) articulated the vulnerability that accompanies caring. When we share ourselves with others, we are at risk. There is no way to truly care without sharing. However, as we know from participating in conversation, if we are present, if we take the risk and share ourselves with another, the rewards of that *commun*ication are well worth the risks. Martha was sincere in her conversation with readers. They responded to this sincerity with honesty, taking risks themselves. One viewer wrote:

> *I was also sad from 1992-95...Those three years lasted my whole life. Now I have another, better life...*

In an earlier entry, Martha explained her understanding of Rilke's attitude toward Kappus:

> *...I sensed that Rilke saw himself as simply a person living his life, finding answers along the way but discovering more questions left unanswered...if you dig far enough underneath our 1990's sophistication...you will find that we are all human beings looking for answers by asking each other questions. The important question is, are we listening to each other?*

Readers seemed to feel that Martha *was* listening.

Martha made her final entry in the journal the day she installed her piece in the exhibition. She relates that she sat in the chair and reflected on her work after she finished. As Martha sat on the chair reflecting, she wrote these words:

> *All my ideas this past year and a half originate from my time of sadness -- probably because of what I learned about myself, my loved ones, and my thoughts for the future while I experienced a great change in my life...Sit here for a while. Think about your life. What is it that you value and what would you change? Are you living as richly as you would wish?*

The Viewers' Responses

Martha wrote only on every right hand page. She reserved the left hand page for readers/viewers responses. It appears that Martha's forthright, direct style and her pointed questions initiated dialogue. She created an "attentive space." Noddings described this as a necessary element of caring and *Vier Dinge (Four Things)* revealed the insight that attentive space is an important element in aesthetic experience. Readers used many of these left hand pages to relate their experiences of sadness and growth. Martha *talked* with the readers. Viewers who responded to her piece tended to share their experiences or understandings of "sadness" with her. They spoke from the heart. Viewers recounted the details of their experiences no more than did Martha. Instead they shared their

understandings with sincerity and thoughtfulness.

> *I have experienced this sadness. It overwhelms, almost drowns but it digs the soul a little deeper -- perhaps a time of growth. Growing pains!*
>
> *I was also sad from 1992-95 and I felt like I was slowly running out of gas until my life halted, or crept on in minuscule little increments, so that a day was eternity and a week was more than I could bear. Those three years lasted my whole life. Now I have another, better life and I am determined not to let this one run out of gas. I won't let it happen again. I won't go back there.*
>
> *...This sadness, I hope, will never leave me for as long as I live, so that it will accomplish its intended purposes in me; to first cause me to care enough to be saddened, then to will me to do what is right.*

Other viewers responded to Martha's ideas about listening and talking. Still others, responded to her ideas about change. Last, viewers reacted to the physical elements of the work. Rather than sharing experiences, these viewers discussed ideas with Martha.

> *Are we listening to each other? ...I don't know the answer but I suspect the answer to be no. We stare at each other. Stare and stare, not brave enough to speak the truth, only have hatred behind our eyes. It makes me very sad.*
>
> *...Isn't it always how it [life] moves & changes & grows that's exciting?*
>
> *And now for a pause my thoughts are blank...but they are not empty!*
>
> *...I also have enjoyed sitting in this chair and reflecting upon my thoughts, your thoughts and your response visually to Rilke's letters.*

Finally, viewers expressed, with eloquence, appreciation for Martha's generosity of

spirit:

> *I like the questions. They take me places I hadn't considered going.*
>
> *I am hesitant to respond in this journal because I have never read nor heard of "Letters to a Young Poet." I thoroughly enjoyed sitting in this chair, reading your thoughts and reflecting on the words and my thoughts. I am now anxious to read Rilke.*
>
> *The text from your personal journal was beautiful...Thanks for sharing.*
>
> *Beautiful. Sweet sadness. Soothing. Healing. Loving. Thank you.*

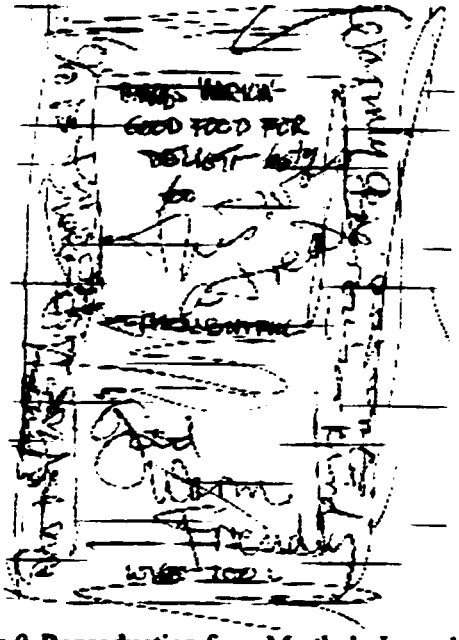

Figure 9. Reproduction from Martha's Journal.

When viewers read *Companion* they seemed to feel included; they became involved in the conversation. They took responsibility for being "cared-for" and responded with honesty and sincerity.

Understandings

Martha's journal reassured viewers that she would provide the kind of caring, inclusive environment described by Noddings (1984). She conveyed her desire to act on the readers' behalf. She assured readers that their reality was important. Finally, she extended a consistent, unfailing level of commitment to the readers of her journal. From her first declarative words to her final rhetorical questions, Martha sat with the reader of her journal. She talked with the reader. She honored her experiences and invited readers to honor theirs. Martha shared her experiences and invited viewers to share theirs. I cannot think of a more compelling articulation of aesthetic experience: the honoring and sharing of experience.

Paul, Rumination, 1997

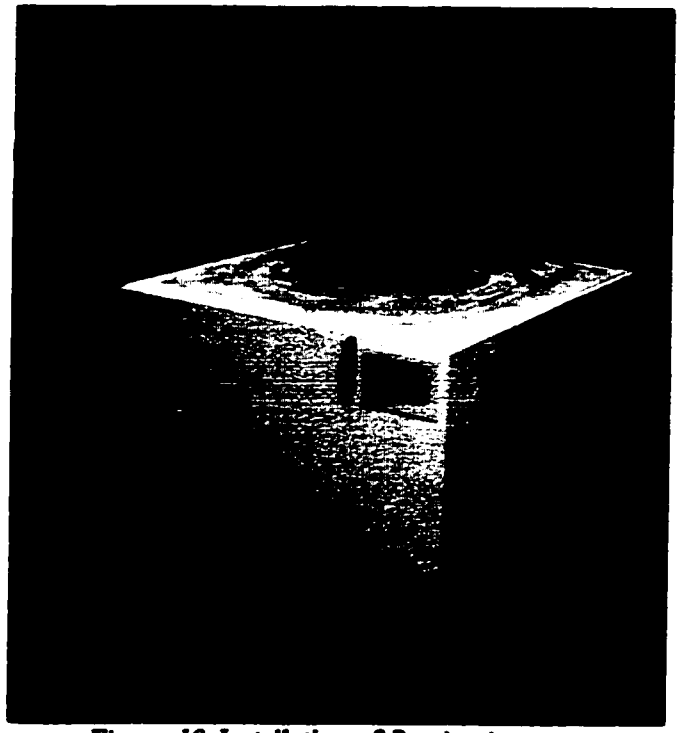

Figure 10. Installation of *Rumination.*

Rumination created an opportunity for Paul and for viewers to explore the nature of "living among." The story of *Rumination* brings us into a world of care as described by Noddings (1984). This world cherishes our participation and encourages us to share our experiences. We nurture each other. *Rumination* shows us that the subjectivity of aesthetic experience is not selfish or self-centred, but generous and responsive. It reveals how aesthetic experience can provide a "connected" experience (as defined by Belenky et al above). It reveals that a community in conversation about art can be inclusive.

The Work

Rumination used metaphors of soil, cultivation, wax and correspondence. Paul presented a humble bucket on a low, square, white pedestal. It had a strong wire handle with

a wooden grip; a bucket one might find on a farm, rather than a tool for urban life. It was the sort of bucket used for gathering vegetables, or one that might carry water from a spring. It might have received milk from a cow. Paul ringed the bucket with a thin sprinkling of soil.

The bucket held wax and messages contained in small manila envelopes. Wax comes from bees. It builds the walls of their comb. It contains their offspring and the food for their young. We use wax to preserve the food we harvest. We use wax for candles which once provided light but now provide atmosphere. At one time, we read letters by candlelight; the light provided by wax. We used to use wax to seal letters, to preserve privacy.

We write letters to communicate with each other over a distance. They allow us to share ourselves, to maintain a relationship even when we are not physically present with one another. Letters are also documents of relationship. We write them and sign them to make an agreement concrete, legal, indisputable. Often we write letters because it is easier to relate our true feelings when we are not present. Letters often contain very strong emotions. Letters can cultivate and nurture a relationship.

The bucket brings food from the soil. The wax protects new life and preserves the food that will nurture it. Letters can create relationships, protect and preserve, whether written or exchanged in person. Our correspondence with one another is a source of life, as Rilke's was with Kappus. Our relationships with one another can bring forth life. Like the simple bucket, the soil and the wax, our relationships can preserve and nurture life.

Rumination explores the ways that we can nurture and preserve our conversations, our "living among". It evokes images of caring-for: feeding, protecting and sharing experience. *Rumination* creates visual metaphors for Noddings' understanding of care: sharing

motivational energy; creating an attentive space; sustaining engrossment. *Rumination* reminds us that to "live among" is to care.

Paul's Journal

Paul's journal was a small, wooden box covered with wax. Paul placed it inside a pail filled with wax. Around the box, inside the pail, and around the pail on the pedestal of the piece, Paul placed small manila envelopes. The envelopes were about 2" X 3" in size. They were goldenrod in colour, with a black leaf stamped on the front. Inside each envelope was a small blank card on which viewers could write. Paul himself wrote on these cards.

From the outside, Paul's envelopes are indistinguishable from the envelopes of the viewers. In order to find Paul's cards, I opened all the envelopes. As I opened each envelope, I anticipated a new experience. The envelopes carried with them the thrill of receiving a letter. When I receive a letter, I immediately look to see who it is from. I often open a letter as soon as I receive it; I find it hard to wait. That day, I opened thirty-four envelopes to discover two cards from Paul.

Paul wrote both these cards after we installed the exhibition at The Nickle Arts Museum. He wrote both cards as letters to "Mr. Rilke." These cards attend to the need for quiet and solitude. In the first, Paul believes he must travel, leave his home, his community, and go far away to find solitude:

> *...soon I will be basking in the solitude that only travel can offer and I will soon be able to , as you say, "walk inside myself and meet no one for hours."*

The second card, written twenty days after the first, offers the reader a different understanding of solitude:

> *...I realize I do not need to travel great distances to journey very far away...Thank you Mr. Rilke for making me realize the value of my solitude and the journey of self which such solitude affords.*

I perceive from this statement that Paul came to believe that solitude is not about separating ourselves from our communities. For Paul, solitude means living in an attentive space. This space is akin to that described by Catherine. This attentive space can occur at home, in our communities. We "do not need to travel great distances to journey" in an attentive space. Aesthetic experience can be the catalyst for creating this space.

The understanding that happens, in Rilke's words, within the vast inner solitude wherein we walk with ourselves, is an aesthetic experience. A text, either written or visual, is a catalyst for understanding. The text sets one off on a walk with oneself. The experience of writing, building, reading and looking is where understanding occurs. Paul's cards remind us that the art object does not contain aesthetic experience. The cards remind us that we find it in our experience of these things.

Paul's cards also remind us that these walks we take with ourselves may take days, weeks, possibly months or years. Paul tried to understand Rilke's words for many months, from fall through spring. The new leaf, stamped in black on the golden envelopes is a reminder of the time it takes to live a life, to understand. Noddings insisted on the importance of commitment to the process necessary for one-caring. We do not hurry in caring relationships. The one-caring is patient and allows the cared-for to have the time she needs.

Paul continued the journey of understanding by writing his notes while viewers wrote theirs. He initiated the journey when he created his piece. By not documenting *that* journey, but by documenting his journey *beyond* the piece, Paul participated with the text in a way

similar to a visitor to the gallery. He modeled the activity necessary for an attentive relationship with viewers. In this way, Paul also acted as a mentor in aesthetic experience to viewers. Paul demonstrated that an artist's aesthetic experience does not end when he completes the piece. By extension, we can assume that Paul would like the viewer's aesthetic experience to continue after she leaves the gallery. By allowing our conversations with a work to continue beyond our physical, sensual interaction with it, we continue to "live among." The work of art becomes part of our worlds as we were a part of its world.

The box in which Paul asked viewers to place their envelopes, along with his own, was worn and old. However, Paul covered it with wax. He used the wax to seal, to preserve. He used it to keep things safe and unharmed. Paul and the viewers placed the envelopes containing their understandings in the box where they were safe and cherished. Paul's box reminds us to cherish these understandings, these aesthetic experiences. They need to be safe, preserved. Again, I am aware of the commitment to the conversation that we need to make if we wish to continue to live among. We need to consider the aesthetic experience as a consistent, unfailing level of commitment like the caring relationships described by Noddings (1984). Paul suggests that the artist's commitment continues after he completes the piece. I suggest that the viewer's commitment to the conversation continues after leaving the gallery. In this way, we preserve the conversation, the understanding.

