THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Whispers Into Words

A written accompaniment to the thesis exhibition

by

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A PAPER

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Abstract

This paper is in support of the thesis exhibition by Charmaine Laboucane entitled <u>Whispers Into Words</u>. It describes my quest for voice and the struggle with silence and anxiety in terms of feminist art and feminist writings. The work is described in terms of textual reading using the concepts of S/Z and intertext from writer Roland Barthes and the "Open Work" from Umberto Eco. It describes the works of this installation in terms of viewer response and interpretations. The work is examined as an interplay of the autobiographical, memory, and text.

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Introduction

When I think of the work I have assembled for my thesis exhibition, I realize that all the work is connected together. Slowly this body of work has emerged, displaying a similarity of concepts, contextual ideas and themes. I see this work as a collection of memories, experiences and ideas taken from my own cumulative experiences.

The title of both the exhibition and this thesis support paper indicate the major themes. Whispers Into Words refers to the human condition of the experience of memory and voice. As memory shifts it is vivid in places and absent in others. These memories are fragmented and fleeting and are then metamorphosed into words but experienced as silent whispers. These themes greatly saturate the work that make up my thesis exhibition and I examine them in this paper.

The function of this thesis support paper is to discuss the form and content of the work, to outline certain relationships individual pieces have with each other, and to speak of the relationship between the artist and viewer. This paper also allows readers certain access to knowledge of the influential factors that have challenged particular aspects of my thinking and affected elements of the exhibition.

In Chapter One of this paper I trace certain events of my life and connect them to my "voice" and examine how lack-of-voice has affected my growth. "Silence" and "voice" can be deeply connected, and *my* silence has been a barrier to my intellectual and artistic development. With the help of writer Carol Becker and the book Women's Ways of Knowing, I was able to begin on the road to self-enlightenment and under- standing.

In Chapter Two of this paper I examine certain influences on my art and artistic development. Text, artists' books and specific artists like Davi Det Hompson, Mary Kelly and Faith Ringgold are examined and related to my work in the exhibition.

The set up of the installation is discussed in Chapter Three. The exhibition is organized into three rooms. Each room is given two names, one references the location within the gallery, and the second name is a title that I feel captures the meaning of each room. Also in this chapter, I will discuss how I hope the work within the exhibition reflects identity, memory and thought, also drawing reference from Indian artist Sutapa Biswas and poet Charles Baudelaire.

The works *Comfort Me With Words I, II, III,* and *IV* (Presented in the Southwest room - *The Surface Skin*) and *Collecting Memories...* (Presented in the Southeast room - *Deep Interior*) use a combination of text, object and imagery to express their meaning and stand as metaphors for human thought and memory. These pieces reflect my interest in text and offer starting and finishing points to the entire exhibition by surrounding the central room (*The Deep Interior*) which contains 250 frames filled with a multitude of imagery, representing the bulk of the work that I have created since my time in the MFA program.

Overall, the installation represents the many faces I possess. There are three areas of human existence that I am trying to convey: *The Surface Skin* — open to anyone to experience but seldom understood; *The Second Being* — the real person, limited to only a few people, usually family and close friends; and *The Deep Interior* — the place inside ourselves where we retreat when we need solitude, the place that can only really exist in our dreams, the ultimate place of understanding and comfort.

<u>Chapter One</u>

<u>Retracing the Past</u>

> We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the
> story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point
> doesn't lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time when they
> happened; the only point lies in interpretation.[1]

> To be creative one needs to feel the confidence to recreate the world
> from scratch.[2]

Going Back

For some reason, I think it's significant for me to remember what I was like

between birth and puberty. As an adult I have very few memories of what I was like

growing up, and when I try to recall what I was like during my beginning years of

development, I can only hazard a guess. The memories I can recall are very fragmented

and the many things I do remember have been related to me by other people's

recollections. By recognizing what I was like during this time, I feel that I might come to

a better understanding of who it is that I am today. I feel that it's important to know this

so I can understand myself as an artist.

> The stories we tell ourselves about who we are — the half-remembered
> events and places which shape our lives — are the foundations on which
> we build up a sense of self. Re-working what has already happened, we
> also give it current meaning, for history always represents the present as
> much as the past.[3]

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[1] C. Steedman, <u>Landscape for a Good Woman</u> (London: Virago, 1986), p. 5, as cited in
Rosemary Betterton, <u>An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and The Body</u> (London:
Routledge, 1996), p. 172.

[2] Michele Murray, "Creating Oneself From Scratch," in Janet Sternburg's <u>The Writer on
Her Work</u> (New York: Norton, 1980), as cited in Carol Becker, <u>Zones of Contention:
Essays on Art, Institutions, Gender, and Anxiety</u> (Albany: State of New York Press,
1996), p. 216.

[3] Betterton, p. 173.

From this statement I understand that my childhood has shaped the person I have transformed into today. When I think back to when I was young, I recall that although I was incredibly shy, I was also happy, playful, and I had an infectious laugh. When I asked my mother if I had shown any abilities in art when I was young, she told me she never saw anything beyond that of a normal child creating the world around her with the exactness of stick figures, but one story she tells stands out in my mind. It is a story of how I once created drawings on my bedroom wall.

Although I'm sure my works were masterpieces, they infuriated my mother. As I remember through photographs, my bed was pushed up against one wall, so I had to climb between the wall and bed to get at my surface. I must have thought by hiding my creations behind my bed I wouldn't get caught, for what could not be seen was not really there. Currently, I don't know why I felt the need to hide them at all.

Of course my mother always found the drawings, and unfortunately, as compelled as I was to draw on that wall, the actuality of my first major punishment quickly ceased that creative endeavour. I did not draw on the wall again, and from that point on, my creative output returned to coloring books and construction paper.

As the years moved along I neglected my creative drive until it was almost completely erased from memory. If I was to find a consequence to my first major spanking, I might assume that it had caused my indifference to art during my preteen years. Then, at thirteen, my artistic ambition emerged once again. At this age I had no training and was uneducated in art so I concentrated on creating recognizable images. As I entered into my late teens, I was still trying to draw the things around me, but at this point, art was only for recreation. I didn't know what I was trying to say. In fact, I didn't know art offered me a chance at a clear voice at all. Then at the age of twenty, I

embarked on obtaining my undergraduate degree. Half way through my second year of

university, and after much debate, I decided to take art as my major. At this point I

allowed myself to take the first step to create. During this period my work was careful

and obvious. I quickly learned that there was more to producing art than being able "to

draw." University offered me a place to expand and grow, not only my creative side, but

it also offered me a chance to explore personal identity.

One might wonder why I should relate such stories to my thesis support paper,

but in many ways, I feel that the previous events in my life have foreseen certain aspects

of the exhibition. In the exhibition I have tried to recreate feelings of discovery, memory,

internal and external voices, as I believe the search for the autonomous self must include

all aspects of one's life. The need for gathering memories, however fragmented and

obscure, has become an important aspect of my creative process.

Recently, while enrolled in the MFA program, I experienced an awakening. I

realized art is not just about capturing objects, but a way of knowing, discovering and

maturing. I discovered that through my art I have a voice that speaks to anyone who

cares to listen. For me, that is enough. I create art for reasons I can't always explain, but

when done it creates a strength within, a power to remain steadfast in my beliefs and

opinions. We create the things that are important to us for various reasons, and creativity

can be a very powerful tool. For me, this creativity is not only about power but also

about the ability to bring a thought, impression or belief into reality. I want to create

work with substantive ground and symbolic truth. I want to use this creativity so *my*

voice can be heard.

The quest for one's voice can be very significant and no voice is silent. "It is the

symbolic substance of human life, there is always at its origin a cry and in its end a

silence; between the two moments develop the fragile time of speech; fluid and threatened, the voice is there, life itself."[4] Perhaps, because I worry about the temporality of life, I feel the need to be heard, and I believe that language is important because it remains on the surface of all things.

During the first year of my MFA program and while on an exchange with the Royal College of Art in London, I began writing in a journal. I was not writing with intentions of informing an audience about who I was, nor was I trying to find salvation. I was not trying to enhance my literary skills, nor did I feel the need to record my thoughts for posterity. I wrote in a journal as a way to remember things as they happened and not how I thought they should be. I wrote simply for myself, as a way to occupy time. For me, it was simply an outpouring of non-verbal garbage, and while there, I began to realize the importance of words and presently, as my exhibition will attest, I am still strongly drawn to text.

Before, what I'll call my pre-art existence, I knew I had a voice but outside I was mute. Although I didn't feel my words were worthy, I didn't *want* to remain silent; I felt the importance of developing my own voice. Voicelessness can be described as never feeling you are good enough, not feeling valuable, or seeing yourself as not capable of speech, and these feelings can be enormously repressive.

The voicelessness I am describing is presented in Women's Ways of Knowing.[5] Voiceless people are unaware of their intellectual capabilities, and they view all others around them as knowing the truth.

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[4] Roland Barthes, The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996). p. 182.
[5] Mary Field Belenky, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (New York: BasicBooks, Inc., 1986), p. 18.

It is [the voice] a metaphor that can apply to many aspects of women's experience and development. In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: speaking up, speaking out, being silenced, not being heard, words as weapons, having no words, listening to be heard, and so on, in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others.[6]

As Belenky describes, the "voice" is more than an "academic shorthand"[7] for being heard; it is a metaphor used to depict "intellectual and ethical development, and the development of voice, mind and self are intrinsically intertwined."[8] It is a very strange sensation to realize you are voiceless, and during my time in the MFA program I began to look back at the person I was and realized that I *had* been voiceless. I began to understand why I was afraid and how those feelings obstructed my words from being heard. I'm not sure if I would have come to understand the importance of one's "voice" with or without the help of art, because I doubt that art and the act of finding one's own words are intrinsically connected, but *I needed* to find a way to express myself, so I turned inward and found expression through art. I found that art offered me a way to develop *my* voice as I hadn't been able to do before. I started to use text in my last year of university for a variety reasons, but mainly because I found traditional picture making lacking because I was not able to communicate intimately with my viewers. At this point, it made sense to me to turn to words. I introduced text to my work because it offered me a certain amount of freedom. I also liked the way the surfaces looked by adding familiar lines of reference that could easily be identified by viewers. By turning to text in my art I was able to find a unique and authentic place in which to express myself. But vocalizing

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[6] Belenky, et al. P. 18.
[7] Belenky, et al. P. 18.
[8] Belenky, et al. P. 18.

to be heard and "seeing" to understand are very different. In art, optic comprehension encourages the viewer to look at an object from a suitable distance. "Visual" understanding requires the eyes to "see," and the ear requires a connection between the object and the subject in order to gain understanding. Thus, "speaking and listening become dependent on dialogue *and* interaction."[9] I had to distinguish between my need for understanding and my desire for voice, but I was also interested in finding certain truths about myself.