My Conversation With Paul

Although two male artists were to join our group, only one male student accepted our invitation to join the *Reading Rilke* project. Paul was in his early thirties when he began the

MFA program.[19] Paul is from rural Alberta and worked in the agricultural industry for many years. Paul's work in the studio explored the myths and mystique surrounding agricultural life and environmental concerns. Generosity and selflessness were important qualities for Paul. He perceived these qualities in Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet.* Paul felt drawn to the work because of this perception.

> *I think overall the thing that affected me the most reading Rilke's Letters To A Young Poet was that it was a very hopeful and humanistic example of one person having no perceived investment or opportunity to benefit from that other person, but it was just a very selfless act to give to another person. And he really gave, I thought. And I thought in a day where that's not happening a lot...that was pretty unique.*

Reading Rilke was interesting to Paul because it built on this spirit of generosity.

> *...the whole process of the exhibition was a very sort of, giving and selfless act. Which really spoke of the traditions of the book itself, Letters To A Young Poet...Just the way...you set it up. You know, creating a really supportive environment, echoed those concentric circles you talked about.*

Paul's words echo Noddings' about the nature of caring. In a caring relationship, the one-caring commits herself to the reality of the cared-for. When we care, we lend our motivational energy to the cared-for. According to Noddings, care does not focus on ourselves (when it does we are not truly caring) but on the other. Thus, we can characterize care as generosity.

Further, in the midst of stressful graduate school life, Paul found *Reading Rilke* to be " ...a kind of little island I could escape to, a little piece of sanity. I think it was the act, above

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[19] Based on their data Belenky et al (1997) postulate that what they have characterized as "women's ways of knowing" might apply to some men as well. They suggest research needs to address this possibility. The experiences of Sam, Paul and Daniel in this project would also suggest that studies be pursued to explore how men experience knowing that is "connected." Gilligan (1987) discovered that about one third of men adopt a caring morality.

all that stays with me the most." The project was a place apart from Paul's regular graduate school responsibility and experiences. Other graduate students shared this attitude. They seemed to need to remove themselves from the requirements of their program. For each student, *Reading Rilke* became an opportunity for disorientation. As Paul described, "it's always good to disorient yourself, place yourself in places you didn't expect to be. Because often you'll learn the most intriguing little bits about yourself or somebody else."

I suggest that the students' experiences of growing through their separation from the graduate program speaks of the need for "attentive spaces." When we disorient ourselves we are not sure where we are. We ask ourselves where we are, where we are going. We engage in an active examination of our environment to find our place again. We are no longer able to walk through our situation blindly. We must pay attention. Disoriented, we exist in an attentive space. Disoriented, we are in conversation with our world. Through attentive dialogue, we find our way again. We know that novices need formally structured experiences to support their learning (Belenky et al, 1997; Wunsch, 1994). Paul's experience with *Reading Rilke* suggests that perhaps novice museum visitors also need attentive spaces in which they can learn to find their ways.

I believe Paul's interest and concern for others manifested itself in his interest in the artist's relationship with the viewer. Paul had explored different ways of providing viewers with active involvement in his three-dimensional art work. He also worked for a small museum, developing interpretive programs for some of the museum's art exhibitions. Like the delicate plants he nurtured to life on his organic farm, Paul provided fertile soil for viewers to enter into and experience his work. Thus, *Reading Rilke*'s attempt to actively

involve viewers in the discussion about making art intrigued Paul.

> *I really liked the participatory aspect of it as well.. I would have enjoyed a really nice critique if someone thought the piece was just not there...[It] doesn't have to be in academic ...language, you know and be able to articulate the artspeak, but that said, you know, "I thought this piece wasn't thought out well," or "you missed the mark..."*

Like Martha, Paul wanted viewers to be thoughtful and curious and to spend some time with the piece. He was very appreciative of the considered comments he received from viewers. Paul believed that it is desirable for artists and viewers to engage in dialogue about the work. This notion is consistent with Gadamer's definition of tertiary understanding, and with Belenky et al's observation of the nature of connected knowing.

Paul the farmer summarized his experience with *Reading Rilke* as one of enrichment, of personal cultivation:

> *I'm not sure it's had an impact. It's definitely added to the diversity that I call [Paul]. It's just given me a bit more to work with as a human being.*

Understandings

Gadamer once described "education" as supporting a person in their coming-into-being. Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger and Tarule (1985) describe the teacher as a midwife helping students to give birth to "their own ideas, in making their tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it." (p.41). Paul seems to be suggesting a similar kind of experience with *Reading Rilke*. His statement is an eloquent articulation of my hope that *Reading Rilke* gave students, artists and viewers "a bit more to work with".

Ingrid, Address *To You*, 1997

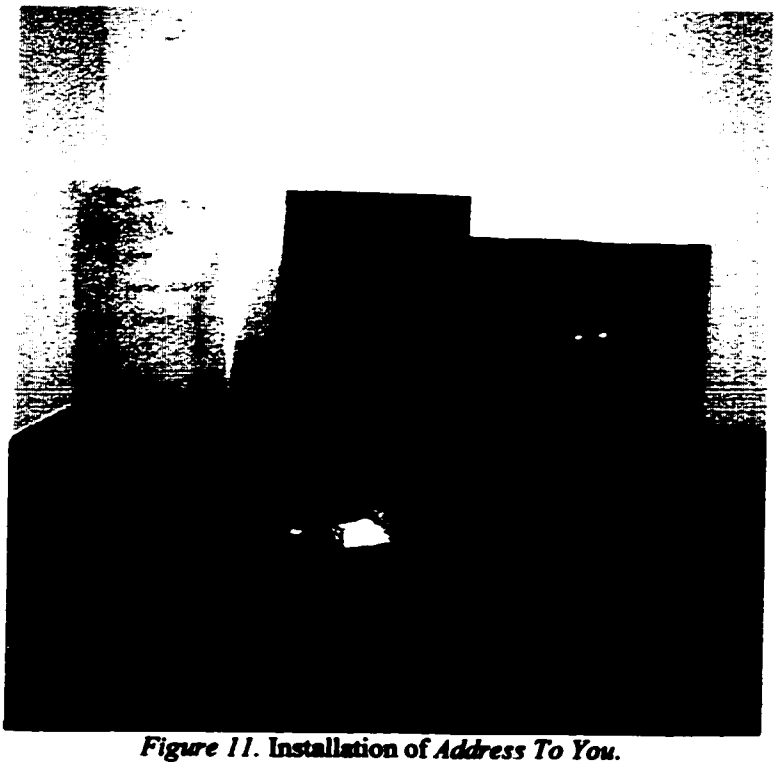

Figure 11. Installation of *Address To You.*

Noddings (1984) reminded us that to care is to be vulnerable. It can be difficult for an artist to expose herself to viewers through aesthetic experience. *Address To You* explores the vulnerability and risk involved in aesthetic experience.

The Work

Ingrid's piece sat quietly in a back corner of the gallery. Light played gently off its smoky, translucent surfaces and was reflected onto the walls. I sat on the floor with *Address To You* because Ingrid placed it there with the boxes she used as her journal. Once seated on the floor, with my back to the rest of the gallery, I entered the quiet, contemplative space created by the piece. I did not feel rushed while sitting in this space. I took time to enjoy the play of surfaces as words moved in and out of each other. I occupied the "attentive space"

that is necessary to aesthetic experience.

> *I address this to You,*
> *Love,*
> *I move across the surface in....*
>
> *...tranquil.....*
> *...ice melts melts...*
> *...in a slow-moving*
> *River to You.*
> (Text printed on to glass panels of *Address To You.*)

Ingrid did not indicate where this text originated. Perhaps the words were hers. Perhaps they were Rilke's. Perhaps they were from some other source. Visually and semantically, the words described an opening of one person to another. The panels articulated the way that we allow others to witness the fragile, interconnected web of feelings and experiences that are a part of being in relationship. Like Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet*, Ingrid wrote the words of *Address To You* for the viewer who sat before them, even though she may have penned the words originally for another.

There was a truth in *Address To You* about sincere, generous sharing of oneself with another. Ingrid used glass, a substance that can easily break, and easily hurt another once broken. It leaned against the wall without support. The words, silk-screened onto the translucent surfaces, wove in and out of each other. They created a visual representation of the web of words that exists between people in relationship; the same web Martha explored in *Conversation*. The words described feelings and experiences shared. Ingrid placed the words on fragile glass, layer upon layer. Thus we build our lives; fragile layer of experience upon fragile layer. Thus we also build relationships. When we try to share our lives with another, as Rilke tried with Kappus, we reveal their delicate structure. In revealing it, we become

vulnerable to hurt. If we compromise the structure, it can break, or it can hurt another. There is a lot at stake when we addresses ourselves to another.

Yet, *Address To You* was a reminder that, built upon sincere sharing of ourselves, these relationships can be strong. The glass panels are heavy, they are solid and do not fall. The two boxes sat quietly next to each other on the floor. We read and we wrote, reaching out to one another, revealing ourselves to one another. *Address To You* was a reminder that relationship, like the "slow moving river," is a powerful force. *Address To You* was a reminder that aesthetic experience, the relationship between artist and work, between work and viewer, can be a powerful force in learning. Despite the apparent precariousness and risk, we do address ourselves to one another. We address others through "Love." We enter into aesthetic experience and learn, despite the risk.

My Conversation With Ingrid

Ingrid was in her mid to late twenties when she entered the MFA program. Ingrid moved from her home, a large city in Ontario, to Calgary to pursue her studies. Ingrid was a visual artist and a poet whose work exhibited a keen insight and profound empathy for her fellow humans. Ingrid, although quietly observant, was always ready to discuss her work with her peers, undergraduate students, or friends. When I asked her why she decided to participate in *Reading Rilke*, she said that her recent move and her need to talk to people motivated her to join. She explained, "Just continuing that idea of getting to know people and their thoughts and use people as sort of a sounding board for your own ideas...that was exciting." Ingrid wanted to learn in that connected way described by Belenky and her

colleagues.

Ingrid also articulates in this statement a phenomenon documented by Martinez Aleman (1997). Martinez Aleman explored the importance of "talk" to women's learning, as opposed to formal, academic discussion. She encourages educational institutions to "prize women's academic partnerships, [understanding that women's friendships and talk are vehicles for learning and cognitive growth.]" Ingrid, and many other participating artists, articulated the need for friendship and to talk as important motivations in joining the project. I perceive this need to be at the root of Ingrid's desire to further explore the issues of correspondence that she had initiated in her undergraduate program:

> *...when you first mentioned this whole idea of the project, I thought of my final BFA show. And I had a piece that was actually centred around the idea of correspondence and a letter, in which I had actually used the fragment of a letter from somebody. And so that idea was already in my work. And so I thought maybe I can expand on it. Actually, the piece itself that I had in The Nickle was I see very much an extension of that one idea that I had a year previously...*

When she read the book, the parallels she perceived in her and Kappus's situations excited Ingrid. This acted as a further motivation for participating.

> *Rilke's ideas themselves too were very good for me. 'Cause ...I found myself in a similar position as the young poet, having come to a new place and I think that was his position as he was writing these letters to Rilke. So that point of departure was one that I could definitely be sympathetic with.*

Ingrid hoped that the clearly defined problem of *Reading Rilke* would provide her an opportunity to find a direction for her work in the master's program. She said, "Just for practical reasons it seemed like a good thing to get me started in my graduate program...[I]t was a wonderful excuse...really, to go into what I was interested in even more so. Even in

regards to the poetry." When Belenky et al talked to women about their experiences learning, they discovered that women in the early to middle stages of cognitive development need structure in which to explore their voices[20].The women in their study experienced "free-form" or "independent" learning situations as lacking in intellectual rigor. Caring structures, on the other hand, provided women with secure places to learn. These structures honored the women's latent knowledge and provided a framework they could use to further their understanding. Ingrid seemed to experience *Reading Rilke* as one such structure for her post-graduate learning.

Further, List's 1991 study of successful professional women artists confirmed Renzulli's concept that gifted learners require

> *opportunity to participate in self-directed independent or small group study which is usually shared with an audience. (p. 119)*

I suggest that *Reading Rilke* provided Ingrid, and her fellow students, with just such an opportunity. I also believe that the students' overall satisfaction with the project resulted, in part, from the fulfillment of this need. (See also Sarah, Martha, Selina and Marie.) Ingrid related this satisfaction to me:

> *I was really pleased with the piece. I couldn't believe that you know, every thing just seemed to click, including the space that I got for it. And even, I know this sounds crazy, but you know, if that carpet had been orange it would have looked terrible, but no it was this neutral beige that also reflected the colours in the glass, which was great. So, that was just lucky. Like I love when those things work when you're doing your installation.*

She believed that the project helped her to find the direction she needed:

> *...it made me reevaluate how I wanted to go forward in this program and my thesis work and it made me think, do I really want to do installation work? You know, there's a certain*

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[20] See also Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger and Tarule, 1985.

> *sadness to it, you know, when you have to throw the pieces out afterward or whatever. So I really started thinking about that. So as much as I like process based and situation based work, there's something that I miss. So in ways it made me turn to drawing again...*

Despite her need to talk to others, to use them as a "sounding board", Ingrid was hesitant about reaching out to others for mentorship. She did not feel grounded enough to expose herself to the opinions or suggestions of authorities. She explained:

> *I remember at that point there was talk of ...the artists in the community coming in, they were mentors. Somehow, I don't think I've talked too much to anybody ...I certainly didn't make opportunity outside of you know the few potlucks that we had to meet with any of them... I'm not sure if that was because I was frustrated with my own work in the studio that I didn't really pursue any of those sorts of things. When... you want to participate in some sort of mentorship, you should at least know what you're doing. And I think at that point in the program I didn't know what I was doing in my artwork. So I kept contact with professors and other sorts of mentors, ...to a minimum.*
> *Me: So...you needed to sort of be alone at that time and get a sense of where you were before you could reach out?*
> *I: Ya, exactly.*

It seems to me that Ingrid knew she needed support, but was not yet comfortable with the challenge of a mentorship relationship. Gilligan's (1977) and Belenky et al's (1997) work supports this interpretation. Gilligan discussed the vulnerability women feel when moving from one developmental stage to another. They experience a defensiveness, a need to protect themselves from criticism. Belenky et al's study revealed that while women are finding their voice they are protective of their own experiences, their words. At this stage of "subjective knowing" women will feel more comfortable relying on their experiences, tending not to seek out authority.

I believe her discomfort with criticism also left Ingrid with a certain ambivalence about the role of the viewer. At times the response she received excited her. At others, she felt hurt by perceived criticism from viewers:

> *There was some that were interesting responses. But one biting one in particular. I felt so terrible after reading it. But I suppose you always expose yourself to criticism, that's only natural. So, it sort of made me question, as I had been questioning already, to what extent do we open ourselves up or should you? And what's the value of that? And what's the difference between that and sentimentalizing? 'Cause I think there is a very fine line.*

When I questioned Ingrid about what she perceived the value of correspondence with the viewer to be, Ingrid conveyed a further ambivalence:

> *Oh, I don't know. I'm sort of questioning that too. In ways, it was really a good thing to do. But in other ways, I think -- Well, yah, I suppose sometimes a viewer needs a little more encouragement than the gallery, the book, the entries [something] but... I'm sort of split on that... I'm thinking you know if somebody's going to make a strong enough response anyway, they 'll make it... I think...people looking at artwork in general are hesitant about such things. Maybe because its such an extra step to actually start to articulate your feelings about a piece. And most people don't. They just get the impact, and stop it there.*

Ingrid seemed to be questioning how much the artist needs to reveal about herself and her process. She questioned how much the viewer wants to know, how that communication can occur, and what the function of that communication is. I believe Ingrid questioned the need for conversation because she herself was not quite ready to talk. She was not yet entirely certain if her experiences and understandings would be valued by others. The Belenky research team described this same experience in the women who participated in their study. They found that the confidence to use our voices in discussion with others comes through the

experience of connected knowing. The more we share our understanding with others, feeling valued and respected, the more comfortable we are with the understandings of another.

Understandings

Ingrid's experience with *Reading Rilke* reminds us of the importance of inclusivity and mutuality in learning through art. When artists and viewers experience relationships characterized by respect and openness to others, both are able to grow into confident learners. We see this in the letters Rilke wrote to Kappus. We see this in *Address To You*. It also reminds us that aesthetic experience can be risky. We can be hurt when we share our feelings and experiences with others. It takes courage to learn with others, in connection, in relationship.

Selina, *Air*, 1997

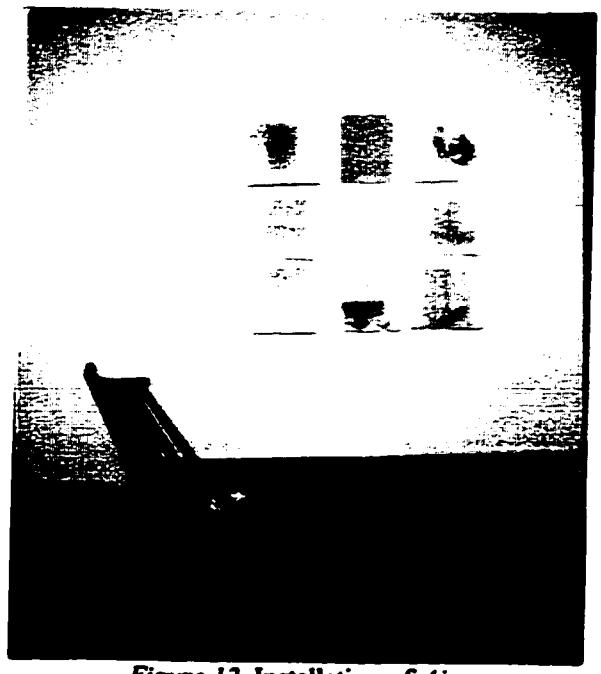

Figure 12. Installation of *Air*.

In the story of "Air" we learn the importance of honoring and cherishing the members of our community. "Air" reminds us that we affect each other in our relationships and that because of these connections, we must try not to take each other for granted.

Selina's Journal

When I introduced the notion of keeping journals to the participants of *Reading Rilke*, Selina remarked that she knew exactly which book she was going to use for the project. The book was a hard covered notebook with a gilded spine and frame around both front and back covers. A Renaissance-period celestial map floated among images of stars and angels embellishing both back and front covers. These images reminded me of the Renaissance notion of "Fate." Our place in the Great Chain of Being determines our lives; the movement

of the celestial bodies and our location in the universe (Tillyard, 1960-86). What happens to us in our lives is a matter of relationship. When I opened the cover of the book, I saw another version of the celestial map. This one inhabited by angels and putti, re-inforcing the theme on the book's cover.

Turning the page, I discovered a contour line drawing that extended over both pages. It pictured two hands reaching towards each other. Again, Selina explored the importance of a relationship. When people touch, they connect their lives together for even the briefest moment. In this connection there is the potential to affect another's life. In the following quote taken from her journal, I perceive the influence of one of the established artists on a student. Selina's contact with Catherine directly affected her process.

> *I was thinking about the location images, maybe I'll look up tourist brochures...Also [Catherine] uses tricks or riddles in her work, and I thought maybe I'd try to use something a little less literal.*

Selina was confident enough in her own voice to consider the authority of other voices. Selina is confident enough to allow the voice of another to guide her. She allows others to affect her.

Belenky et al (1997) observed this experience in women they described as "procedural knowers." Women at this stage of knowing realize that others have something to offer. They listen and learn from others. They are confident that another's voice will not overpower their own. Thus, women who are procedural knowers look to external authorities for models of how to know. Selina's journal entry reveals that she was observing the way an established artist worked, and used her approach as a model.

The thoughtful way Selina approached her journal also reveals this procedural

approach to knowing. She was systematic in her organization. From the first written page to last, Selina consistently dated each page and wrote only on the right hand side. She left the facing page blank (as I had casually suggested at one of our meetings would provide space for viewers to respond).

Selina was meticulous in recording her process. Her journal reveals that she not only read *Letters To A Young Poet*, but she also read secondary sources about Rilke and one volume of his poetry, *The Duino Eulogy*. Selina shares with the reader her first interpretations of the text and their sources:

> *Nov. 12*
> *I have the image of Michelangelo's painting of God creating Adam in my head, of the two hands nearly touching...This reminds me of the relationship Rilke has with his protégé Kappus, one of helping him up to greater heights.*
> *Because this is a historically based piece based on words, I may approach it as a drawing and using just black and white.*
> *Maybe I'll do ten little drawings, each for each letter...*

As the days passed, Selina's journal reveals how her "reading" of the text developed:

> *Nov. 16*
> *I like the idea of a train because of the journey that both men are on...*
> *Maybe these could be drawings done on mylar or parchment, that is translucent and pinned to the wall so the text shows through underneath..*

Until this point, Selina seemed to be interpreting the text very visually. None of her entries "explain" the personal significance of the text. Nor do they explain *how* her work interprets the text. Selina records her process of interpretation. But on December 6, Selina wrote:

> *I took home the Duino Elegies last night and read them, the first one is exquisite.*
> *I found a beautiful line in "The poem on the edge of the world"*

about silence and emptiness
"Do you recognize me, air, still full of my former places?
...We know what we intend."

This seems to be an initial articulation of the significance of some of the images Selina used; for example the smoke and the blank white space.

Selina's entries move from describing general, first intuitions of the form and shape of her work to the very specific. After December 13 (one month after Selina began working on her piece), she began to include photocopies of the work by other poets inspired by Rilke. She wanted to use these as inspiration. She also began to make lists of images she wanted to explore and things she needed to do to achieve them.

1. I want the shutters image
2. Rilke
3. 6 location images
11. poetry quotes
12. Duino Castle
13. Example of his writing
14. Him before a window
15. Military outfit
16. Birds
17. Plants
18.
I need to photocopy my hands, an envelope, a pen, candle the 2 volumes, this book and my Rilke letters book tape, very postmodern
You need 18 final, interrelated images
Oh yeah -- what about smoke? What does smoke mean? Is it relevant.

Then, I found a cut and torn piece of paper on which Selina photocopied the following:

Do you recognize me, air, still full of my former places?
You were once the smooth bark
The curve and leaf of my words.

Beside this ragged piece of paper, Selina wrote:

> *This is the piece from which I took my paper piece's title: "air".*

As with all the texts that she photocopied and added to her journal, Selina did not cite the source of this quotation. However, from her earlier entry about reading the *Duino Elegies,* I assume this is part of the poem by Rilke.

Towards the end of her work on *Air*, Selina consciously recognized her source. We can easily make the connection between the piece, the process she documented earlier, and these lines by Rilke. Selina's journal is evidence of a woman approaching knowing procedurally. It is also evidence of a person who is a "connected knower." As Belenky et al explain,

> *By understanding we mean something akin to the German word kennen, the French connaître, the Spanish conacer, the Greek gnosis (Lewis, 1983), implying personal acquaintance with an object (usually but not always a person). Understanding involves intimacy and equality between self and object...In an attempt to achieve a kind of harmony with another person in spite of difference and distance women...try to enter the other person's frame to discover the premise for the other's point of view. The focus is not on how they want you to think...but on how they think; and the purpose is not justification but connection.* (p. 101)

Thus, Selina did not "justify" or "explain" her piece. Rather, she recorded her process of creating connections with Rilke and *Letters To A Young Poet.* She recorded how her relationship with the texts documenting Rilke's life and work resulted in the piece *Air*. Selina shared her process with us in an intimate, detailed way. Perhaps she sought to connect with us. Selina's journal reveals the importance of exploring connections and acknowledging influence when we learn within the conversation of aesthetic experience.

The Viewers' Responses

Selina's journal focused on her experience creating *Air*. This orientation seems to have led viewers back into the piece. It appears they took a closer look at the work after examining the journal. This is a different experience than viewers had with Cathy's or Martha's journals. The viewers' responses in these journals focused on their relationship with it rather than their response to the work. When viewers responded in Selina's journal, they recorded poetic representations of their experience of *Air*:

> *Are our works...documents of our journeys, traces of spirits moving through life?*
> *I am an observer*
> *Interrupting or onlooking*
> *I don't know the context of conversation*
> *Each word I misinterpret*
> *I need to read some more.*
>
> *Reading M—*
> *Quiet, whisper, still*
> *Hidden messages on the wall*
> *Open/Closed Book*
> *I wonder*

Other viewers discussed the functioning of Selina's piece or of the *Reading Rilke* exhibition. Selina's choice of medium seems to have captivated viewers and they pondered the significance of the transparencies on vellum.

> *The subtle images is what really attracted me to this piece*
> *...I like that they are hiding behind something vague. One needs to look further -- unblurr the images.*
> *Pins holding the images like the pins holding butterflies on display.*
> *Real yet not; unreal yet not.*
> *Everything fades.*
>
> *Such order*

days, such bleak
transparencies.
Such faded focus.
Words (Rilke) forward.

Notice how viewers responded poetically. The subtlety of *Air*, its ineffability, seemed to elicit poetic readings that pass over the reader like a fresh summer breeze. I find it interesting that this work, more than any other, called to the artist within viewers' souls. The poetic elicited poetry. The experience seemed to demand an aesthetic response, the *erfahrung* of understanding. By providing viewers with a window into the "effective history" (see above discussion in Chapter One) of *Air*, Selina helped viewers connect to the piece. In Belenky et al's sense, most viewers became intimately involved in understanding *Air*. They achieved that understanding by entering into conversation with it.

Viewers did not often use prosaic text in their conversations with *Air* that would have neatly labeled the experience and filed it away (*erlebnis* experience). In two cases that I located, the viewer recorded an evaluation or assessment of the work or the exhibition.