With the desire to understand and the need to be heard I began to feel anxious. I craved understanding. I needed change. I wanted to find a place within society as a person who makes art, but the anxiety I felt prevented me from expressing myself with the confidence and creativity I needed in order to gain acceptance from my family, friends and peers as an innovative and mature artist.

Carol Becker writes in her book Zones of Contention,

> This culture does not encourage women to develop an autonomous
> ego, so it often becomes difficult for women to withstand the bouts
> of anxiety that accompany acts of assertion like expressing anger, ask-
> ing for what one needs, taking the necessary time, space, and energy
> for one's own development, or pushing one's work to capacity - no
> matter what it takes.[10]

I began to realize that anxiety is just as debilitating as voicelessness. The right amount of anxiety can motivate, too little can leave the person unprotected, and too much anxiety can leave the person too afraid to express themselves. As Carol Becker writes in Zones of Contention, women have been conditioned from birth to put the needs of others before themselves. When this happens, along with "abandonment-anxiety,"[11] the

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[9] Belenky, et al. P. 18.

[10] Becker, p. 214-215.

[11] "Abandonment-anxiety" leaves the person fearing the loss of love from their children, family, friends, peers, co-workers, community and mates, and they may even fear of

ego is then in danger from the superego, "that part of the self that accuses the self of not living up to some obligation deemed essential."[12] If one's ego is devalued, that person often tends to exhibit signs of voicelessness, underestimating their own skills, potentials and talents. As I began to do research for this thesis support paper I became aware that these things Becker and Belenky described as being repressive were so ingrained within me I could only begin to realize their full effects on my life.

As I read <u>Women's Ways of Knowing</u> I became fascinated with what Belenky described as the five stages of knowing. The five types of knowing are described as:

1. Silence- A position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority.

2. Received Knowledge- A perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own.

3. Subjective Knowledge- A perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited.

4. Procedural Knowledge- A position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge.

5. Constructed Knowledge- A position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing.[13]

These five ways of knowing are not fixed or only applied to women. They are abstract and suggestive categories in which one can examine and contemplate the feminine identity. Belenky notes that these stages are by no means "scientific" descriptions of all women, but more generalizations as types of women that can exist.

When I read these five stages I was shocked to find that at certain times in my life I have fallen into one category (silence) more than any of the others, yet at the same time,

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losing these people to death. Becker, p. 215

[12] Becker, p. 215.

[13] Belenky, et al. P. 15.

I was able to realize that parts of me existed in all categories. I have described my pre-art existence as being dominated by "voicelessness" and anxiety. I now realize these characterizations are merely renderings that I have affected for myself, perhaps to justify and explain previous actions and inability at expression. I use these idealizations merely as guides, places to start examining things about myself that I might not have realized otherwise.

As I continue to grow I am beginning to realize that these five stages plot an avenue of self-exploration and persistence that allows women to analyse the frameworks of logic, identity, and self-knowledge. When I first began to examine Belenky's ways of knowing I was able to position myself at certain stages, and I began to realize that perhaps I wasn't functioning in my fullest capacity, that there were truths of myself that had yet to be found.

When I sat down to answer the "truths" about my myself and my art I started by *asking* questions. I found that each answer was only replaced by other questions. Instead of becoming frustrated, I let each question fuel the creative process. I knew that I could find what I was looking for once the work was complete. With each new work, something from a distance would appear and over time, this image would become clearer, until I realized that by working in this way, I was creating a path for myself, not a single path, but a road filled with so many branches that my head spun from lack of knowing which direction to take. It opened up so many possibilities that I found myself working instinctually, and without blueprints of any kind I was able to fully appreciate the kind of imagery I pulled from myself. I was searching for the "ultimate truth," but I slowly began to realize that "truth" is an ongoing process.

Searching for "truth" began to open up parts of me, it enabled me to take control over my art. I began to allow myself freedom to work, without thinking. At first it was difficult for me to accept the work that emerged from my subconscious. I felt unsure of its significance and usefulness. I had always thought it was best to plan out everything before starting. But by "accepting knowledge that is taken intuitively and believing that it is as important as knowledge learned from others allows for a new way of thinking."[14]

I think the fear of accepting intuitive work as being valid is a characteristic of my youth, and it has only been within my last year of the MFA program that a new way of thinking has emerged. I have come to understand that at times my intuitive instincts are more cogent than those things I had "known" to be correct, and I have also begun to make certain connections within my work. This has enabled me to understand my reactions to things and recognize how certain events have challenged my life.

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[14] Belenky, et al. P. 134-135.

Chapter Two

Influences

The Use of Text as a Language

> My words are dry and raspy, the residue of something from which
> all the nourishment has been sucked and now I must get rid of what's
> left.[15]

> She never did and never could put words together, out of her own
> head.[16]

At times I felt I was so full of words that I couldn't speak, that there was no place

for the words to go but pour outside of me in bursts and waves. I became so obsessed

with the use of text that my work was lost in all the noise. But I also felt my work was

silent, so I began to think that it had to be something else. I found that I wasn't drowning

from my words but I drowning from my voicelessness. Once this voicelessness abated my

work began to evolve.

As Roland Barthes stated "speech is irreversible; that is its fatality. What has been

said cannot be unsaid."[17] I started using text in my work because I had a fear of my voice.

I was afraid of being vocal, to say the wrong things. One might think that when I realized

that I was without a voice the need for text would diminish, but even though I was no

longer afraid to hear my own voice, my use of text increased until entire surfaces were

drowning with my words. I was no longer afraid of my voice. I couldn't stop talking.

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[15] David Rabe, Recital of the Dog (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 41.
[16] George Eliot, Middlemarch (New York: Penguin Books, 1985, originally published 1871-72) as cited in Mary Field Belenky, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing, p. 35.
[17] Barthes, p. 76.

Reading Text

> Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an
> individual.[18]
>
> Writing already involves intention, interpretation and(mis)under-
> standing, in short, it inscribes a relation between human subjects.
> The book sets out a relationship between author and reader, the
> letter between sender and reader.[19]

Roland Barthes describes a manner of reading where the reader is filled with

many of their own interpretations and ideas. He calls this openness S/Z. This type of

reading is beneficial because it allows for many possibilities and goes beyond the

traditional relationship the reader has with the author. As Barthes describes it, S/Z

(text-as-reading) is little known because we have become so concerned with *why* an

author writes that *what* the author writes is less important. (This idea is not exclusive

only to authors but it applies to artists as well.) "The author is regarded as the external

owner of his work, and the rest of his readers, as simple usufructuaries."[20] [21]

Writer Umberto Eco describes a similar reading to Barthes, in his book The Open

Work. For Eco, the "open-work" offers a "multitude of intentions, a plurality of

meanings, and above all, a wide variety of different ways of being understood and

appreciated."[22] As Eco believes, art provokes incomplete experiences, and with these

experiences, the viewer establishes a need for completion.

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[18] Roland Barthes, The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 13.

[19] Philippi, p. 18.

[20] The word usufruct means the "legal right of using and enjoying the fruit or profits of something belonging to another; the right to use or enjoy something. The term usufructuaries is one having the use or enjoyment of something." Websters dictionary (Internet)

[21] Barthes, p. 53.

[22] Umberto Eco, The Open Work, trans. by Anna Cancogni with intro. by David Robey, (United Kingdom: Hutchinson Raduis, 1989), p. 8.

Eco states that traditional (classical) art is unambiguous, while modern (contemporary) art's ambiguous nature increases the viewers' need for information.

Classical art "could give rise to various responses, but its nature was such as to channel those responses in a particular direction."[23] So in classical art there is only one way of understanding while contemporary art encourages an open-endedness, thereby able to reach a wider audience with a wider range of interpretations, possibilities and readings.

The concept of the open work, text and intertext play important roles in how readers interpret what they read. As stated by Kathryn L. McKelvey in her MFA thesis support paper Distance Over Time:

> Integral to the concept of *text* and *intertext*[24] is a particular method of reading. Barthes conceives of conventional reading as a consumer activity and the conventional work as a product for consumption. However, the *text* demands a different reader, one who is willing to interpret beyond the conventions of the written page.[25]

It can be argued then that these concepts of S/Z, text and intertexts are the *only* ways to read. Outside these concepts, "the literary work would very simply be imperceptible, just like the word or speech of an unknown language."[26] These ideas allow for readers to come to their own interpretations rather than concerning themselves with *why* the author wrote what s/he wrote. This type of reading is how I hope *Collecting Memories...* (Illustration 1) and the other works in the installation are read.

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[23] Eco, p. x.

[24] Intertext — Intertextuality is the intrusion of another voice, the projection of the reader into the space of writing, and the projection of the writing into the space of reading; it is the way of reading text through other texts; it is the phenomenon that lets the reader receive the texts in the text; and intertextuality is also the opening of the text to its future productivity. Barthes, p. 9.

[25] McKelvey, p. 11.

[26] Armine Kotin Mortimer, The Gentlest Law: Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of Text* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989), p. 9.

> Language itself is seen as constructing an imaginary coherence of the self
> which achieves its unity in the act of being read: authorship gives way to
> writing in theory and practice of textuality. Language thus offers us posi-
> tions through which we are able to "speak" ourselves.[27]

Eco speaks of language as something not natural to man but experienced. "Language is

not an organization of natural stimuli, like a beam of photons; it is an organization of

stimuli realized by man, and, as such, an artifact, like any other art form."[28] He goes on to

say that:

> There is no need to identify art with language in order to pursue
> an analogy that would allow us to apply to one what we have said
> about the other. As the linguists have clearly understood, language
> is not *one* means of communication among others, but rather the
> *basis of all communication*, or even better, language really is the
> foundation of culture.[29]

Our understanding of things rests on the principle that we do so through

language, and language then becomes a powerful aspect in making art. We are drawn to

what is familiar and language is universal. Even though viewers may be witness to

language they don't recognize or understand, they still bring with them a full

understanding of what that language *might* mean. The act of speaking, reading, seeing or

hearing offers the participants the chance to become intimate with an art work. Using

language is not only a way to express something, but it also unites the viewer with the

one thing they are most familiar with.

Text has become an important factor in my art. Writers Roland Barthes and

Umberto Eco have enabled me to aspire to an openness in my work that encourages a

wide range of interpretations and possibilities from viewers. Relating the ideas of text and

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[27] Betterton, p. 164.

[28] Eco, p. 28.

[29] Eco, p. 28.

intertext to my work, from there I am able to make the transition to the world of artists' books.

I became interested in bookworks because they allow me to write, and write in the way I feel most comfortable with. Artists' books allow me to explore and delve into my inner self and extract the words that exist there without feeling the pressure of producing "traditional" narration.

Artists' Books

> What is more meaningful: the book or the text it contains?
> What was first: the chicken or the egg?[30]

Although "bookworks" are not a new art form, they are abundantly seen in contemporary visual arts. Bookworks are very attractive to many artists because the artist has a high degree of control over the entire appearance of the book. It allows for many levels of experimentation with narrative, sequence and format. Bookworks encourage artists to explore their use of materials and their conceptual ideas. Rather than being a book about art, a bookwork *is* the artwork. An artists' book is done for its own sake.

> An imaginative book, by definition, attempts to realize something else
> with syntax, with format, with pages, with covers, with size, with shapes,
> with sequence, with structure, with binding - with any or all of these
> elements.[31]

All these elements are presented to a viewer in order to create a different kind of "reading" experience, offering the viewer a chance to *experience* the book as both visual art and literature.

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[30]Joan Lyons ed. Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), p. 36.
[31] Lyons, p. 29.

Bookworks are unique in that they are a highly varied form of art. They are open to any artist in any field. Bookworks encourage a motion of the mind, a renewal of reading, an experience of interaction. Because of their nature, bookworks increase the sensitivity of reading and allow viewers to expand beyond the conventional use of language.

For the artist, the bookwork's relationship with readers is based on narrative, and the book "provides a more intimate communication with the viewer than a more conventional art object."[32] There are many types of bookworks; some appear to the viewer as more traditional forms of the book, while others offer an expression, form, or feeling. A bookwork achieves intimacy by using shape, context and narrative on a personal level. The narrative of a book becomes an important method of informing the viewer about the meaning of the work, but narrative is not always presented with words. At times, a bookwork may contain little or no text at all. The appearance of the book can examine the relationship between text and image.

Artists like Davi Det Hompson use the book form as a way to play on viewers' perception of reality and the familiar. Hompson's books have a more traditional appearance to them, while his narrative has affinities with concrete poetry.

The bookwork *You Know It Has to be a Hairpiece* (1977) visually appears as almost ordinary. Inside the pages, Hompson presents single typed sentences placed individually on each page. He is not "story-telling", but, as he puts it, "image" telling.[33] The sentences are snippets of conversations taken at random that give the impression of words just being spoken or heard. Because the text has been enlarged two or three times the normal size, attention is drawn to the appearance of the word, accentuating letter and

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[32] Lyons, p. 47.
[33] Lyons, p. 121.

typeface. The simplicity of these words offers refreshing glimpses into ordinary conversational occurrences.

As a woman, I became interested in bookworks because they allowed for certain degrees of privacy and intimacy, and I was aware that a large number of women artists have been attracted to bookworks for similar reasons. They encourage a relationship with the viewer and in many cases they offer the perfect opportunity for the artist to work in an autobiographical way. In this feminist era, bookworks appeal to large numbers of women because they offer an outlet where the producer remains in complete control. Bookworks allow for voice and because voicelessness is, more often than not, an issue, the book form allows for aggressive and subtle uses of one's own words. Initially, I did not want feminist ideas to interfere with what I had to say, but as I reached further, into the ideas of bookworks and feminist ideas, I found that they were connected in many ways, and there indeed, was a place for me.

The relationship between the viewer and the artist becomes dependent on the viewer's willingness to pick up the book, which itself is an act of intimacy, and turning pages to follow the progress of the story becomes essential to the flow of a book.

The work in Whispers into Words relies heavily on the viewer's willingness to interact with the installation. Narrative and reading becomes the main focus because the viewer is expected to, at least, read parts of the installation. In *Comfort Me With Words I* (See Illustration 2.) and *Collecting Memories*... the structure of the works encourages reading and viewer participation. The bookworks invite viewer response. These pieces demand certain methods of reading. The experience of reading is important for understanding the entire work in the exhibition.

Various Voices

I was initially interested in artists Mary Kelly and Faith Ringgold because of the various ways they dealt with and presented their voice. After I began to read about them I was surprised to find that they had both firmly embedded themselves in the feminist movement, if not contributing immense amounts of their own conceptual ideas.

I found their work to be interesting and visually challenging. As I reflect upon my work in the exhibition I am able to see certain similarities between their work and mine.

Mary Kelly

Artist Mary Kelly examines the relationship between the (human) body to text. She explores this relationship in her most well known work *Post-partum Document* (1983). *Post-partum Document*, first exhibited in 1978, consists of 165 units in six sections. This work investigated the relationship between mother and child, a subject little talked about in art. Kelly set about to "challenge the assumption that motherhood is an instinctive experience."[34]

> Each section consists of two forms; a series of framed collages that make refined and beautiful art objects out of stained diapers, infant clothes, her son's first marks, drawings, discoveries, charts, and detailed analysis of the ongoing debate of the relevance of psychoanalyses to the theory and practice of Marxism and Feminism.[35]

Kelly presented this work using found objects to chronicle her relationship with her son during the first six years of his life. "The work incorporated the language of psychoanalysis[36], linguistics, archaeology and science."[37] Part archive, part exhibition and

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[34] Herbert Read, consulting ed. The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art and Artists (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 165.

[35] Lucy R. Lippard, The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art. (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 163-66.

[36] For Kelly, Freudian and Lacanian theories structure much of her work. She describes the Freudian/Lacanian theory of sexual identity in her book Imaging Desire. According to

part case history, Kelly used her own voice in the first person narrative to relate her

feelings, not only of child development, but also about the "project" of motherhood.

Kelly was not trying to reproduce a slice of life but *Post-partum Document* was an

attempt to articulate a mother's fantasies and desires.

Kelly stated that her work is not meant to be viewed purely as an

autobiographical expression, but it is meant to suggest a number of voices relating the

mother's experience to child care, feminist analysis incorporating Lacanian and

Freudian ideas,[38] academic discussion, and political debates. She demonstrates that no

one narrative can possibly account for all areas of human experience stating that "there is

no single theoretical discourse which is going to offer an explanation for all forms of

social relations or for every mode of political practice."[39]

With her writing, she examines how each person is formed during the process of

maternal bonding and growth, as well as attempting to understand the personal sense of

loss when a child leaves the home.[40] For Kelly, her writing is a way to self discovery and

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Freud and Lacan, sexual identity is the out come of the Oedipus Complex - "a passage
which is in a certain sense completed by the acceptance of symbolic castration." (Mary
Kelly, Imaging Desire (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 40. For the child, recog-
nizing the difference between mother and father is an admission that the mother is lacking
a penis (the phallus). For the male, the female body, although lacking the penis, is seen as
a substitute with her breasts and curves.

[37] Read, p. 195.

[38] According to Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, sexual identity is the outcome of the
passage of the *Oedipus Complex*. Their ideas are similar in that the body-image is the
outcome "of a dialectical inter-play between the subject and the Other/the Mother."
[Cathy Deepwell, ed. New Feminist Art Criticism (Manchester: Manchester University
Press, 1996), p. 129.]

[39] Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and
Art History (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), p. 492.

[40] Where woman may suffer from penis envy, the male may suffer from castration anxiety.
Castration anxiety is a fear of losing limbs, teeth, eyes or the penis itself. Castration
anxiety may also affect women but not in the same way as a man. For women, castration
fears amount to the loss of loved ones (also similar to abandonment-anxiety described by
Becker). As a result of this, Kelly describes this separation-anxiety (loss of the child) as a

understanding as an artist and a mother. This experience parallels my own growth as an artist and individual.

Kelly recognizes an inability to escape the narrative and autobiography.[41] Her bookwork[42] then becomes a private experience of understanding and feminist thinking. I was especially interested in the way Kelly used text in her art and how she established a relationship with the viewer.

Faith Ringgold

The work of Faith Ringgold often commemorates women's work. Her work is often autobiographical, dealing with her social and political environment. She charts not only the private aspect of her life, but also feminism and her African-American tradition. As an artist she has presented herself as an African-American woman through the mediums of performance, sculpture, painting, quilt making and writing.

It was the use of personal narrative in her quilts that most interested me. While her quilts contained certain characteristics of traditional quilts, Ringgold's are different because she utilizes text and uses them in great sweeping narratives. She uses her quilts to tell stories in almost a picture book fashion. *The Dinner Quilt* (1986) is as much about feminist ideas as it is about family history, as it celebrates the cultural heritage of African-

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reason why a woman may fetishize her child. To "fetishize" is the act of collecting memorabilia from, or having to do with, the child. And in the preface to her published Post-partum Document, Kelly described mother's memorabilia (her diapers, locks of hair, first words, drawings, hand imprints, photographs) in terms of Freudian "fetishes", as "substitutes for the child-as phallus." (Kelly, p. 40.) This memorabilia is used as fetish objects, as representations (in the psychoanalytic sense) of "catheted memory traces." (Kelly, p. 23.) These "traces" represent the "life" experience of a mother. Dressing him up, continuing to feed him no matter how old, or simply having another child, are attempts to delay the separation that will occur. (Kelly, p. 41.)

[41] Stephen Bury, Artists' Books (England: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 22.

[42] Although *Post-partum Document* is not a bookwork, I cannot help but see it as such. I include *Post-partum Document* in the realm of artists' books because of Kelly's use of text and format, and the experience I get from imagining the work.

Americans. It is an expression that art is about more than being "wall-worthy" and

Ringgold's quilts are much more than decorative arts. She uses her art to detail and

illustrate her life, as an example that art can be more than an image.

I was attracted to Ringgold's quilts because her work immediately reminded me

of my own attempts at quilt making. My quilts, although not discussed in depth in this

paper, are part of *Comfort Me With Words III.* (See Illustration 3.) I didn't want to go

into a long discussion about my quilts because I only created two in my first year of my

MFA program before I decided that they spoke of issues I did not want to deal with, and

at that point in time, and I was not ready to examine them further. What interested me

about Ringgold's work was the way in which she presents her work. Ringgold uses her

art in a very personal and reflective manner. Her quilts appear autobiographical, but they

also include political issues and feminist interpretations.

Talking About Myself: The Autobiographical

> The autobiographical has become an important means through
> which women have explored the social and psychic production of
> feminine identity; how particular patterns of gender and family,
> class, race and history are mapped out within individual narra-
> tive.[43]

> Women will starve in silence until new stories are created which
> confer on them the power of naming themselves.[44]

Many women artists turn to the autobiographical as a way to express their artistic

voice. Mary Kelly deals strongly with the autobiographical in her work and it becomes an

exploration of the self documented. Faith Ringgold uses her art to express her role as a

daughter, mother, grandmother, African-American, writer, and artist. And Sutapa Biswas

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[43] Betterton, p. 173.
[44] Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), p. 18.

uses her body image to express the memory-images dealing with her identity and cultural heritage.

In the conventional form of autobiography, a "line is tracked from childhood to the achievement of an adult identity that is conceived as an endpoint, as the resolution of choices made and obstacles overcome, however convoluted the journey."[45] But when looking at autobiographical and feminist[46] writing, the line appears unfinished, " often taking the form of a series of movements between present and past, self and Other, towards the production of an identity that is still in process."[47]

According to Betterton, the difference between men and women is that women have a hard time separating themselves from the past. Citing a man's belief, Picasso stated, "Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction."[48] To do this, one must be willing to do anything in order to get what they want. "One must be willing to slander, attack, ignore, annihilate, absorb, move beyond all that has come before in order to create, and this willingness to destroy has never come easily to a woman."[49] Women need to remain secure in their history, emotional and mental ties to others. Many women artists find it difficult to split their lives between their "work" and their "life," whereas, historically speaking, the tormented male artist is portrayed as having cut himself off from everything in order to create.