> *...Did you people make-up a stupid journal for that stupid show?...I feel that you people're pretending to be intellectual.*
>
> *I'm not sure that memories are "vague" or "incomplete" as you suggest in your journal. Only <u>some</u>.*

These two viewers experienced *Air* at a distance. Belenky et al characterizes this as "separate knowing",

> *Separate knowers are tough-minded. They are like doormen at exclusive clubs. They don't want to let anything in unless they are pretty sure it is good. They would rather exclude someone*

> *who belongs to the club than to admit someone who does not ... Presented with a proposition, separate knowers immediately look for something wrong -- a loophole, a factual error, a logical contradiction, the omission of contrary evidence.*
> (p. 104)

Belenky's team might say that these two viewers engaged in a "doubting game."[21] They did not enter into a relationship with *Air*; they did not enter into a conversation with Selina's piece. Rather, these viewers remained apart from the piece, arguing its validity.

The viewers who responded in Selina's journal helped us to expand our understanding of the character of "living among." When viewers make connections to a piece, they live with it. They can converse in the space created by the work (the attentive space described by Catherine). However, we do not always make these connections. We have seen that insecurity, lack of confidence, fear of vulnerability, all separate us from a work of art. Our recourse in this situation is to play "the doubting game" and look for what is wrong.

Understandings

Air reveals the importance of our relationship with the work of art. When we are able to find connections and live in the work, we are able to "believe" in the reality it creates (rather than doubting it). Our experience of the work is *aesthetic*, or *erfahrung*. It is an experience which we appreciate. We cherish and honor its gifts. When we do not make connections our experience is *efferent*, *erblenis*, separate. We play the doubting game, skeptical that an experience has anything to give us.

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[21] Peter Elbow (1973) described this in a work about writing. Belenky et al have appropriated the term to describe an attitude toward knowing.

Jennifer, *Resurrection,* 1997

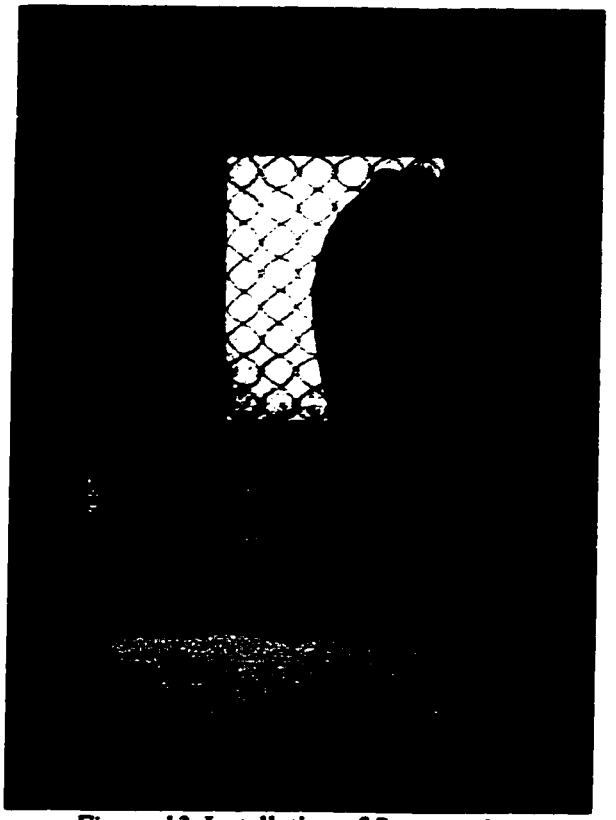

Figure 13. Installation of *Resurrection.*

The story of *Resurrection* describes the attentive space in which conversation occurs. *Resurrection* characterizes as sacred the space of aesthetic experience. We need to honor this place for the activity that occurs there. *Resurrection* describes the richness of the attentive space. This space asks us to care-fully examine the complexity of a subject. *Resurrection* reveals that we can com-fort (make strong) in the conversation. It also reveals that learning requires an intense commitment of mind, body and spirit.

My Journal

My journal is a scrap book. It is about 13" X 9" with a hard, black cardboard cover and a metal spiral binding. There is a large rectangular window near the top of the

cover. In it, I placed an enlarged photocopy of the Rilke text:

> *...in their confusion and fear, they thought it must have entered them at the very moment they became aware of it, for they swore they had never before found anything like that inside them.*

Inside the scrapbook the pages alternate between cropped, gray lined sheets and full sized black sheets. I left the lined sheets blank for the viewers to respond. The black sheets held photocopied pages from my personal notebooks -- books that I felt informed the piece -- and other memorabilia that somehow spoke to my content or my subject matter. I chose to create a scrapbook because I felt I could best represent the divergent sources of inspiration and experience that informed my piece with this format.

I used gray parchment for the photocopies and held them in place with gold corners. Thus presented, the scrapbook takes on a precious quality. I tried to re-inforce this by the altar-like support on which I placed it. As with my visual work, this presentation is ambiguous. On the one hand, I admit that I approach artists' work as sacred. I believe we need to honor the ability to create and bring forward understanding as a sacred office. On the other hand, I believe that our culture has marginalized this sacred activity to the point where it is no longer accessible to people in their everyday lives. Aesthetic experience has become, for most people, like going to church. We attend only on the high holidays. We wear only our best clothes. We get it over with and then get to the presents and turkey. The specialness we have attributed to art has ultimately removed it from relevance in most people's lives. While the activity of learning through art requires the attentiveness and carefulness of a sacred act, like all holy offices, it

requires a community to enact it.[22] Reading through the scrapbook, I came across a note I wrote in response to a reader's query about white gloves. I wrote:

> *Gloves not necessary. This is a place for us to "talk," it is precious because of that, not because of itself. The object isn't precious.*

I believe this quotation summarizes my understanding of the sacredness of aesthetic experience versus the sacredness of the art object.

I did not arrange the scrapbook in chronological order. I tried to organize it in themes so that readers would be able to see how the different sources talked to each other, and how this conversation resulted in the final work. As an artist, my work does not necessarily progress in a linear fashion. Often I start in the middle. I need to search back through the things I considered, read, and believed in the past. I need to link these to my experiences in the present. I can then begin to move into new material suggested by the conversation between past and present. The new material usually takes me back to the past. This back and forth movement, this linking of experiences across time, is fundamental to the way my work progresses. I wanted my journal to reflect this process. I wanted to model the space of my aesthetic experience for the viewer.

Although response from viewers was not abundant, these thoughtful notes pleased me. I felt satisfied that something of the collection of ideas I presented, either visually or

---

[22]Jesus is reported by the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (based on stories from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, RVS) to have instituted the act of Holy Communion saying, "Whenever two or more of you are *gathered together*, do this..." (General Synod, 1962, p.82). In this, there is a recognition that sacred acts require conversation, or living among. Heschel (1951) describes how the Sabbath is sacred because of the attentive, careful acts observed on that day. Through attention to the moment, significance is wrought. I interpret Heschel's meditation on the Sabbath as an exploration of how we live with or live among. Heschel explores the ancient meaning of "Sabbath" as a bride wedded to humanity. He reminds us "Thou art one." Thus, this sacred day is not something separate from us. I suggest that, by extension, in sacred relationships of any kind, we are not separate from that which is sacred. Its sacredness is based on our togetherness. Thus, I believe, we need to find ways to re-institute the sacredness of aesthetic experience. Not a sacredness based on apartness, but rather a sacredness founded on gathering together to pay careful attention.

with words, touched those who took the time to read my journal. The variety of responses pleased me; different elements seemed to evoke dialogue from different readers. It appears that at least a dozen viewers took the time to look through my scrapbook and record their relationship with either the work or the text within its pages. These responses are evidence that some of us gathered together in careful attentiveness. Together, we created a truly sacred space.

Understanding

Resurrection tells a story of a sacred space that provided members of a community with a place to attend care-fully together. *Resurrection* tells a story about how to build the sacred space so that novices can enter into it and remain there as strong participants in the conversation.

Understanding Conversation in Aesthetic Experience

Chapter Three explored the nature of "living among." Through the stories told, we learned that to live among requires structures for mentorship and opportunities for dialogue. We learned that both artmakers and viewers have a responsibility to maintain the dialogue in aesthetic experience. We discovered that we maintain dialogue through an artmaker's inclusive attitude and a viewer's attentive presence. We saw that we nurture and protect dialogue through care. We heard that when we enter into such a conversation we become vulnerable, we are at risk. We learned that if we can find connections, we can be strong in our vulnerability. The stories reminded us to honor and cherish the members of our community. Chapter Three reveals that aesthetic experience is an active, dynamic process that we can not take for granted. It reveals that learning through works of art is a sacred act.

CHAPTER FOUR:
COMMUNITY

> ***Community:*** *Middle English, A body of persons living together and sharing common goods.* (Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1964)

In Chapter Two we came to understand how we strengthen individuals, enable them to take part in the conversation of aesthetic experience. In Chapter Three we explored how communities ensure that their members "live among." We learned how a conversation with a work of art can be a dialogical, responsive and inclusive experience. In this chapter we discover how a strong community fortifies its members. Through *1 Corner* we explore how works of art provide opportunities for individuals to move from the isolation of their personal experiences to a shared understanding. With *Strange Attractors* we see how works of art can involve members of a community in the conversation in different ways. *Tender Steel* helps us to see that through sharing we create a world of understanding. Finally, *Self-image In 8 Parts* reminds us of the important role the art museum plays in facilitating this world of understanding. We learn that art museums can teach viewers the skills of contemplation and dialogue necessary to open the door into the world provided by the artwork.

Marie, 1 *Corner*, 1997

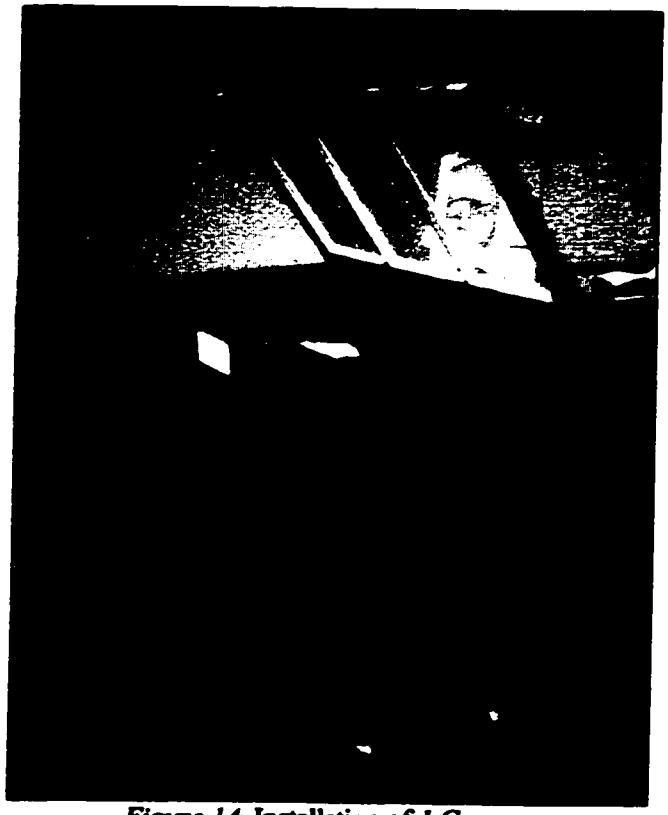

Figure 14. Installation of *1 Corner*.

1 Corner explores how a work of art draws the viewer out of her own world into the world of the work. *1 Corner* reveals that a work of art takes our personal experience and makes it part of a shared understanding.

The Work

It stood mysteriously on the gallery floor, this wooden case with its lid tilted open. The glass on the lid reflected the case's contents; it hinted at the treasure inside. Through the glass lid, I viewed the work of other artists. When I leaned into the case, many printed hands confronted me. The image was like that of God's reaching finger outstretched to Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation* on The Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-12). It is the hand

of a creator, bringing raw materials to life. *1 Corner* explored the problem of individual experience. It asked, "How do we move outside our own little world to share the world of others?" It revealed how the work of art can be a door between the two worlds.

Marie's Journal

Marie's journal is heavy. When I hold the book in my hands, I know that I am engaging physically with an object. Marie bolted two copper plates onto its cover. The larger plate is almost as big as the book's cover. The smaller plate, set into the larger plate, is about an inch square. Marie etched the larger plate with the image of a hand sensitively exploring a rough surface. Below the image of the hand, Marie lightly etched the smaller plate with the words "1 Corner". The cover falls open easily because of its weight. This is a science notebook, with lined sheets on the right and graph paper on the left. Inside the front cover, over the graph paper, I find a list of titles for the prints that Marie exhibited with the journal. Below this list, Marie pasted a piece of foil from a cigarette package on which a viewer scribbled, "Well now, Who is this Rilke person? 2·13·97 J. W.". Marie ripped out the first few pages of the book. Their jagged edges emerge from the binding.

Two lines, almost at the beginning of the journal, stood out. Marie indented both lines, setting them off from the rest of the text. They read:

> *Solitude is formative factor*
> *not punishment*

This ambivalence about solitude is a theme that re-emerges in Marie's journal as she "read" Rilke's text.