The problem, as Carol Becker writes, is the ways in which women are measured.

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[45] Betterton, p. 173.

[46] I define feminist using Nancy Miller's words, "as the wish to articulate a self-consciousness about women's identity both as inherited cultural fact and as a process of social construction and a protest against the available fiction of female becoming." Nancy Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) as cited in Heilburn, p. 18.

[47] Betterton, p. 173.

[48] Becker, p. 27.

[49] Becker, p. 27.

The woman's creative process tends to be very different from that of a man's but a woman still tends to measure [herself] against the standards of form and content set by men, often suffering from the 'voice of despair'- an internalized patriarchal voice, that tells them their work is not good enough, intellectual or innovative enough.[50]

At times I am reluctant to believe these words because I do not fully understand them, for I have yet to encounter the "glass ceiling," but "the voice of despair," I have experienced. It all comes back to the feeling of voicelessness. I believe that the reason so many women turn to text and the autobiographical in their art is because they need to be heard and accepted.

I believe that my work is easily identifiable as being made by a woman. When thinking about the pieces in the central room, *The Second Being*, (See Illustrations 4 and 5.) I can track a line going back into my childhood, between the past and the future, self and other. My work is very autobiographical as I am trying to trace myself. I am searching for the ultimate endpoint only to realize that no one answer is going to describe who I am. Instead I must let the work unfold on its own, until I can form a group of images ranging from the autobiographical exploration of feminine identity, to stored memory fragments, and the self documented.

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[50] Becker, 219.

Chapter Three

The Installation

To defy order, to break the convention apart, to analyse and be
critical of existing form, to assert the unconscious over the cons-
cious, to insist on the interaction of both, one must make concrete
objects into theories of abstract thought and transform abstract
thought into concrete. One must have the confidence to create a
personal odyssey and to make one's person the centre and subject
of the narrative.[51]

Walking Through The Exhibition

1. Diagram of the installation *Whispers Into Words*
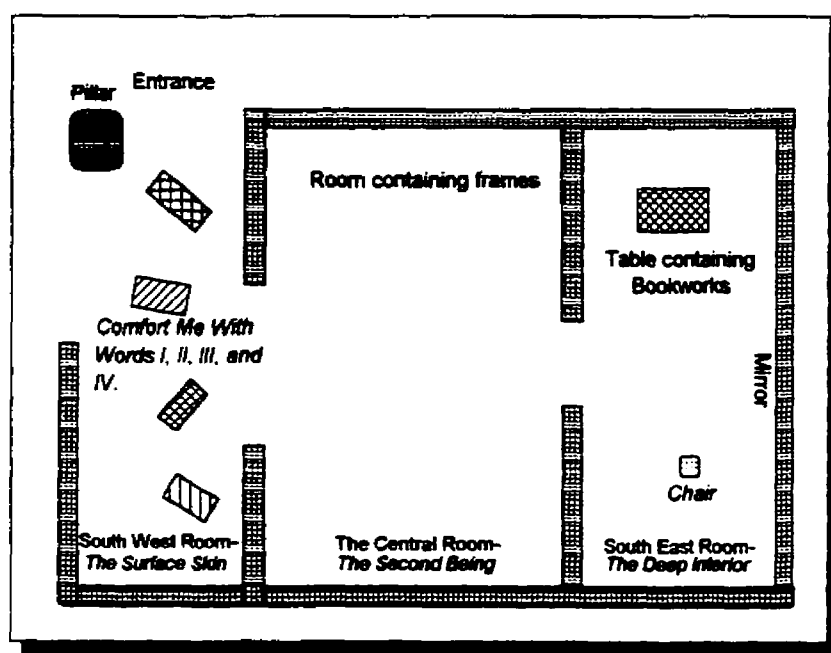
The installation (see above diagram) consists of three areas or rooms, each meant

to be considered in combination with the next. The spaces are set up so viewers are "led"

from one room to another. I ordered the space so that as viewers finished looking at

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[51] Becker, p. 216.

the interior room, they are forced to return the way they came. By allowing for only one exit, viewers are offered a second chance to re-examine the work in the exhibition when viewers pass by the earlier work as they exit the space. This allows them to make connections within the work, connections they might not otherwise have made from the first walk-by. By controlling their steps I am echoing a saying that one must look back before going forward. This reflects the way I am constantly being drawn back and forth inside of myself.

I also wanted to set up the three rooms in such a manner that as viewers stood in the Southwest room they were able to see past the central room into the Southeast room and catch a reflection of themselves in the mirror that is hung on the farthest SE wall.

The Southwest Room: The Surface Skin

When entering the Southwest room, (See Illustration 6.) the viewer is immediately presented with four objects. These pieces are recognizable, describable as chests, cases or containers. Each object is reminiscent of obsolete items that were once used to store precious memories, objects or possessions.

Comfort Me With Words I (See Illustration 2.) was inspired by a small metal suitcase that I found in the possession of my family. By the time I came across it, it had lost its usefulness and was to be discarded. It appealed to me, and I was immediately attracted to the case because it had history and allure. It revealed its age by the marks it had received over the course of time. A certain amount of mystery surrounded it because I knew little of its background.

The container was once a suitcase where clothes were placed and memories made. I took the empty case, that once contained so much, and began filling it with pages, each page acting as a narrative[52] of my voice. On each page, from a piece of

[52] When I say narrative I do not mean narrative in the traditional sense. Narrative is

linoleum I had cut, I hand printed a few words in black ink. The imprinted words became very important to me and were used to fuel my everyday existence. *Be brave, be strong.* Each day I told myself that I was capable of these traits. I *was* strong. I *was* brave. I was more than the surface-image people observed when they looked upon me. The act of placing these words onto paper became a ritual, it became a way of educating myself to the person that I was and the person I could become.

The pages comforted me. They alleviated pain, hesitations and uncertainties I felt during the course of many days. I felt myself grow stronger by repeating the words. Some days I truly believed that I was brave, strong and capable of anything. On other days, the words came to me as questions rather than answers.

Each day I took the pages with the imprinted words *be brave, be strong*, and I let them act as a canvas for revealing my voice. These pages quickly filled with words of support, observations, desires and grievances. Sometimes the words became detailed remembrances of reality, sometimes fabrications. Whatever the truth, they became pages of my diary and the worn metal case was the binding.

Diagram 2. An example of writing from *Comfort Me With Words I*

Today was a day filled with blue sky and little comfort as the sun turned on me and caused sweat to drip from my pours. I hated it, as I hate all days when my thoughts are interrupted because of discomforts. I took some pictures of my cat with my new Polaroid camera. The color was all wrong. She looked yellow, but queen like nonetheless.

June 19, 1997 Mid-afternoon

generally thought of as a story, tale or an account of real or imaginary happenings. The narrative I am writing about is a representation of my voice using written words. The work is meant to be representative of a book so the work is meant to be read in the manner of a book.

With the printed words and the hand-written text, the pages then reveal two types of language. For me, the imprinted images represent an internal voice, whereas the written word reveals the external and more immediate representation of the self.

I also dated the pages to convey a sense of time and to reinforce the idea that these words occurred at specific times, a reminder that they were once thoughts. Since the pages were not placed in the case in any specific order, the sense of time is not chronological in any direct sense. I also left certain pages blank, with only the presence of the linocut image, to reveal the opportunity for future entries.

The words printed from the linocut[53] act as "archetypal" images, archetypal meaning that all other words emerged from these images. The images produced from the linocut also become more generic. These images are printed hundreds of times with increasing and decreasing value intensities. Again this echoes the idea of time; as time passes, memories fade and objects disappear. The two types of language, the handwriting and the linocut images, transport readers back and forth between the past and the present, the personal and the archetypal.

The other pieces in the Southwest room are presented in much the same way. *Comfort Me With Words II* (See Illustration 7.) contains all the questions I could think to ask myself. Again, a large chest is filled with a multitude of pages. Each page contains elements of my voice, but this time, the words are more universal. The questions asked, *why am I here, what is it about, when will the time be right,* have no specific ownership; they are questions common to us all. But unlike the first piece of this group, the pages are crumpled, stacked and tied. These pages represent words that have been discarded

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[53] The term *linocut* refers to a technique used in printmaking. "The parts of the design which are not to be printed are cut away from a piece of linoleum; therefore it is a negative or subtractive process which does not directly register the lines made by the hand of the artist as in *engraving* and *etching*." James Smith Pierce, From Abacus To Zeus: A Handbook of Art History 5th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1995), p. 106.

and then retrieved again. I could find no answers to these questions, but only more questions creating other questions. I have stored them away for future use, for a time when answers might become part of them.

The third piece inspired the titles for the Southwest room. *Comfort Me With Words III* (See Illustration 3.) contains words, not on paper, but stitched into cloth. The quilts and cloth stitchings that I had previously created as independent pieces are folded and placed neatly inside another large chest. Each piece is filled with lines of text stitched onto the surface with embroidery thread. This is also reminiscent of storing precious objects as keepsakes and mementoes. The bits of thread act as fragments of thoughts and memories, and as the thread blends with the multicoloured surfaces of the cloth, their intensity and strength as memories ebb and flow.

The act of folding the quilts and cloth pieces and placing them inside the chest also speaks of memory. "Folds are marks of a past transition. They become visible in the act of unfolding a surface, and remain as the visual reminder that this surface has temporarily been elsewhere and invisible."[54]

The final piece in this room, *Comfort Me With Words IV*, (See Illustration 8.) is incomplete, empty, except for one word printed on the bottom of the chest. The word *silence* appears on the bottom in barely discernible print. It is visible only if one looks for it, like a forgotten moment in time. It alone fills the chest with its presence and stands for many things. The empty chest reminds me to take control, to calm myself, to quiet rising anxieties, it reminds me one word can quiet. It represents the sound of silence. It is also an intro- duction to the next room.

All the pieces in the Southwest room are meant to suggest the idea of memory and storage. *Comfort Me With Words I* and *II* are reminiscent of books, but these pages are loose and not in any specific order. Nor is there any sense of plot or set of events;

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[54] Desa Philippi, "Distance of Memory" in Parachute (July-Sept. 1996), p. 16.

rather, it is a collection of fragmented journal entries and commonly asked questions, stacked and stored. These pieces deal with text in more tangible ways because the words on these pages are presented to viewers in familiar ways.

Comfort Me with Words III contains cloth stitchings, acting again as memories, yet is presented to viewers as precious objects, similar to grandma's quilts stored away in the attic. Each chest contains its own work but at the same time, all pieces are connected. All speak of storage and memory, yet each piece represents these ideas in slightly different ways.

Comfort Me With Words IV allows for many possibilities. It acts as a catchall to memories, those memories that have yet to come or memories that have already been forgotten. The empty chest represents the presence of strength and control. It is filled with silence, and yet, is more full than the other three pieces in the room.

These pieces are offered to viewers as proof of my existence. They convey self-analysis of feelings, joys, fears, terrors, fantasies, realities, dreams, and autobio-graphical bits of daily thoughts and remembrances. Each chest/container is filled with bits from my daily life. Hundreds of pages make up the work from *Comfort Me With Words I and II*, and thousands of words are embroidered on cloth in *Comfort Me With Words III*. *Comfort Me With Words IV* remains empty, waiting to be filled with future thoughts, feelings, ideas, memories and realities. Each piece may appear as an intimate view of someone's life, but really, they are no more than superficial glances. By reading the pages, or surrounding oneself with cloth, or viewing the appearance of an empty chest, viewers are no more aware of me as a person than they were prior to entering the room. I did not fill these works with text as evidence of who I am, but I wanted to create a place in which viewers could disrupt the privateness of emotion, a place where they could invade a person's thoughts, to say "this is me but you don't really know me, not from

this." To know that there is more left to learn, to crave the knowledge of what is to come; this is the first stage of knowing.
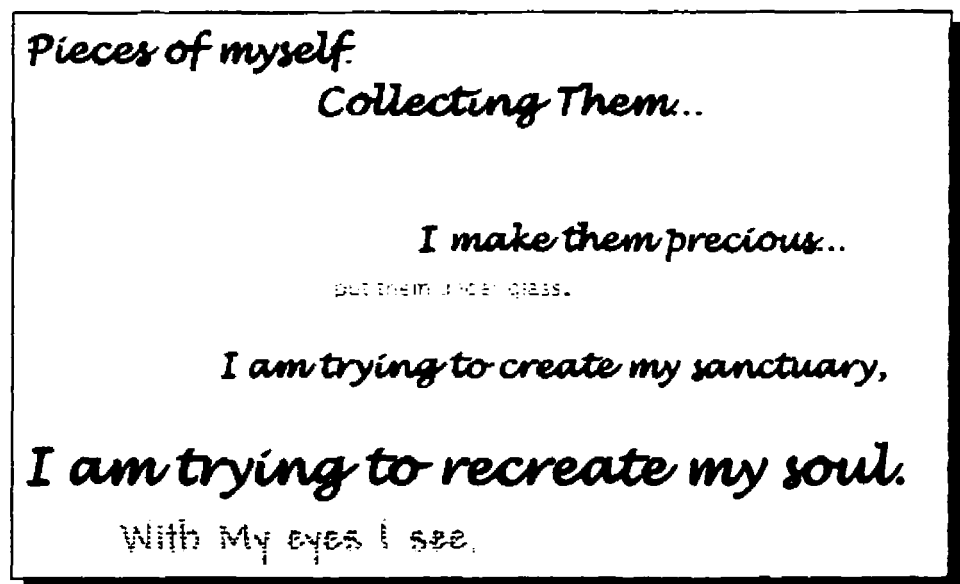
At this point in my discussion, I feel it is important to pass by the central room and enter into the Southeast room. Because this room contains a bookwork using text, it follows with the works presented in the Southwest room.

The text in the bookwork *Collecting Memories...*(See Illustration 1.) recounts the personal and reflective journey that I have taken during the course of my MFA program. The narrator is myself; the words are reflective and come from within.

The Southeast Room: The Deep Interior

The work in the Southeast room, as well as the work in the entire installation, is intended to imply a reflective narrative with a voice that is my own but could also belong to many. The bookwork *Collecting Memories...* contains a narrative that is loose and fragmented. The lines of text are placed on the page in less than the traditional manner. The font, size and color of the text varies, emphasizing certain ideas and words. This was done to encourage readers to expand on their own reactions and associations.

Diagram 3. This is an example of my writing as it appears in *Collecting Memories*

Pieces of myself:
Collecting Them...

I make them precious...
but them in her glass.

I am trying to create my sanctuary,

I am trying to recreate my soul.

With My eyes I see.

Collecting Memories... was written in such a manner as to encourage the readers' own lines of text to emerge. I hoped my text would allow the reader to concentrate on the *word* and not the organization of the text or *my* meaning of the words.

By writing in this way I hoped to encourage readers to react to what they read and not concern themselves with the *reasons why I chose to write*. It *is* at this moment when you look up from reading that becomes important, it's at this moment when your head is filled with ideas, association and stimuli. When you keep stopping and going back to the work because it feeds you; it is at *this* moment your head fills with lines of your *own* text. This is what Roland Barthes terms as S/Z,[55] as discussed in chapter two.

In my bookwork *Collecting Memories...* I use words as a path. They lead to places buried deep inside and they help me understand the ways in which I see. I follow the energy where it takes me, and the words become poetic. Perhaps certain people are so attracted to the words I write because they offer parts of me not normally seen. I found words not because I was looking for them, but because I wasn't. Perhaps they found me.

As the pages unfold my words take viewers on a journey and invite them into the process. With each turning of the page viewers are presented with my language. Each page is filled with my feelings, narration, sights, experiences and reactions.

Also in the room the viewer sees a table on which small glass jars sit. Some jars are filled with small objects, pieces of hair and fluids that are meant to represent precious objects or fragments of memory.

The table itself speaks to the viewer. (See Illustration 13.) On its surface I have written lines of text. The text was taken from the bookwork *Collecting Memories...* and it is also meant to be reminiscent of memory and thought.

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[55] Barthes, p. 35.

The room itself represents a peaceful place. (See Illustrations 14 and 15.) A place where one can seek refuge. The double mirrors on the wall cast a double reflection on the floor and reminds the viewer of an open window or divided self. All the components in this room help to create an atmosphere of solitude and compilation. I wanted to allow the viewer a place where they could sit and rest. A room where they could re-examine what they have seen and delve deeper into themselves.

The Central Room : The Second Being

> A room that is like a reverie, a room truly soulful, where the
> stagnant atmosphere is lightly tinted with rose-color and blue.[56]

As viewers enter the central room they are surrounded by a haemorrhaging of images. (See Illustrations 9 to 12.) The room consists of 250 framed images hung semi-randomly on deep wine colored walls. All frames are the same size and style. Some are black, green, brown, or wine colored. The wine color frames outnumber all other frames and closely match the color of the walls. Some frames remain empty but the majority are filled with various images, ranging from family photographs, to text, objects or overlapping images. Some frames retain their traditional usage, while other frames cannot contain the very images they are trying to enclose. Some frames have been wrapped and certain images are concealed. Whatever the case, each frame represents an experience or memory drawn from my inner reflections and experiences.

The way the frames are placed on the walls is also a direct reference to memory. I wanted to convey the feeling of memory as exploding outward to viewers. The frames are hung so that there is a point of origin. From here the frames emerge outward until

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[56] Charles Baudelaire, "The Double Room", from Twenty Prose Poems trans. Michael Hamburger (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988. Originally published in 1946)

they become fewer and fewer, presenting the strength and importance of certain

memories.

Similar to the work of Sutapa Biswas, whose work deals with "memory images,"

my work deals with human experience.

In her series "Synapse" Biswas uses photographs to stress the notion of cultural

identity, human memory and human presence in a world of nature. Her work contains

multiple perspectives. The title itself "Synapse" refers to the medical term:

> The anatomical relation of one nerve cell with another, the junction
> at which a nerve impulse is transferred, which is affected at various
> points by contact of their branching process. The state of shrinkage
> or relation at these points (synapse) is supposed in some cases to deter-
> mine the readiness with which a nervous impulse is transmitted from
> one part of the nervous system to another.[57]

Biswas uses the term synapse as a metaphor for the human condition with particular

reference to the experience of memory. "Synapse here is symbolic of an undefined

territory or space."[58] Her work relates the idea that memory shifts, and certain areas are

blank while other spaces are vivid. In her "Synapse" series installation she creates an

in-between zone where the body and memory images are unified. The photographs she

projects on her nude body serve as images to suggest desire, strength and the search for

truth.

These projected "memory images" are at times supported by the cradle of her

hands. In other images they are "resting" on her bare flesh. The images themselves are

photographs of people, places or only fragments of the human form. The images may

invoke thoughts of her Indian tradition or the relationship between memory and desire.

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[57] Kathy Deepwell, ed. New Feminist Art Criticism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 35.
[58] Deepwell, p. 35.

She believes her work describes the process of memory and how memory is triggered and transformed. When looking at my own work, I believe the images in the central room are also working in a similar manner.

Although I am aware that there is no traditional narrative present in my work, I like to think of this room as telling its own story. The narrative does not follow any pattern of events or have a beginning or an end, but the narrative is told through the visual inventory of images representing memories, events, feelings and reflections.

Each frame is filled with whispers, questions, ideas and simple documentation. Some frames contain fragmented text which I view as being more readily interpreted as a human voice, and other frames are left to viewers for their own interpretations. I wanted to create a room filled with its own life and memories, a place where one could recognize the inner sanctuary that exists inside us all. I wanted a place to room memories and thoughts, some as insignificant as our shoe size, and some so important that they shape my world. Most of all, I wanted the room to be silent, yet filled with a thousand whispering voices.

In the first paragraphs of the poem, The Double Room, Charles Baudelaire writes of a similar room: "There the soul bathes in idleness, made fragrant by regret and desire. It is a thing of twilight, bluish and roseate; a dream of delicious pleasure during an eclipse."[59] In Baudelaire's poem there is no "artistic abomination on the walls,"[60] but the room is filled with furniture that "appears to be dreaming; it seems endowed with somnambulistic life, like vegetables or minerals. The cloth materials speak a silent language, like flowers, like skies, like setting suns."[61] My room is a reversal of this. The interior space is empty. I feel the central room operates in much the same way as

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[59] Baudelaire, p. 15.
[60] Baudelaire, p. 15.
[61] Baudelaire, p. 15.

Baudelaire's room. Dreaming a silent language, it is the work upon the walls that speaks in voices no one can hear.

I wanted to create a room filled with character and atmosphere. When one thinks of these qualities they might conjure up an image of a room filled with furniture, furniture that invites rest or comfort, yet this space, my deep interior, is without furniture. It is the walls that are filled with the images of me, parts of my life, while other images are nonsensical and dark. I wanted to create a room similar to the room in Baudelaire's poem. I wanted to create a place where viewers are filled with many thoughts and feelings, a room where one can "dream of delicious pleasure," and surround themselves with color, life and vision.

When viewers enter the room they are surrounded with images that comfort them and bathe them in knowledge of who I am. Yet, strangely, only a few people will understand the meanings of the images I am presenting. They may recognize that it is me, that state of me that exists, as a hundred faces. (Yet I wonder, will they understand it at all?) Some memories are shared with others, some remain purely as mine. I put these images on the wall because I am trying to reveal myself to the best of my ability. But interestingly enough, the images protect me and shield me from potential knowing eyes. Perhaps it is an attempt to satisfy those eyes, those that want to press further, inside of myself.