Marie wrote the introduction with a charcoal pencil. She explained the significance of this choice to the reader,

> *Why charcoal? I love art for its physicality, so if your hands get dirty from reading this, I'm sharing with you my love of art.*

This seems to link back to a note Marie made on the first page of the journal,

> *writing as work as sculpture was work for his wife -- unless there's ink on your fingers* (emphasis Marie's)

The idea of the physicality of aesthetic experience (either in reading or in making a work of visual art) also echoes the heaviness, the physicality of Marie's journal itself. Her experience of art as physical and affective is reified in her journal as in her piece. The opening pages of Marie's journal present two themes that occupied her during her work with *Reading Rilke*: presence and isolation.

Marie's entries following this "introduction" have two dates: The first is the date of the letter she read; the second is the date on which she made her notation. Marie makes a deliberate attempt to bring the words, written so long ago, into a contemporary, personal context. Not all the entries are in charcoal. Marie wrote some entries in graphite. She wrote some in a combination of both graphite and charcoal. There does not seem to be a regular pattern to the combination. When however she used both, one indicated quotations from Rilke, while the other indicated Marie's own thoughts. I find that the combination is most effective when Marie used graphite for the quotations (words written to another, many years in the past) and charcoal for her experience of the text. This combination reveals again Marie's aesthetic experience of the text. It conveys the *erfahrung* character of living in a text. It overcomes the isolation of artist and viewer. It

makes them present together.

As Marie read through the letters, she attended to passages that speak of solitude and loneliness. She mused on her own experiences of loneliness.

> *I feel lucky to be ecstatic, alone, to have learned that has probably been the greatest achievement of the past 5 years. Why do I become so fucking needy. Relationships are often a contest with your self-esteem.*
> *I have come to the realization that I become weak and lonely when I am with someone.*

Marie's entries often isolated the passages where Rilke encouraged Kappus to "endure." Marie was attracted to Rilke's injunctions to embrace solitude, to be cautious of fearing loneliness. As we saw with her first page, she seemed to want to understand solitude and loneliness as a positive, "formative" experience; "not a punishment."

Yet, at the same time, Marie was drawn to Rilke's description of human limitation:

> *For if we think of this existence of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it becomes clear that most people get to know only <u>one corner</u> of their room, a window seat, a strip of floor which they pace up and down. (p. 38, emphasis Marie's)*

Intrigued by this notion, she even examined the original German text. She took inspiration for her piece in *Reading Rilke* from this quotation. Marie wrote that she found this "a rather pretentious and insulting remark, however it might be true." She pondered in her journal and through her piece how one can move out of this one corner. (Remember that the small square inset into the larger copper plate on her journal's cover read "1. Corner.") Marie wanted to make present to us our isolation within our own little worlds. She tried to understand the aloneness and the loneliness of human consciousness.

She tried to find a way out of the dilemma.

I suggest that Marie's answer to the dilemma is through the physicality of art. Her journal is heavy, present, and her words, written in charcoal, have a physical reality that affects the reader. Her final entry is a conclusion that described the intensity of her emotional response to Rilke's text. Marie described how Rilke's text "made me feel," and what it "forced me to think about." This sense of being compelled is the metaphorical representation of a physical nudge. Her sentence reads, "I was most touched while reading the letters for the 5th time." In this last sentence, Marie recalled the image on the cover of her journal of a hand exploring a surface, touching it, being affected by it. Her journal reveals faith that the aesthetic experience of affective physical objects can help to move us beyond our small corner; to explore the room beyond.

Understandings

I Corner could move. Containing images of outstretched hands, it moved into the sphere of other works and into their worlds. Belenky et al's 1984 study revealed that subjective knowing, or knowing the world only through our personal experiences, is an important transitory stage. It lays between voicelessness and the ability to learn from, and later with, others. *I Corner* reveals that the functions of an artwork are to draw the viewer out of her own world and into that of the work, and to help us understand how personal experiences can become part of a shared understanding.

Liz, *Strange Attractors*, 1997

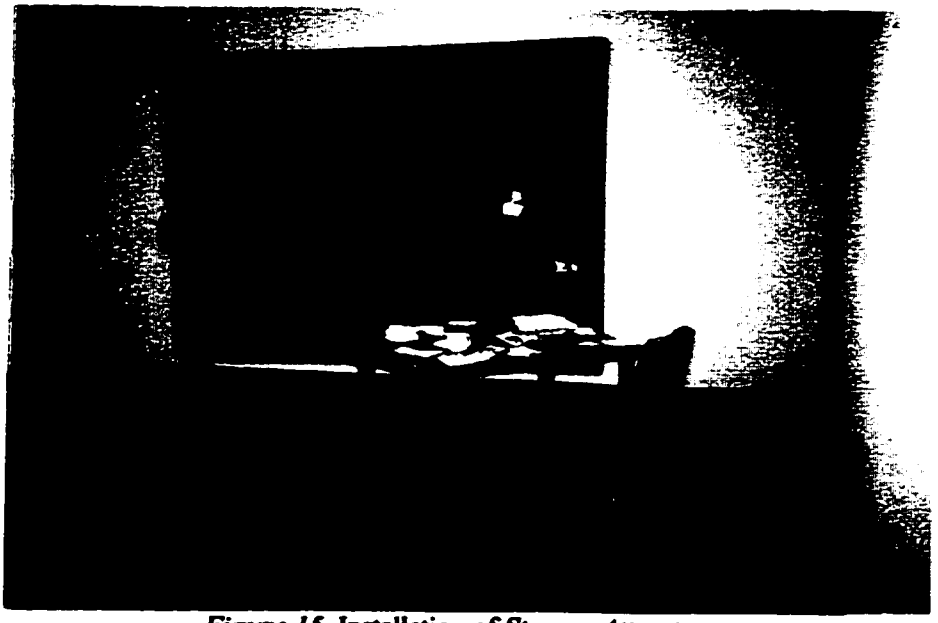

Figure 15. Installation of *Strange Attractors*.

With Liz's piece, we learn that artworks are indeed "strange attractors." Many different individuals enter the world of an artwork, each with their own set of experiences, each with their own way of learning. *Strange Attractors* asks us to consider how a work of art (or an exhibition) involves these very different voices; how we share each other's understanding.

The Work

Did you ever walk by an open classroom door and peer in only to discover the most gloriously inviting space? Did you see children drawing huge colourful images on the blackboard? Did you see the teacher working with other children on a project that seemed to engage them completely? Although you knew you had your own classroom to go to, did you wish desperately that you could enter into this one? Did you want to

become part of this space? Liz's piece commanded this kind of attention for me. Hung in a shallow alcove across from the entrance to the gallery, *Strange Attractors* was an inviting presence from the time I entered the room. If I stopped and examined the two works adjacent to it, its large black shape beckoned in the corner of my eye. With its fanciful figures, vibrant colours and playful textures, I felt excited about reaching it. I wanted to discover it. It was rather like that schoolroom that one might glimpse through an open doorway. *Strange Attractors* was a space full of energy and ideas.

Strange Attractors created a space where I did not just contemplate; it invited me to participate. To the right of the large black surface Liz placed a work bench, filled with different kinds of paper, pens and pencils, photocopied quotations, and handwritten messages from her. There was a comfy old kitchen chair on which to sit while I worked at the table. While working, I could gaze at the dancing figures on the central panel and imagine myself dancing with them in their surreal world of shells and floating figures. Metaphorically, I could become part of the world of the figures. I entered the world of the figures by writing words, or making images on a piece of the paper and then attaching it to one of the large black panels. I put myself into the picture. Liz offered me other ways to enter into the dance. She provided Chinese markers held from strings, and stencils with which to mark directly on the panels. She even left a step stool to one side so that I could insert my presence where ever I wanted.

I felt drawn to Liz's piece, by its energy and its size. Once I entered into its space, I interacted with the piece easily. It was fun to explore the central panel and discover the visual puns and gentle irony that lay there. It was amusing to read and view the work that

others had added to the piece. I felt comfortable entering into the play and adding my work to the big black board.

Liz's Journal

Liz chose not to exhibit a journal with her piece. The day we installed the works in the gallery space, she brought in a loosely hand bound book that contained printed images and text. She also brought with her two large "pilasters" that she hung on either side of her piece. Liz thought she would place her book on the table. However, she was ambivalent about the book. She was uncertain she really wanted to share it with the viewers.

> *...I'm not first and foremost a person who carries a journal a lot...But for me, my work chronicles those feelings that I don't necessarily want to share with other people, or can't share with other people. And words are buried in my work...*(From my interview with Liz.)

After she installed her work, she took up the beautiful book and began to rip it into pieces. I watched her with horror! Gone were the sensitive, earthtone images on black paper. Gone were the meditations so carefully recorded. Liz took the remnants of her book and scattered them over the surface of the table. She pinned a few to the bulletin board pilasters. The lovely book had become note paper for viewers to use. Liz fragmented her individual experience of the piece and incorporated it into the thoughts and feelings of those who viewed her work. The journal fragments became a ground on which viewers could build.

> *So now I realize how appropriate it was for me to put up the bulletin boards...my own big desire to be in conversation...I'd rather speak to be heard and listened to and to have the*

> *reciprocal. I like the reciprocal...I think women and crafts people as well as people from other races haven't always been invited into the conversation of artmaking. And I want to be part of that conversation and I've become more and more conscious of that.* (From my interview with Liz).

Liz tried to set up an environment that encouraged viewers to respond to the work and to each other, rather than to her experience of the work. She acknowledges her fundamental role in the experience through the inclusion of her book fragments. On these, others articulated their understandings. Liz made a very clear statement about her role in the work of art. Her actions reveal her belief that the artist's work is a catalyst for the viewer's experience. It initiates understanding of an experience and it directs understanding within a certain territory. Liz made a very clear statement about her place in the conversation about the work when she tore up her book. Her act was a way of handing the work of art into the hands of the viewers. After *Reading Rilke* ended, Liz said to me

> *...I want my art to be a conversation. I want to be affected by what goes on around me and I want to be affected by people I meet and impressions they tell me about orally about my work. So, my work gets affected by people I meet and by encounters I have and...I don't like working in a closet.* (From my interview with Liz.)

Liz empowered viewers to use their own voices by removing her authority from the conversation about the piece. Thus, viewers spoke confidently with the work itself and with others about the work.

The Viewers' Responses

When I examined the viewers' responses to *Strange Attractors* I felt very much like I was in the school room Liz envisioned when she created the piece. The "brains" were present, bantering back and forth about what art is and is not:

> *Viewer 1: I want to understand but it is for too difficult to change my ways.*
> *Viewer 2: You will not find meaning or understanding or originality or even art in art.*
> *Viewer 3: I agree, discovery of ourselves and our worlds is an art in itself -- alas almost entirely forgotten it would seem.*

The "clowns" were there giving everyone a laugh and providing a reality check for the arguers:

> *Well, maybe we should have read that book honey!*

The "mothers" were in the room, just as they were when I was a child. These voices were the mediators, peacemakers in the conversation about *Strange Attractors*.

> *Your work offers many avenues of exchange -- I like the "expressions/explosions." Thanks for sharing.*

Listening to the viewers' conversation reminded me that all three voices are important in the community. Each voice provides a different understanding. Each voice creates a different image of the world explored by the work of art.

Understandings

Strange Attractors reminds us that there are different ways of participating in a community; there are different ways to learn through works of art. Research into learning styles by educators like Lowenfeld and Brittain (1964), David Kolb (Naestead, 1998),

Anthony Gregorc (1985), Dunn and Dunn (1978) and Howard Gardner (1990) reveal that individuals approach learning in different ways. Research into aesthetic response, like that of Abigail Housen (1983), Andrea Weltzl-Fairchild (1991) and Michael Parsons (1990;1987) describes an experience that has some common characteristics. However, it also shows that aesthetic response is unique to each viewer in its composition. Together with Belenky et al's concepts of differences in knowing, these researchers affirm the insight of *Strange Attractors*: that art exhibits host many different kinds of learning. The art community speaks with many different voices. Art museums need to be cognizant of this and provide opportunities for the "brains," the "clowns," the "mothers" and the quiet souls at the back of the room to participate fully in the art community.