My voice is used to set up a direct relationship between the spectators and the art, which *embraces* them with memories and experiences. Even though the narrator is absent, location and time become a means to tell the story, to reveal the thoughts. My presence is referred to only by association or insinuation.

I use the frames as a way of giving reference to the things I feel. At the same time the images within the frames are not important only because they are housed within the confines of a frame. I want viewers to be able to jump in and out of the constructs of the frame and create their own meanings and their own life from the work. I want them to understand that the work on the walls is not *only* a reflection of me, it is a reflection of *everything* I take in, so therefore, it is also a reflection of *them*.

One of the first things people see when they walk into the central room is the color of the walls. I painted the walls for several reasons, the first being that it was more visually pleasing to create an interior room filled with a soothing and relaxing color. The second reason was that I felt that if the walls were left white the contrast between the wall and the frames would be too great, and the room would be overpowered by the number of frames. I believed the overall feeling I was trying to create would be lost if the work and the walls were competing with each other for space. Thirdly, it was important to have the work and the space come together. I thought that the use of color quieted the space down leaving room for the whispers. And finally, by painting the room it became reminiscent of a Victorian parlour. This suggested age, nostalgia and comfort, thus also adding to the atmosphere I was trying to create.

When I started working on the concepts for this room I thought it might never get finished. Each time I created a certain number of frames I felt it was never enough. I felt it was important to have a certain number of frames fill the room, and each time I reached my desired goal I found that the frames did not fill the space as I thought they should. But at the same time I didn't want to start creating images solely for the purpose of reaching a set number. I found while working, I tended to work intuitively, and at

times quickly and without much consideration for the images, and yet, at the same time, considerations were made for the appearance of the entire room.

All in all, I was working from the point of view that I would be creating a large number of images to fill an entire room. My thinking was that when a work is large it can engage viewers in a physical way. It can overpower their natural senses and suspend "normal" time, allowing them to get lost in contemplation. A large work can affect the way the viewer sees and reacts to the work. I also wanted to create a space in which the viewer felt a part of and was free to move around and interact with the pieces inside the space.

Within The Frames - Taking Pictures

I feel that it is important to briefly discuss my use of photography within the frames of the central room. I believe this is necessary because I have used a large number of photographs to express or represent images, and I see photography as a language understood by everyone. Perhaps this statement is cause for much debate, but I believe that photography offers accessibility for viewers to experience images. By placing photographs amidst the plethora of images present in the central room I was able to create launch pads for viewers, a way to draw viewers into the work as photographs tend to draw viewers in because they are recognizable images. Perhaps that is why I tended to use so many photographs in my exhibition.

Photographs record specific details in an exactness that even the human mind can't capture. When I found myself adding more photographs to my work, it occurred to me that I was trying to conceal the truth, trying to offer only glimpses of who I am. Photographs have a way of fooling viewers. Although photographs can appear as truths

or personal references, they actually only celebrate myths. There is a false assumption that photographs offer a chance to delve deeper into the history of a person, but I believe by adding photographs, I was only setting up another kind of barrier. Of course, I immediately liked the fact that by placing certain photographs in my work an appearance of intimacity would be assumed, but photographs are not telling, they simply record. A photograph can look into the face of an unnamed person but it does not really share any information. Even though it simulates the visual senses its voice is unheard. Photography has been successful in entering all fields of society and the public has become so accustomed to these images that they are seldom recognized as fine art. With that idea in mind, the photographs in Whispers into Words can then be somewhat overlooked. A language understood by all, a photograph may be the first recognizable image, but once recognized, it is quickly dismissed and then passed by. But instead of being a hindrance, their anonymity adds to the atmosphere I am trying to create.

The Work As A Whole

In the works *Comfort Me With Words I, II, III*, and *IV*, and *Collecting Memories...*, I used personal reflections, memories, observations and a combination of ordered and fragmented text to express my sentiment. These works relied heavily on the use of text to express my voice as an artist, whereas, the works presented in the central room rely on visual stimulation, encouraging viewers to experience the work with their own senses. This work is autobiographical in that I am using myself as the canvas. I am not depicting my physical body for exploration but I am examining interior memories, motives and searching for the connections between them.

The collection of work then becomes dependent on the viewers' willingness to accept each room as one cohesive group and not merely as an assemblage of individual

pieces placed together in the same space. Just as it is important for viewers to bind the works together, it's important that the installation allows viewers to derive their own experiences and perceptions, as well as encourage them to produce their own personal narratives. So in this sense, the ordering of the installed rooms is an important factor in guiding viewers through the space.

I am interested in creating a work that is seen as a whole, not a group of work only seen together because they occupy the same space. It's important for me to make clear that even though I have stated that the work in this exhibition is a collection of related pieces, they are not to be marked only as such. I see my work as being capable of individuality, but in order to create a certain atmosphere, I feel it's critical that the work exist as a collective.

I began doing installation without even realizing what I was doing. I simply had a feeling that I wanted to capture, and by placing objects and images in certain ways, I found that I could recreate the emotions that I longed for. I find it interesting to be able to place objects, images and ideas together to allow viewers to interpret and derive their own words for what they see. The silent state one is in as they look at my work is the state that encourages personal interpretation.

Conclusion

Time becomes an important factor for the spectator when viewing the installation Whispers Into Words, as I hope viewers will take a certain amount of time when looking at the exhibition, and I am counting on them to take part in reading many of the textual elements in the work.

All the work has been brought together in order to express my personal sentiment and reproduce feelings of memory, discovery and identity. I feel viewers must invest a small amount of time reading and examining what is presented, because their involvement with the work is crucial to understanding the entire installation. The amount of time viewers give to the work helps lead to understanding, and understanding enables viewers to draw interpretations from a multiple of meanings. The idea of various interpretations brings me back to notions of *text* and *intertext* as related by Barthes, and also the concept of "open work" by Umberto Eco, in which viewers go beyond conventional interpretations of the artist's/author's own work/words to reach that point when they are able to develop their *own* lines of text and draw their *own* conclusions.

In the exhibition all of the work has been arranged specifically to heighten the sense of the viewer's own emotional and referential meanings. The meanings derived from viewers' responses calls attention to the act of reading as a visual and mental stimulation. I have created the work with the hopes that viewers will extract certain interpretations of the work, but created a space that allows for individual interpretations.

As I did the research for this support paper I began to understand many things. Although I was reluctant to place myself in the feminist field, I realized that there *was* a place for me. Even though I sometimes disagree with the harshness of certain feminist ideas I have come to realize that, at times, I can situate myself comfortably within

"feminist" art. Before writing this support paper I was able to recognize that my work was very personal in nature, even autobiographical, but I was unaware that these characteristics sometimes fall into feminist categories. "Making it in the system" and hitting "the glass ceiling," often talked about in feminist writings, were things I knew nothing about, because my life up to now has existed under the shelter of the educational system, also surrounded by a majority of females and feminine role models. I still hold to the belief that I can do anything, so when I began reading certain works by Lucy R. Lippard and Carol Becker I began to realize that as a woman I may face more obstacles than just residual sexism.

I was slightly uncomfortable in the knowledge that my art fit so comfortably within the "feminist" framework, not because I disagree with "feminist' ideas, I know too little of them to make that judgement, but perhaps I was a little disappointed to find that I was not as "original" as I believed. I know this is naive, but to find out that you can be slotted so perfectly within a category for which you are not totally prepared is a little disconcerting, since I was unsure if that was the place for me. But I do believe that some-thing has just opened up for me and I *still* have much to learn and understand about my placement in the art world. I realize I have much knowledge to acquire before I can truly accept who I am, what my art is saying, and where to place myself in this field of women artists.

I have stated that feminist thinking has played a part in my development as an artist. These ideas have only just begun to influence me, but with time I feel I will be able to make clear connections between my own work and the work that is *feminist*. At this point in time I do not consider myself a "feminist" artist but an *artist* who is a *woman.*

With the help of artists like Mary Kelly, Faith Ringgold and Sutapa Biswas I have come to see that art is more than just about "image" making. It can be used as a way to gain deeper understanding of the person I am and the person I can become. I have come to understand that there is a bond between these artist's and myself. The need to express oneself is universal and common, but to do so in an autobiographical way is something that I see as relating to women's ways of knowing and thinking.

After reading <u>Women's Ways of Knowing</u> I have been able to recognize my need for voice and how it can affect a person's life. I am only beginning to realize that I have not always allowed my voice to be heard, and perhaps, that is why I have turned to art and to text in my art as a way to express my voice. There is a safety in not having to vocalize one's words. The visual aspect of art can reach a wider range of people, those that may never hear the realness of my voice. It is not that I am afraid to speak or express myself to others using words, but art offers me a chance to express a voice that I might never have had the chance to express. This exhibition has allowed me the chance to draw from my internal voice and learn things that I might never have realized at this time.

I believe by writing this thesis support paper I have only begun to explore the possibilities open to me. This paper and exhibition are by no means "the end," but merely a starting point, a place for me to continue.

In conclusion, during the last two years I have been subjected to many new things, things that have allowed me to look with different eyes, and ideas that have encouraged growth and understanding, but putting Barthes and Eco theories aside, and letting go of feminist ideas, I think the thing that has caused me to examine myself the most has been the search for *myself*. I believe this is important to me because at some point I realized I *could* be a different person. I didn't have to remain stationary. I could

change and grow many times, in many different ways. I could bask in the excitement and

satisfaction of being able to express myself with... words... images... voice... silence.

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1. *Collecting Memories...* (1997)
Bookwork present in the south-east
room, *The Deep Interior*.

2. *Comfort Me With Words I* (1997)
Hand printed linocut on tracing paper.
As presented in the south-west room.
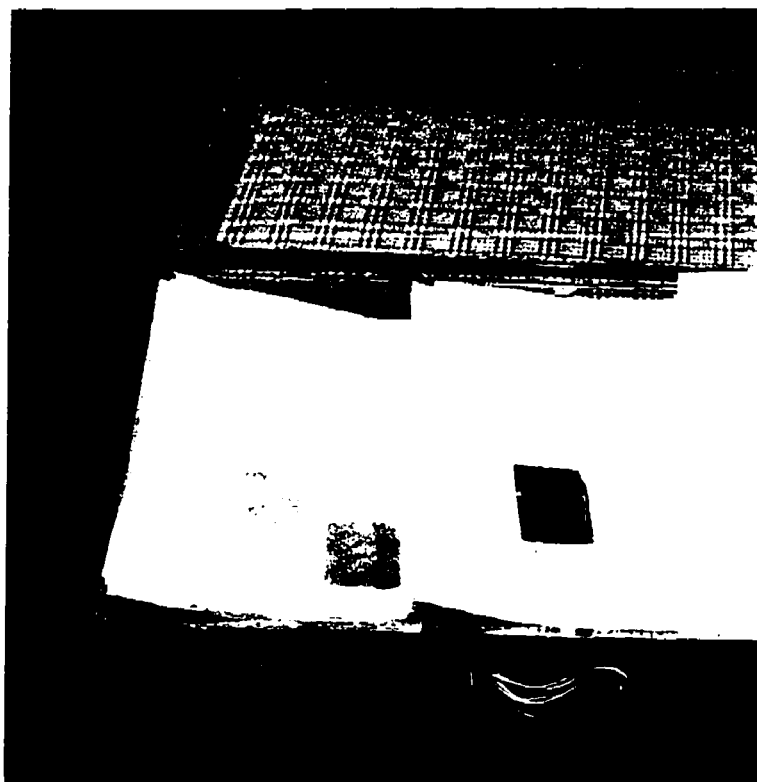
3. *Comfort Me With Words III*   (1997)
Embroidery thread on various cloth pieces, quilts and
multicoloured fabrics. As seen in the south-west room.