Beth, Tender *Steel*, 1997

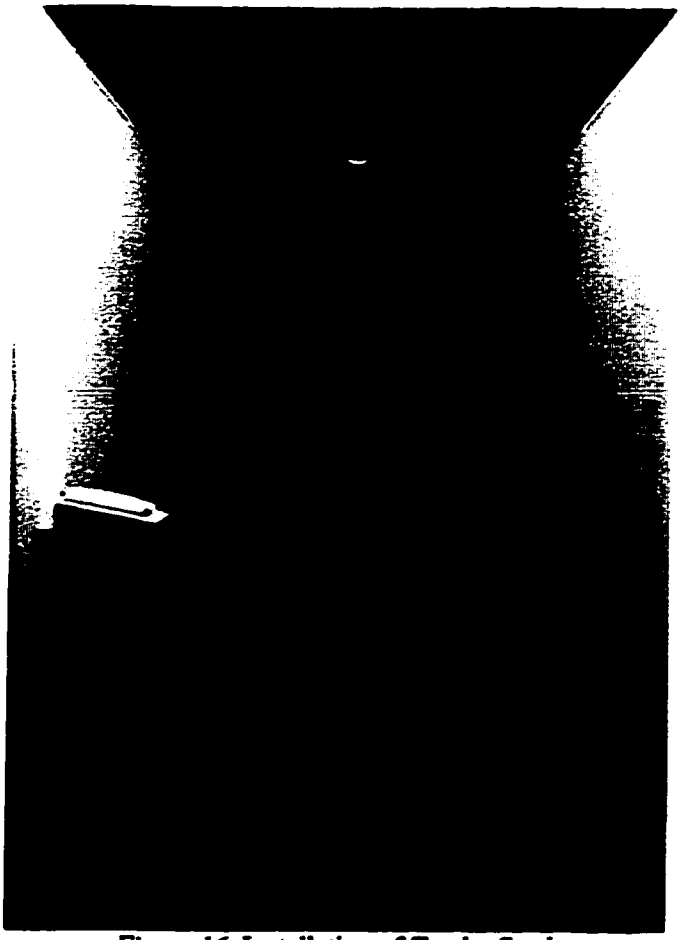

Figure 16. Installation of *Tender Steel.*

Beth's installation *Tender Steel* re-inforces the understanding about community revealed in *1 Corner* and *Strange Attractors*. Through its silence and privacy, *Tender Steel* made clear the viewers' need to participate in the world of the work. *Tender Steel*, with its paradoxical title, reveals the paradox inherent in the conversation of aesthetic experience. It is at the same time personally private and communally shared.

The Work

At the end of a long narrow corridor, *Tender Steel* hung from the ceiling, bathed in light. The translucent material cast barely a shadow on the wall behind it. On the

surface two figures faced each other. Their foreheads touched. The palms of their raised hands faced one other, but did not touch. Their bodies disappeared into the surface. They were silent. Shining steel pins wove in and out of the surface of the drawing. At its base, Beth covered the floor with the same steel pins.

We use pins to hold pieces of fabric together, temporarily, until we secure them with thread. The figures came together temporarily. Their union seemed tentative. The pins were between them, binding them for a little while. They needed thread and a needle to bring their two parts together to form a lasting whole.

Where was the thread? Thread bound the journal that sat on its shelf at the other end of the corridor. If one were to unwrap thread from the book, one could have used it to bring the two figures together.

The Viewers' Responses

Where was the needle? The pin-cushion appearance of the book, and the presence of hundreds of loose pins at the base of *Tender Steel,* inspired viewers to use the book as a medium for communication. Visitors pinned words and images into Beth's book:

Figure 17. Viwers' respond to *Tender Steel* by pinning into journal.

There was an assertiveness to these acts of expression that is significant. I believe the viewer's actions with *Tender Steel* parallel their adamant objections to Sarah's "Hush Now" phrase. Viewers want to participate in the dialogue; they want to share their response and understandings.

Understandings

Tender Steel reveals the importance of sharing to maintain community. Without sharing our worlds, we come together only temporarily. Will we slide apart when the shining pin that bound us slips silently away? Without sharing, we are only individuals in the same place. We are not a community. *Tender Steel* reveals the important function played by the work of art. When an artist creates a work of art, she provides an opportunity to share experience and understanding. In this way the work of art functions similarly to other cultural artifacts. According to Ian Maclaren (1995), exhibitions of cultural artifacts provide communities with a document of their past experiences. They give us an opportunity to examine our world today, and provide a window into the kind of future we want to create. This sharing is fundamental to maintaining a strong community.

Daniel, *Self-Image in Eight Parts*, 1997

Figure 18. Installation of *Self-Image in Eight Parts*.

Rilke's letters contained several years of reflection upon his experience. They were expressions of his process of understanding. They were letters to a young man trying to understand himself. Rilke's descendants bound the letters in a book. Daniel's drawings seemed to be a reflection on his experience. They were expressions of his understanding. Daniel bound them in a book. Daniel did not suggest a truth, nor did he argue a position. Through his images, Daniel created a space for us to travel in and a melody to carry us along. Daniel created a place for us to meet with him and to engage in conversation -- a visual, aesthetic conversation. His drawings became a place for us to learn not only about him, but also about ourselves. *Self-Image in Eight Parts* reminds us that the conversations we have with artworks are both internal dialogues with ourselves and actual discussions with others about the world opened up to us by the work. The dilemma for the art museum is how best to facilitate both kinds of exchange.

My Conversation With Daniel

My conversation with Daniel after *Reading Rilke* ended provides us with insight into this dilemma. Daniel's first observation was that *Reading Rilke* was a paradox. He observed that we were trying to articulate something that we have difficulty describing. "You have to deal with nameless things. You have to deal with things that can not be described. And here, this is being studied." A few moments later, Daniel stated, "Never go by yourself to an art gallery." He believes strongly that it is important to talk with someone about your experience of an artwork. These two statements reveal the dilemma of supporting viewers' learning in art exhibitions. There is something fundamentally personal and visceral about the experience of art, but there is also something inherently social in that same experience. Daniel and I explored this territory for over an hour in our discussion.

Our first conclusion was that the context of the art gallery creates an environment that supports distance and exclusion. Daniel described these issues in the following way:

> *...I haven't shown anything in an art gallery for ages. And I don't want to really...because of the values that are associated with them. The sort of preciousness, the fact that it forces whatever is there to be viewed in a category which it may not...be best in...As soon as something is in an art gallery it almost has the overtone that it is unapproachable and it has a distance, by its nature.*

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explores the nature of cultural contexts. Along with Jean-Claude Passeron, Bourdieu (1990) examined the structures that exclude individuals from cultural institutions. They believed that cultural institutions perpetuate

elitism by limiting opportunities for people to learn the language and customs of the context (its *habitus*). Bourdieu (with Darbel and Schnapper,1991; 1993) revealed the fundamentally important role informal learning in the family holds in enculturation. We learn through osmosis and mimesis the language and customs of the art world. Thus, formally organized educational programming in art museums only re-inforces the learning accomplished in the home. When our aesthetic values differ from those enshrined by the art museum, there is usually little opportunity for debate. Indeed, we probably do not even visit art museums because we are not part of that world. There is a distance maintained between those who know and produce the arts culture and those who do not. Thus, art museums exhibit only what the art culture defines as "art". This phenomenon may be what is behind Daniel's feelings about art museums.

We talked then of how we might overcome this distance and exclusivity. Daniel felt strongly that we cannot accomplish this through a lot of activities for the viewer.

> *...I think the involvement of the audience is not artistic in a sense. It is not an act of doing...You see it at ———— and all the galleries. They've created a little room for people to make something. And I think that's hogwash. I think it belongs in schools, I don't think it should be in art galleries. Now this seems to run right contrary to what I'm saying about people coming into an art gallery and there being this sort of value idea. But it's not. It's a matter of function.*

Instead, Daniel proposes that people talk:

> *...I think what is more valuable is to have people talk about it...Just to be able to say anything, because I don't think people realize how many perceptual experiences they're having and how many value judgments they're making. You know, thousands and thousands. And I don't think people are aware of that, and I think that's where things need to be dealt with.*

Daniel believed that when we talk about our experience of works of art with someone else they can move us beyond statements like "I love this". We can come to understand why we hold the values that we have; where they come from.

> *So you learn a tremendous amount about where you are and what your experience is. Whereas, if you're just there by yourself all you get's the experience. But you never, sort of, come to realize what it is.*

In making the distinction between "the experience" and "realiz[ing] what it is," Daniel observed the distinction in kinds of experience that I examined in Chapter One. We have experiences that immerse us in understanding. They cause our carefully structured cognitive frameworks to become unglued and reformed. We also have experiences that help us to locate ourselves again and rebuild an understanding. There is *erfahrung* and *erlebnis*. Daniel provided further insight into the difference in how these two phenomena function:

> *The meaning is not the same as an aesthetic experience. You know, they sometimes hang on each other, but it's not the same thing. I mean an aesthetic experience can be totally meaningless...people feel they ought to get meaning because there's so much explanation these days. And explanation kills contemplation. The two are not compatible at all...it's my theory that aesthetic experience is based on perception. It's a perception...And it's the thrills, the excitement, the letdown, the trauma, the drama, the subtleties of little scratches on a surface, of colours interacting, of textures, of you know, basic things...What I would aim for is that an aesthetic experience is something that makes your mouth water or your stomach turn, or makes your head spin. It's a very, very visceral experience. Something has to happen to make you shiver up your spine or something like that...I think the core experience is that physical and that real.*

Daniel seemed to be implying that this real, physical aesthetic experience is contemplative. We live within the world of our perception with the artwork. Our "conversation" is wordless. It is akin to the kind of experience Clive Bell (1987) explored in his work on "significant form." It is the activity Kant (1964, trans.) explored in his writing on imagination. Daniel explained that we need to learn how to be contemplative, how to be perceptive.

> *You have to have somebody actually demonstrate that this is doing something for them...I really think you have to teach somebody to be sensitive to colour, to be sensitive to texture, to be sensitive to shape, and to be sensitive to line, composition, and those things. And it takes example. The only way is by example.*

When we begin to explain to someone what that experience means to us, Daniel believed we leave the realm of aesthetic experience. We enter a cultural realm where we assign value, significance and meaning to the experience.

> *Well, you see, that [explaining to someone else] helps them even to categorize it. Like, I usually sort of say, there are three experiences. There's the individual, the social and the cultural. The individual means that, maybe you don't like blue. You know, the social means that you don't like gooey stuff. And the cultural means that there are some things you just can't relate to 'cause you don't know how to look at them or how to approach them. So, there's at least three levels. And when you approach a work in a gallery, you have to be able to sort through that. You have to be able to say that with my sort of social experiences this is what I see. And with my individual sort of preferences it would colour my social experiences because here's a place where they come together...But to find out where you are, you have to have a sort of reference point. And someone else makes a really good reference point. A good friend you can sort of say anything to makes a good reference point. Because you can say, " I love this." And somebody will say, "Why?"...So you learn a tremendous amount about where you are and what your experience is.*

Thus, Daniel and I came to the conclusion that there are two distinctive experiences that occur in viewing artworks: perception and explaining. The fine arts disciplines call these two "aesthetics" and "criticism". We need to learn how to engage in both kinds of experiences, and we must be careful not to confuse them. Learning how to engage in these different experiences requires different forms of education. The former requires a kind of apprenticeship with a mentor to demonstrate and guide the viewer. The latter requires conversation, a dialogue, perhaps even argument.

Understandings

Although "aesthetics" and "criticism" require different kinds of education, learning to engage in either experience requires a relationship with someone. We need an "other" to mentor us. We need an other for debate. I believe that *Self-Image In Eight Parts* reveals that one of the goals of art education in museums needs to be understanding through contemplation and conversation. It also reveals that we require community to teach these ways of understanding. Those of us who know how to learn through works of art need to share our experience and expertise with those who do not.

Understanding Community in Aesthetic Experience

1 Corner, Strange Attractors, Tender Steel, and *Self-Image In Eight Parts* explored the role of community in aesthetic experience. These stories revealed that a work of art can be a catalyst that helps us move from our individual experiences to a shared understanding of the issues explored by the work. They examined the different ways that individuals participate in this sharing. They affirm the inherent worth of the viewer in the arts community and they suggest ways that novice viewers can learn how to become experts in understanding through works of art.

The stories told in these last three chapters describe aesthetic experience as a way of learning that brings our individual understandings into dialogue with the perspective of the artmaker. We are able to understand the importance of all the participants when we examine aesthetic experience as the result of these three phenomena. We see the artist as mentor and fellow learner. We view the artwork as the document of the artist's journey and a text from which we can learn. We understand that without the viewer there would be no dialogue. We cannot limit the work to documenting an artist's relationship with her work. The art museum provides the site for the conversation to occur.

In Chapter Five, Understandings and Future Conversations, I will explore the role of the museum in learning through art more carefully. I will examine it with respect to the roles that comfort, conversation and community play in learning through art.

CHAPTER 5:
UNDERSTANDINGS AND FUTURE CONVERSATIONS

Understandings

> ***Understanding:*** *Late Middle English. To stand under.*
> (Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1964).

I have described the meeting place and the speakers of the conversation of this dissertation. I have explored the territory of its subject matter. What understandings did this conversation affect? What can I stand under, now that the conversation is concluded? When I examined the texts from *Reading Rilke*, I found myself taken into the deep waters of aesthetic experience. Often I struggled to reach stable ground. I read through the journals and thought, "That's it, that's what all this meant." Then I turned to the works themselves and lost my footing. The interviews with the artists further perplexed me. The anecdotal information I received from viewers constantly ripped my precarious hold from the concepts I was building. It was not until I began to look at the separate texts as one body with different parts, as one conversation with different voices, that I began slowly to find my way to solid ground.

Once on the beach, the rubble of my understanding surrounding me, I was able to discern three elemental materials from which to build my understanding of the museum's role in aesthetic experience. I discovered that comfort is the first element of the structure. It is foundational. It "makes us strong," gives us confidence to engage in the discussion. Aesthetic experience can not proceed without comfort. Next, I discovered the element of conversation. Conversation helps us to learn the rules and the culture of a work of art. We take part in the discussion that the work initiates. The final element is community. The

work of art is a witness to the journey of understanding that another has traveled; an art exhibition is a conversation among those others. An exhibition of artworks is a community in discussion about something. Aesthetic experience can not occur without an other, without community.

So, what does this mean to art educators in museums? I propose that it means we need to think carefully before we rush to prepare didactic panels, brochures, tours, lectures and all the other wonderful addenda to the art exhibitions we install. We need to think about how we provide comfort to the novice and the expert artmaker and viewer. We need to think about how the exhibition design creates inclusive conversations rather than lectures or elite symposia. We need to think about how the art objects bear witness to the community engaged in the conversation. Do they create a sacred space that honors and respects the conversation and those who choose to participate in it? I believe that once we address these three elements, we will know what the appropriate peripheral materials are. They will be materials that are integral to the structure we have built with comfort, conversation and community.

In this last chapter, I want to gather together the ideas I feel I can stand under. These are understandings about the roles of comfort, conversation and community in learning in art museums. They are also understandings about developing opportunities for artmakers to learn what it means to make works of art through which others will learn. These understandings lead me to more questions and the possibilities for future conversations about learning through art in museums and in post-secondary institutions.

Comfort

When Arthur and I initiated *Reading Rilke*, in 1996, I was excited and optimistic about inviting all the participants to contribute actively to the endeavor. As I remarked above, despite the wisdom of the literature that I read prior to the project's commencement, I believed that just opening the door would assure that people would enter. I did not understand that there is much more to people's silence or non-involvement than the lack of an invitation. Now, four years later, I understand the wisdom of my feminist and post-modern colleagues, Nell Noddings, the Belenky team, and Pierre Bourdieu. Non-participation does not occur just because of a perceived exclusiveness. My conversation with the *Reading Rilke* texts taught me that people do not participate in conversations about art in museums for one of three reasons. They can not participate. They dare not participate. Or they choose not to participate.

I Can Not

When I examined Cathy's journal I discovered that some art makers and viewers do not participate in the conversation of understanding in an art museum because they can not. As the Belenky research team might say, they are in a state of silence. They do not have the words to speak; sometimes they do not even know they can. Others may have the words, but they do not know how to use them in the conversation. What is the role of the art museum in supporting the learning of those who believe they can not participate in the conversation? I discovered through my examination of the *Reading Rilke* texts that we need to comfort artmakers and viewers who believe they can not learn. We need to make them strong. I discovered that this means giving them words to use until they find their own. Like Cathy, those who "can not" need to borrow others' understandings until they recognize that they

have understandings of their own. Like Cathy, those who "can not" need responsive, respectful opportunities to use their newly discovered understandings. Art education in the museum can be an experience of comfort for those who "can not." Sarah showed me that by creating a space that is safe and engaging, those who thought they could not, can.

I Dare Not

Ingrid's work, *Address To You*, explored the element of risk involved in learning through art. It revealed the vulnerability we feel when entering into a relationship with a work. Martha's installation, *Companion,* suggested that learning through artworks can be comfortable if the space provided is "attentive" (to use Noddings' word).

How can art museums be places that are "safe" for participants who dare not enter? *Reading Rilke* revealed that artmakers can become active participants in the production of an exhibition. What was it about this project that provided feelings of security for artmakers like Cathy or Ingrid who felt uncertain about their involvement? I believe one factor was peer pressure. When I asked the artmakers to describe their process in deciding to participate in the project, many of the MFA students replied that (1) I was their friend and (2) the other students were participating. In contrast, the concept intrigued the established artists or they knew and enjoyed Rilke's work. The novice artmakers dared to join the conversation because it involved people they knew and trusted. I believe the MFA students felt respected and that we listened to them.

When I worked in a midsized museum in Saskatchewan, the installation officers used to say, "The only good artist is a dead artist!" By this they meant that installing historical works of art was easier because the artist could not tell them what to do. Because I often

helped in the installation of exhibitions, I can attest to the fact that sometimes artists had very strong opinions about the installation of their work. It seems that both the museum staff and the artists had difficulty listening to each other respectfully. Arthur remarked on this when he observed that in artist-run-centres there seems to be more cooperation and collaboration in exhibition planning and design. He suggested this was because the artists are both the administrators and the clients of these facilities. *Reading Rilke* suggests that public art museums can also work with artists collaboratively, can listen to each other respectfully, can explore an issue together. *Reading Rilke* provided artists with comfort through its collaborative structure. Sarah remarked, "I think the fact that we were *working ... along side* people who where more established artists in the community, ... gave everybody a chance to see that we really aren't so different." (emphasis mine). Arthur and I organized and curated the exhibition *along side* twelve artists. Working along side people, rather than feeling inferior or superior helps us to respect each other, helps us to listen to each other. When we work along side people we make each other strong, we comfort each other.

And what of viewers who dare not participate? *Hush Now, Companion, Strange Attractors,* and *We shall and always shall be realistic in the eyes of our friends* revealed that viewers will dare to participate when we create an attentive space. *Hush Now* provided the stamp that allowed viewers to reveal only as much of themselves as they wished. They could mark their presence with the stamp, experiment with the stamping process without ever revealing anything personal about themselves. *Companion* provided an inviting, cozy place to sit and contemplate. Martha revealed her understanding to viewers without describing the details of her journey. For viewers, this modeled a way of responding which made them feel

safe. They realized they could share their understandings without exposing personal information. *Strange Attractors* provided a space for interaction that was spontaneous and fun. Ripped pieces of paper, "post-it" notes and grease crayons are not precious. There was little risk to the viewer in doodling or scribbling off an anonymous response. The mirrors and grease pencils included with *We shall and always shall be realistic...*offered viewers a purely sensual experience. The pleasure of discovering the way the greasy implement slid across the smooth glass surface resulted in a lot of scribbling, a lot of "graffiti."[23] The artists of these pieces provided viewers with spaces that allowed them to be as personal or as anonymous as they needed to be. They allowed viewers to interact as they needed to: playfully, sensually, or critically and reflectively. These pieces valued the many different ways we learn through art. Some visitors will hesitate from participating in learning through art in museums because they dare not. Art museums can find ways to help artists and viewers take that risk.

I Choose Not To

Some people will choose not to learn through art in museums. During the planning stages of *Reading Rilke*, Arthur and I invited participation from all twelve of the MFA students registered in the graduate program. Eight chose to do so. Arthur asked six artists from the Calgary community to participate. Four joined us. Unfortunately, I did not interview those who chose not to participate. I can, however, make an educated guess at their reasons. I suspect that the timing of the project may have been inconvenient for some. Perhaps the lack of artist fees deterred others. Some of the art makers we

[23] Sam stated in our interview that he was disappointed by the "graffiti-like" quality of the marks left by viewers. He intended that they draw their reflections. "The mirrors are not works of art," he said.

approached may have felt little interest in making a work in response to another's. Perhaps, some were not interested in Rilke's work or the themes it explored.

I also attended the departmental meetings of four different academic units. Several instructors from each of these departments structured learning activities that used *Reading Rilke* as part of their coursework. Again, I can make an educated guess at the reasons that the majority of the instructors to whom I spoke did not incorporate *Reading Rilke* into their coursework. Perhaps they perceived they did not have time to participate. Perhaps they perceived a lack of relevance to their course.

I am certain that not every visitor to The Nickle Arts Museum during *Reading Rilke* visited the exhibition. There are probably similar reasons that those who could not visit *Reading Rilke*, or those who dared not to, felt excluded. Probably time and relevance played important roles in their decisions not to engage in learning through the works in the *Reading Rilke* exhibition.

My discussion of the choice not to participate is purely speculative. However, there is some research to support my hypotheses that non-participation might be simply a matter of choice. The Getty Institute's 1990 study queried non-visitors about their lack of attendance. A focus group recorded that non-visitors perceived that the museum had nothing relevant for them. Also noted as reasons for non-participation were logistical problems like finding the museum. Further, the Government of Canada commissioned a study that described the typical arts consumer in Canada (Decima Research, 1992). This study revealed that there are specific characteristics to people who visit art museums. They tend to be between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. People who visit art

museums generally have post-secondary education and are middle to high income earners. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Decima study confirmed that people who visit art museums visited them as children with an adult who had a significant influence on them. Thus, there is a specific socio-economic demography to art museum visitors.

Public relations can mend logistical problems such as finding the museum. Good public relations can also create links between the exhibitions and the life of the community, allowing people to perceive the relevance of art to their lives. Public school education and museum school tours programs endeavor to teach children to value the aesthetic productions in their communities. They try to provide the significant experiences with art that some children do not have with their families. However, despite all these interventions, I believe that some people will simply choose not to engage in learning experiences in an art museum. I believe it is important for educators in the arts to remember that people equipped with knowledge and skills and feeling secure may still choose not to engage in learning through art.

I believe that art museum educators need to remember that the notion that exposure to art is necessary because it ennobles the spirit and creates better citizens[24] has some very specific ideological roots (see Eagleton, 1990; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Art museum educators need to remember that, in the democratic world, citizens are free to choose to learn from a multitude of experiences. There is nothing necessarily wrong with the art museum or a particular exhibit if some people choose not to participate in learning there.[25]

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[24] See Dufresne-Tassé (1991) for David's statement of the purpose behind creating the Louvre in Paris.

[25] All this is said in light of the above mentioned phenomenon of those who feel they can not or dare not. An individual who feels confident and secure in the face of a decision to visit an exhibition of art may decide not to. There

Comfort in Aesthetic Experience

How did participants respond to the invitation to be part of the conversation of *Reading Rilke*? Some people seemed to feel uncertain about their skills and abilities. We enabled them to respond when we comforted them with safe and engaging environments that allowed them to "borrow" words and develop skills to interact. Artmakers seemed to gain comfort when they could "work alongside" others in equitable, respectful relationships. Viewers felt comforted when they had models to emulate and templates to follow. Despite these resources, some people chose not to participate. *Reading Rilke* reveals that once comfortable -- or made strong -- people are able to make the choice whether to be a participant in the conversation or not, and then to act on that decision.

Conversation

Once we choose to participate in a conversation with a work of art, we need encouragement to act on that decision. We need to know what the conversation is about and what our role in it is. Above, I discussed how working alongside each other, how models and templates can comfort or enable us to enter into learning through art. I propose that to remain in the conversation we require the opportunity for dialogue, an atmosphere of reciprocity, and experiences of being included. In short, when learners, both artists and viewers, experience care they can be active members of the conversation.

In Chapter Three, I described how the artmakers involved in *Reading Rilke* were able to create places where they and viewers could "live among." *Reading Rilke* revealed

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is another entire discussion that needs to be entertained that looks at relevance. There may be subcultures with aesthetic values that do not include art objects exhibited in a museum. Art educators are presently engaged in this discussion (Zimmerman, 1998), but I will not delve into it here.

that we facilitate aesthetic experience when we establish a caring dynamic. The artmakers and museum staff need to commit to "caring-for," to supporting, the viewers' learning. We saw how The Nickle Arts Museum provided our group with the space and the personnel to exhibit the work produced during the project. We saw how artists committed themselves to the interpretation of Rilke's text and to providing an inclusive, responsive environment for viewers in a variety of ways. We sustained our commitment to the reality created by *Reading Rilke* until the end of the project. We shared the energy we received from this commitment with viewers, and motivated them to become part of our conversation.

Through care, we communicated to viewers the "rules" of how to learn in an art museum. The pieces created by Sam, Liz, Daniel and Sarah gave viewers a place to play and to practice using their voices. Martha, Cathy, Selina and Ingrid made themselves vulnerable and showed viewers how aesthetic experience can lead to understanding. Paul and Sam revealed that learning through a work of art is a journey in which we meet and examine some of our fundamental beliefs about learning and art. Catherine, Beth and I created attentive spaces that revealed how aesthetic experience requires that we attend carefully, recognizing the importance and sacredness of each small detail.

We have described museums through metaphors of temple, library, forum and laboratory (Davis, 1989; Cameron, 1997). *Reading Rilke* revealed to me that perhaps we can describe an art museum as a corner where friends talk. In this corner, we encourage and strengthen each other by sharing our experience. I encourage art museum educators to use this metaphor more often in their program design. I believe we need more oppor-

tunities to learn through art in museums which are characterized by this kind of care.

Community

At the beginning of this dissertation, I examined what it means to "understand." I came to the conclusion that we "understand" when we examine that which lies beneath our assumptions about our worlds. This is not an easy task. It is like "sorting through the rubble left when the tower falls." It requires strength to move the fallen stones and courage to see what is there. For the task we need fortification. We learned in Chapter Five that such fortification comes through community. To push at the huge stones alone is an exercise in frustration. We can, however, accomplish this task with the aid of a community that has already begun to sort through the rubble. I suggest that an artwork documents the labour of another who sorts through the rubble. It is evidence that we are not alone in our task. It is a sign of the community standing behind us as we embark on our work of understanding. A work of art fortifies us on our journey of understanding.

The cohesion of the *Reading Rilke* participants impressed me. Through conversation about how and why we wanted to create this exhibition we built a strong community. At the opening I felt humbled as I surveyed the show. Each and every artmaker had committed himself or herself to their conversation with Rilke's text. Everyone lent their motivational energy to the task. Everyone committed themselves to the reality of the project and maintained that commitment to the end. The care exhibited by all the participants touched me. I felt proud that our careful attitude resulted in such fine work and such an exciting project.

The artmakers who participated in *Reading Rilke* took courage from Rilke's text

as they pondered what it is to make art, to be an artist. The works and the words of the artists fortified viewers. *Reading Rilke* revealed to me that the role of the art museum is to ensure that works documenting the artists' understandings, are available physically, intellectually, and emotionally to viewers. To accomplish this, I learned that art museums need to comfort viewers. Models, templates and mentors need to be available to novice viewers who lack skills and knowledge. Viewers need attentive spaces that help them focus on what they need to perceive. Learning through works of art in museums also requires conversation. Viewers reciprocate the care they receive when museums help them to voice their understandings.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, art museums provide viewers with the community essential to understanding through art. While viewing an art exhibition we see evidence that others are with us. The works of art witness that others are working to understand the issues with which we are grappling. When we stand in an art exhibition, we stand in a corner with friends and we share our experiences.

What I Stand Under

This dissertation has been a conversation with the texts from *Reading Rilke* and related literature about the role of museums in aesthetic experience. The conversation has explored a rich territory that included the nature of aesthetic experience, learning and caring. Through the voices of the participants in *Reading Rilke,* we heard compelling stories about the importance of comfort, conversation and community in learning through art in museums. I have learned that within art museums there is a way to work that is

encouraging, fortifying and inclusive. I have learned that those who know can share their knowledge with others, and that this sharing happens through the exhibition of artworks.

Future Conversations

When I survey the "rubble" that I have carefully sorted through, some stones do not fit easily into the new structure I have built. We need to turn over these stones. They provide the starting places for future conversations about the ways we learn through works of art. These are the stones of Mentorship and The Viewers' Role in Design.

Mentorship

The first stray stone is the role of mentorship in aesthetic experience. Arthur and I felt strongly about this aspect of the project. *Letters To A Young Poet* documented a mentorship relationship. Yet mentorship seems to have been the least developed aspect of the project. The Master of Fine Arts students and the established artists did not form the dynamic, enduring relationships I had hoped for. The viewers did not perceive the *Reading Rilke* artists as mentors in their learning.

I believe these relationships failed to emerge because we failed to provide formally structured experiences for supporting mentoring relationships, those between the mature artists and students, and those between artmakers and viewers. The artists and students forwarded the following suggestions during my interviews with them: First, Marie, Selina, Sarah and Beth suggested that we needed regularly scheduled planning meetings and group discussions between the artists and students. Second, Marie, Selina, Sarah and Daniel suggested that mentor relationships might have developed between artist and student if we had formally paired them according to interests and expertise. Finally, Sarah suggested scheduled visits by the group to both artists' and students'

studios. She believed these would have enriched their discussions about the text, about the artmaking process, and about being an artist.

Wunsch (1994) described the role of the mentor in initiating novices into a community. One of the important functions of the mentor is to teach the novice the language of the community and the rules by which the community plays. Wunsch describes how mentors teach procedural knowledge. She suggests that knowledge of how others approach learning provides models for novices to follow. Eventually, individuals develop integrated ways of learning that use subjective experience, shared experiences and useful procedures in understanding. (see also Belenky et al, 1997). Wunsch also described how mentors challenge the beliefs of novices and encourage them in their growth. Belenky et al (1997) confirmed women's need for flexible structures that support them in acquiring procedural knowledge. List (1991) described how creative women, when they were young, had mentors who "challenged and stimulated" (p.118) their creative growth. The mentors that List's study described,

> *challenged abilities; set high standards of excellence; encouraged creative potential; allowed for freedom of expression; if specialized, were very knowledgeable in their field...*

In order for vital mentoring relationships to occur, learners need opportunities to meet and trust potential mentors. *Reading Rilke* did not formally provide enough of these opportunities. I believe that mentoring relationships need structured experiences in which to develop. To build trust and confidence, novices need formal structures that introduce them to potential mentors in the earlier stages of learning. Once the novice establishes a relationship with a mentor, she will become comfortable with the challenge, high

standards, encouragement and freedom of expression that the mentor provides. Novices, like Marie and Ingrid, do not have the security to risk a relationship without these structured experiences. With these structures, mentors can teach novices to live in a community confidently and with a strong voice.

I urge art educators in museums and in post-secondary institutions to engage in a conversation about the role of mentorship in learning through art. *Reading Rilke* points to the importance of mentor relationships in training professional artists and in viewers' aesthetic experience. Separating these two phenomena from each other and talking about them separately will lead us to greater understanding of the role of mentorship in learning through art.

The Viewers' Role in Design

The MFA students and artists who participated in *Reading Rilke* gave eloquent evidence through their work, journals and interviews of what and how they learned through art. *Reading Rilke* provided a rich context for the artmakers' aesthetic experience. On the other hand, *Reading Rilke* did not provide viewers the active involvement in learning that Arthur and I envisioned. Nor did the data collection methods we used provide viewers adequate opportunity to voice their experiences. Hence, as the research questions for this study evolved, based on the texts from *Reading Rilke*, the artmakers' learning became the dominant focus.

If I could do *Reading Rilke* again, I would include our viewers in the conversation earlier. University faculty were enthusiastic and supportive: nine undergraduate and

graduate classes visited *Reading Rilke*. However, I believe that the comfort level of many viewers was less than it might have been if we had included their voices in the conversation earlier. For example, one viewer remarked, "When I visit an art museum, I expect it to be like a temple." She was uncomfortable with the interactive nature of the show. It did not seem sacred enough for her. Other viewers were not sure what the show's central thesis was. Others felt excluded because they had not read *Letters To A Young Poet*. I strongly believe that including university faculty and students in the conversation during the design stage would have helped us to address these needs. After all, the cared-for is an essential part of the caring relationship! Belenky et al (1997), Noddings (1984) and Gilligan (1977) told me this, but I did not attend to it carefully enough at the time.

Art museums need to talk about how to include viewers in the conversation. We need to explore contexts for our work that best provide for this inclusivity, while honoring the voices of all who come to the conversation. This is not easy. We have few role models for this kind of activity in museums. I suggest that perhaps if we look at contexts that require caring we may begin to envision how we can have these conversations. Nurses and Early Childhood educators have struggled with these kinds of relationships. They have developed understandings that honor and respect the voices of the cared-for. Perhaps their understandings can help us as we search for understanding of our own work. We will be vulnerable as we enter into these conversations. We must have courage. We will gain this if we remember the three elemental materials of our work: comfort, conversation and community.

Conclusion

What will I do the next time a group of people stand on the threshold of the art museum waiting for me to share my knowledge with them? I will invite them in. This invitation will precede the opening of the exhibition. It will occur when I first think, "I'd like to do an exhibition about [fill in the blank]." I will collaborate with curators, collectors or artists, and viewers to develop an attentive space in which all can participate.

Next, I will care for them by giving them comfort. *Reading Rilke* taught me that perhaps the visitors who left my tour so long ago did not have the words to talk to me about the work. I dis-comforted them by my request that they tell me about their impressions of the work. Perhaps they were on the tour to learn the words. Perhaps they needed to borrow mine for a while, until they could find their own. I understand now that a tour guide can be a role model for a novice viewer. A guided tour can provide templates for aesthetic experience through sensitive questioning. An exhibition space can promote attentiveness and help the viewer feel valued. For example, by responding to some of the viewer's basic needs for adequate lighting, orientation devices, and seating the art museum shows that it respects and values her experience.

Once comfortable, the visitors may have stayed. Thoughtfully planned activities, developed with consideration for the visitors' learning objectives, would have engaged them in the conversation of the exhibition. I do not know what the visitors wanted to learn that day. I did not bother to ask. Nor did I discuss with them possible alternatives to the activities I had planned. There was little dialogue, not to mention reciprocity in my naive attempts at conversation. Today, I would establish an agenda for our tour based on the

objectives of the group, the content of the work and my expertise. Our tour would be a conversation with the works.

In alienating those half dozen visitors, I certainly did not help them to understand. I left them to sort through the rubble by themselves. I believe the works on exhibition that day were by "Little Dutch Masters" of the Baroque period. Today, I would ask myself how I can provide visitors with links between their concerns and those of the artists. How can I demonstrate to the visitors that they can "have their being among" the works? An educator who cares for her learners will provide opportunities for them to make these links through demonstrations, questioning, storytelling, or interpretative performance, to name only a few techniques. My goal would be to make the visitors part of the community present in the works.

Even now, the woman's comment echoes across the years. "We don't want to talk about what we know, we want you to tell us what you know." *Reading Rilke: Works by artists inspired by "Letters To A Young Poet"* was one of my attempts to address the problem my visitor articulated that day. *Comfort, Conversation and Community: The Role of The Museum in Art Education* is my attempt at understanding what she needed.

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APPENDIX A:
PROJECT DESCRIPTION SUBMITTED TO THE NICKLE ARTS MUSEUM FOR APPROVAL SEPTEMBER, 1996

Reading Rilke:
Inquiring Into The Role of Dialogue in Aesthetic Learning

The purpose of this project is to explore the role of dialogue in situations of aesthetic learning. The project will examine the nature of the response of visual artists to a literary text, the nature of the relationship between mature artists and emerging professionals, and the nature of the dialogue between artists and viewers. The following describes the origins of the project and elaborates on the three issues under exploration by "Reading Rilke".

I have recently become acquainted with the little book that collects the letters of Rainer Maria Rilke to a young poet friend of his, Franz Xavier Kappus between the years 1902 and 1908, "Letters to a Young Poet". The book has become a companion to me over the last months. I am comforted by the knowledge that other young artists have struggled with emotional and spiritual issues very akin to those I have faced. I am also mesmerized by the formal explorations such subjective experiences suggest; the issues of balance, tension, space and time Rilke writes about are fundamental to the aesthetic process. I wonder how artists might interpret Rilke's letters through their work, how the experiences he explores might be translated into works of visual art. I am also intrigued by the responsive nature of the letters. They are not essays or poems, written for some indistinct "other", only vaguely conceived. The letters are witness to a dynamic

interchange between two artists who take on the roles of both writer and reader alternatively.

This reflection led me to approach Arthur Nishimura about working with Fine Art students to explore certain formal and conceptual issues in visual art through Rilke's book. Professor Nishimura was interested in the idea and through several discussions, we have finalized a proposal for an exhibition in the Nickle Arts Museum, February through March, 1997. The project, "Reading Rilke" would consist of three elements. The first is the creation of a body of work by participating graduate level art students and mature artists from the Calgary arts community based on the reading of "Letters to a Young Poet". The second element would be the exhibition of this body of work in the education gallery at the Nickle Arts Museum for the months of February and March, 1997. These two elements address the issues of the response of visual artists to a literary text and the relationship between mature artists and emerging professionals.

The third element addresses the issue of responsivity and the fluctuating role of the artist as creator and viewer, author and reader. The artists involved in the project would be asked to visit the exhibition on a frequent and regular basis over the exhibition time and to write their reflections about the exhibition in a journal kept in the gallery space. These journals would be read by other visitors to the gallery and space would be provided within them for these visitors to enter into a dialogue with the artists. In this way, we hope that artists and viewers become co-creators in building the meaning of the exhibition. The exhibition is in itself an exploration of the themes of balance, tension, space and time.

Artists, fine arts faculties in universities and art galleries are exploring their roles as educators and as educational institutions, respectively, in contemporary, post-modern society. We are looking at the sources of our work and the myriad ways we reify our understandings in works and acts of art. We are examining the nature of professional art practice and the training of professionals for the practice. The relationships we have with viewers and our communities are being scrutinized by ourselves, our funders and the public. "Reading Rilke" is a project that enters this dialogue, providing artists, educators, curators and viewers, the key actors in this drama, an opportunity to play with the issues and build some meaning for themselves.

APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTMAKERS
NOVEMBER, 1997

Thank you INSERT NAME OF ARTMAKER HERE for meeting with me today. It's good to see you again after so many months! Before we start our conversation, I just want to go over the proceedure we are going to use and make sure that you understand it. I will be asking you four questions to frame our discussion today. I want you to understand that I will be tape-recording our conversation and that this recording will be used as data in the report of the study. I will be quoting passages from our conversation, but I will keep your identity annonymous, using a pseudonym in the report. If you have any questions at any time during our convesation, please ask me. If you wish to end our conversation at anytime you may do so by indicating your desire to me. Do you understand all of this? Do you have any questions at this time? Do you wish to proceed with the conversation?

1. Can you describe for me your process in deciding to participate in *Reading Rilke*?

2. What do you believe was the most successful aspects of *Reading Rilke* and why?

3. What do you believe were the least successful aspects of *Reading Rilke* and why?

4. If you could change anything about the project, what would you change and why?

5. What significance has the project had for your work/your life since it ended?