4. Installation view of the central room, *The Second Being*.

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5. Second installation view of the central room.
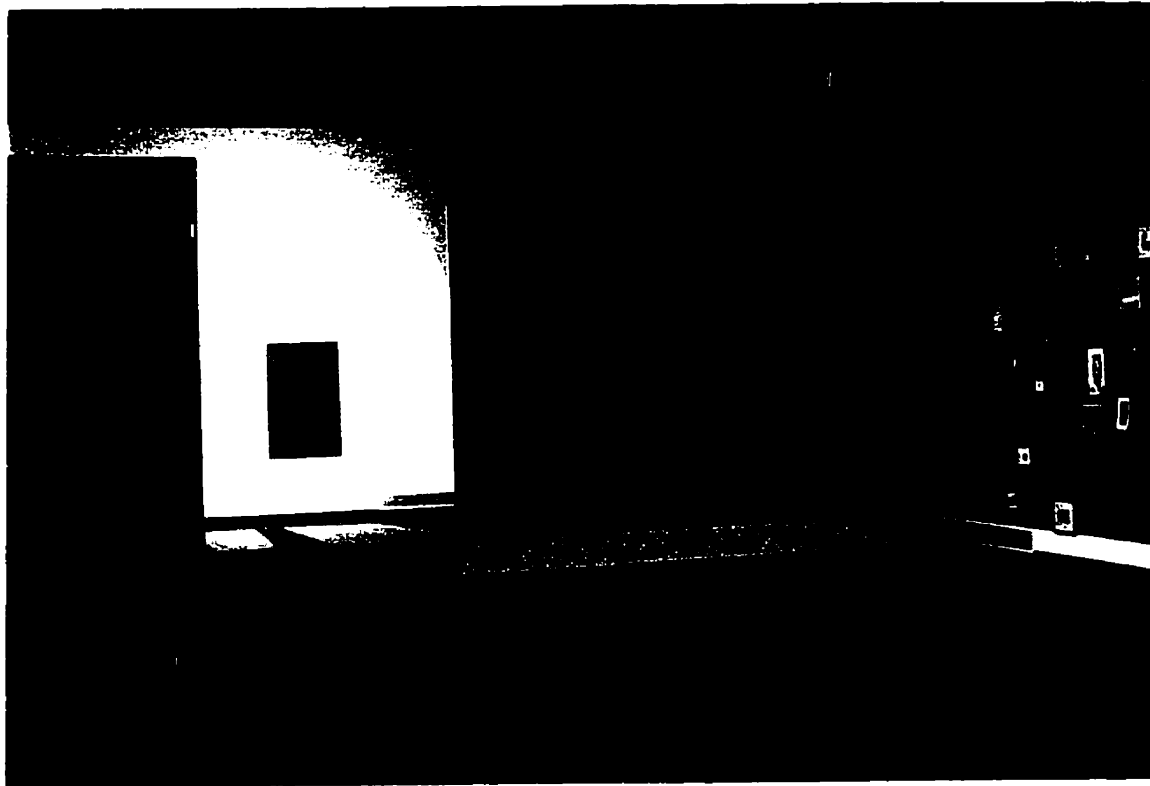
6. Installation view of *Comfort Me With Words I, II, III, and IV.*
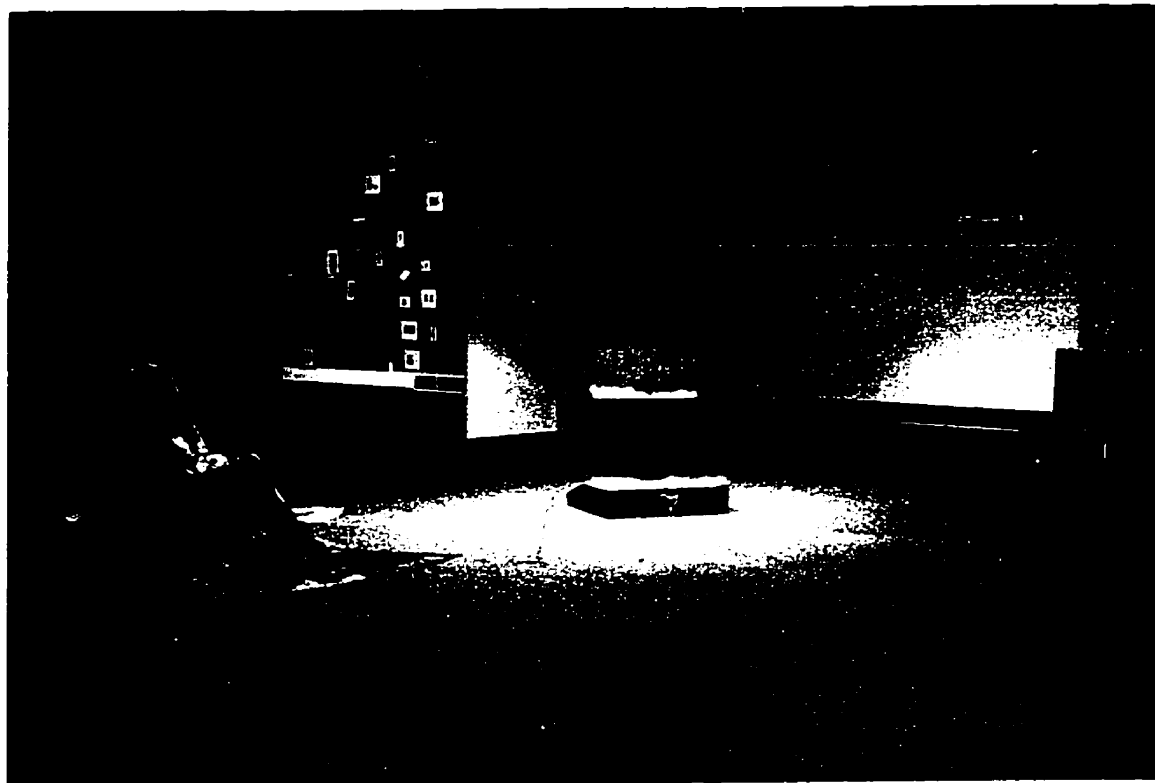
7. *Comfort Me With Words III*   (1997)
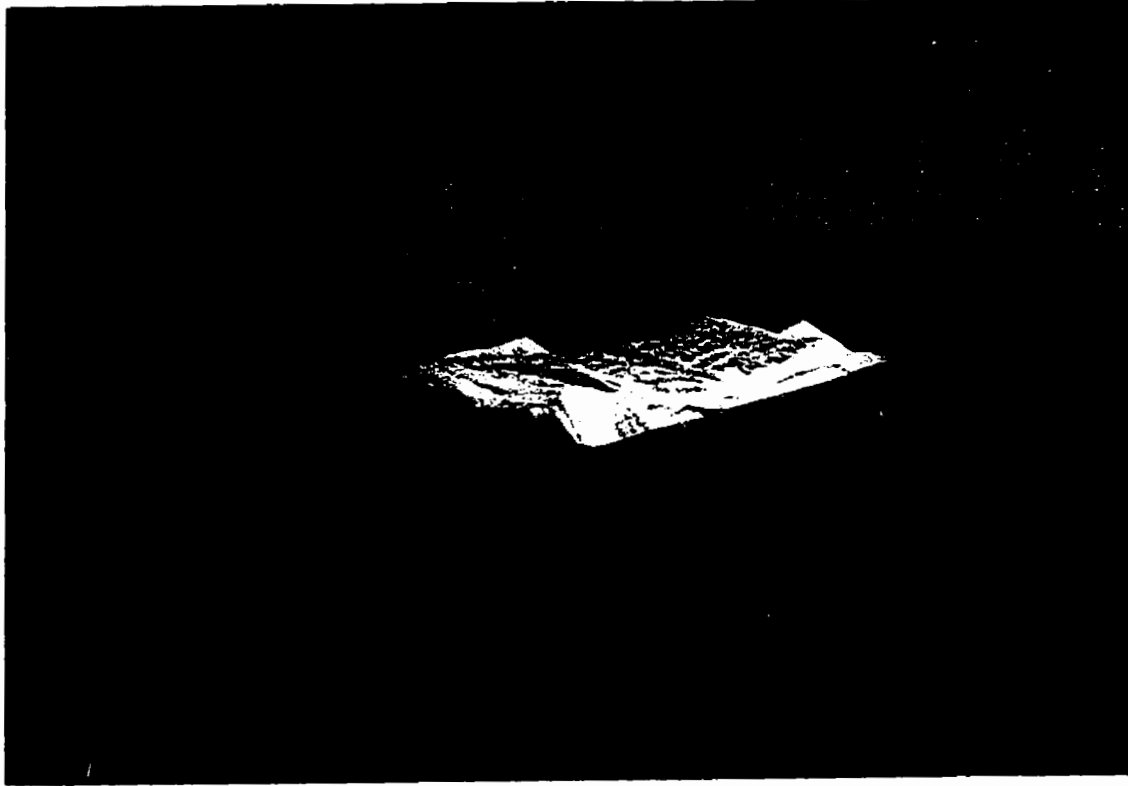
8. *Comfort Me With Words IV.*   (1997)
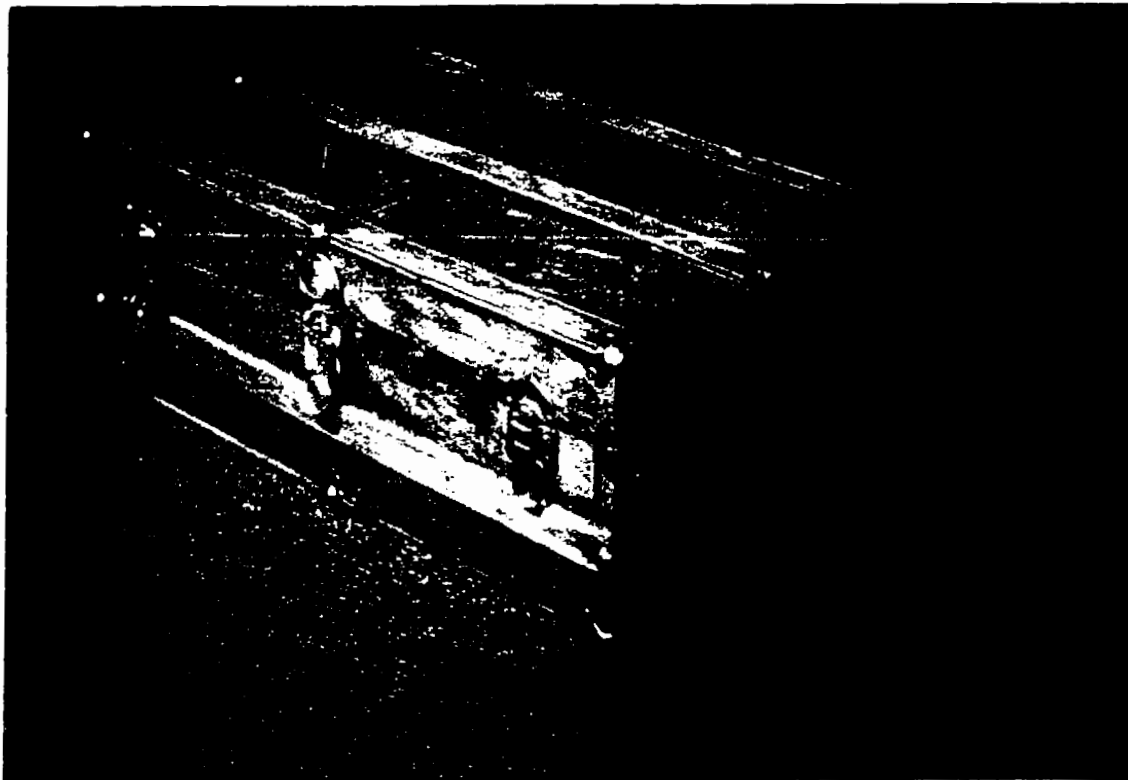
9. Installation view of the central room.
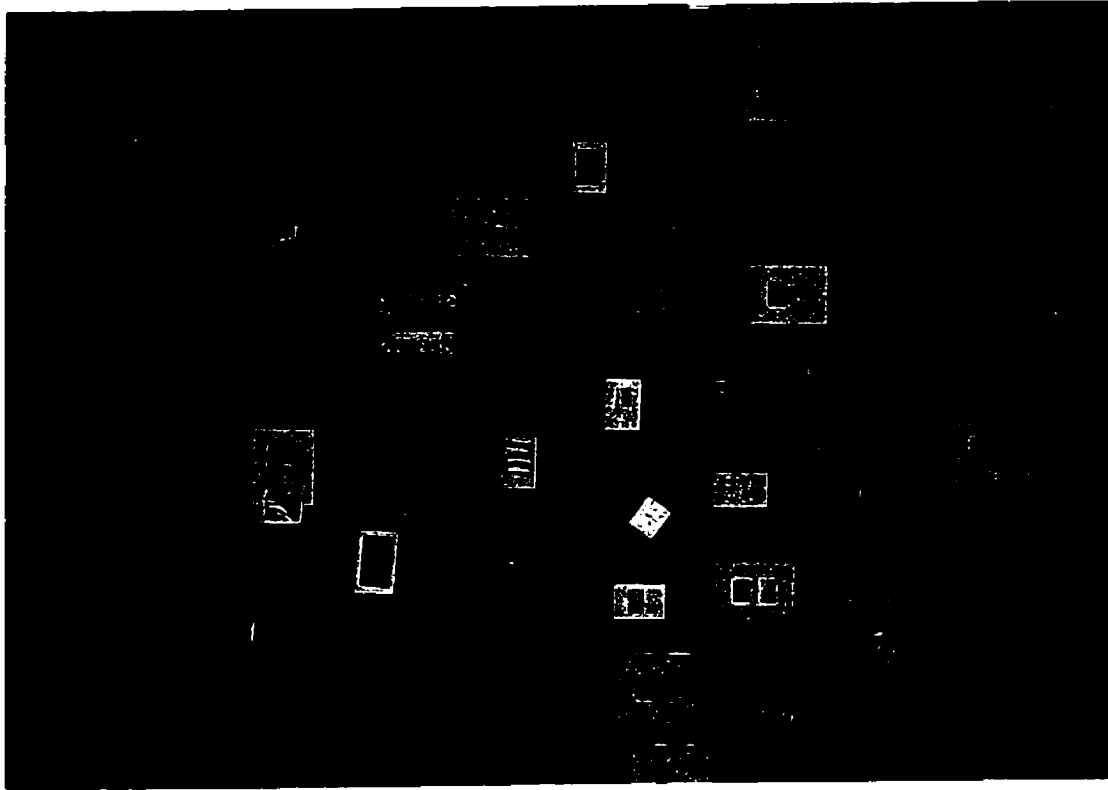
10. Installation of the central room
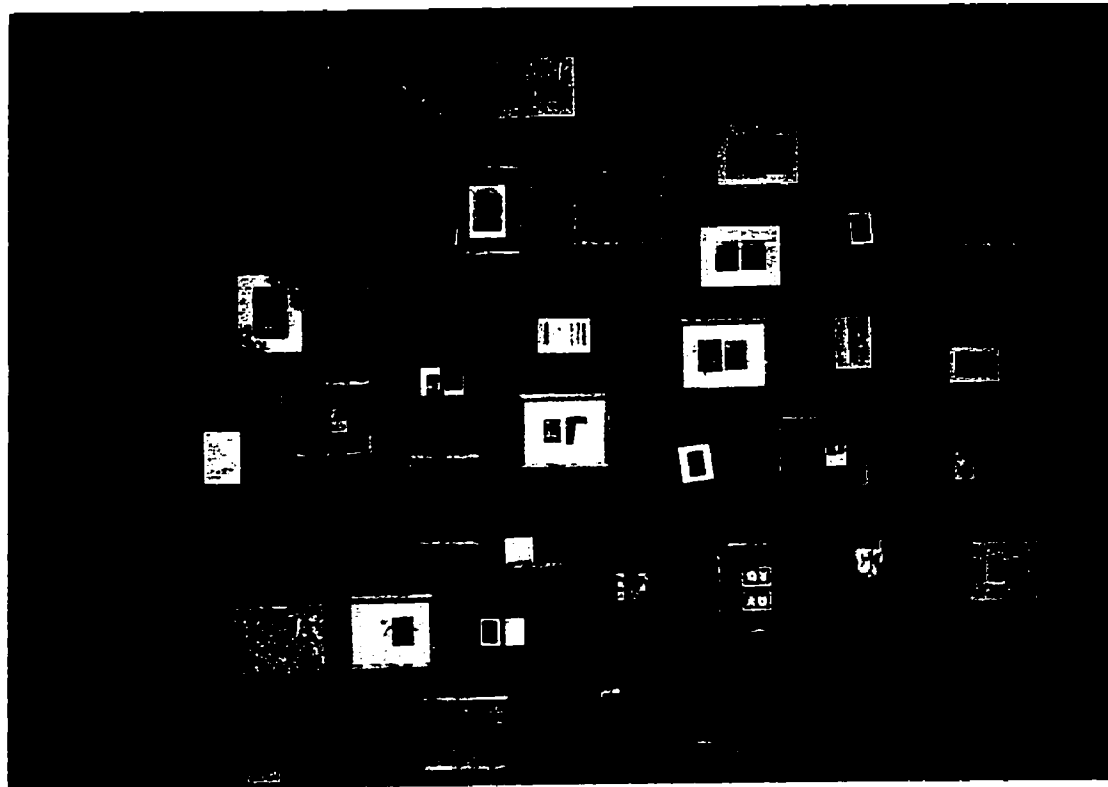
11. Detailed view of the central room.
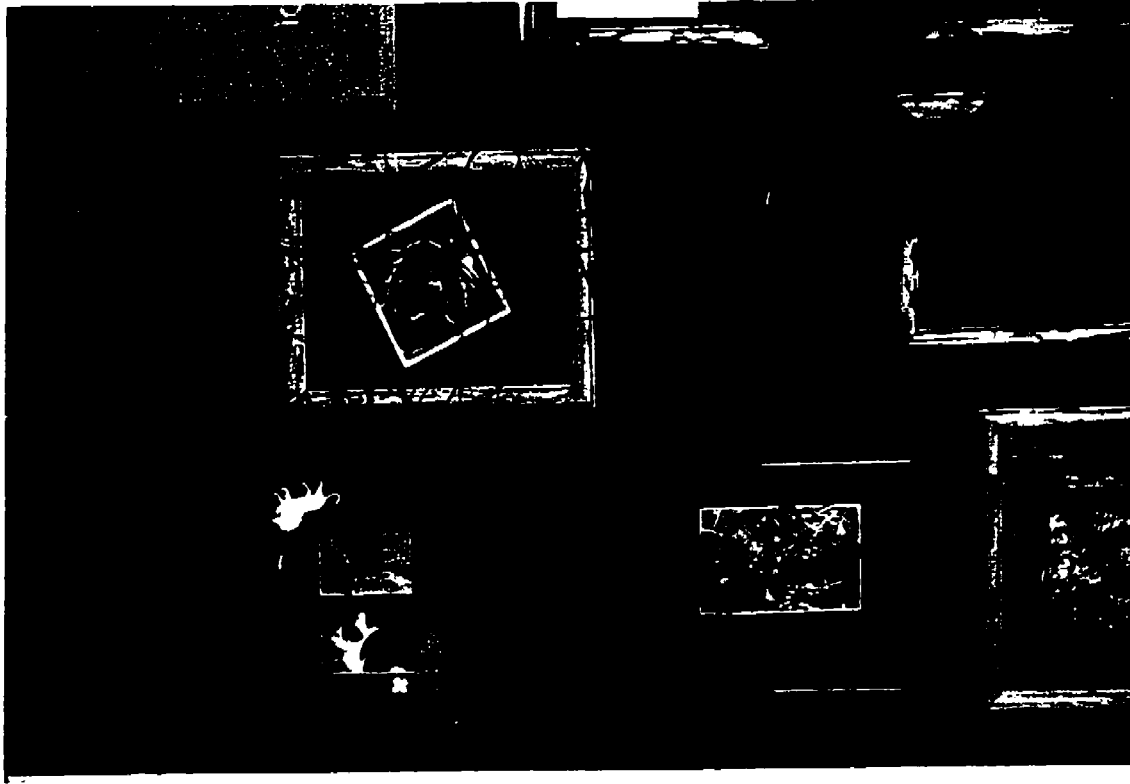
10. Detailed view of the central room
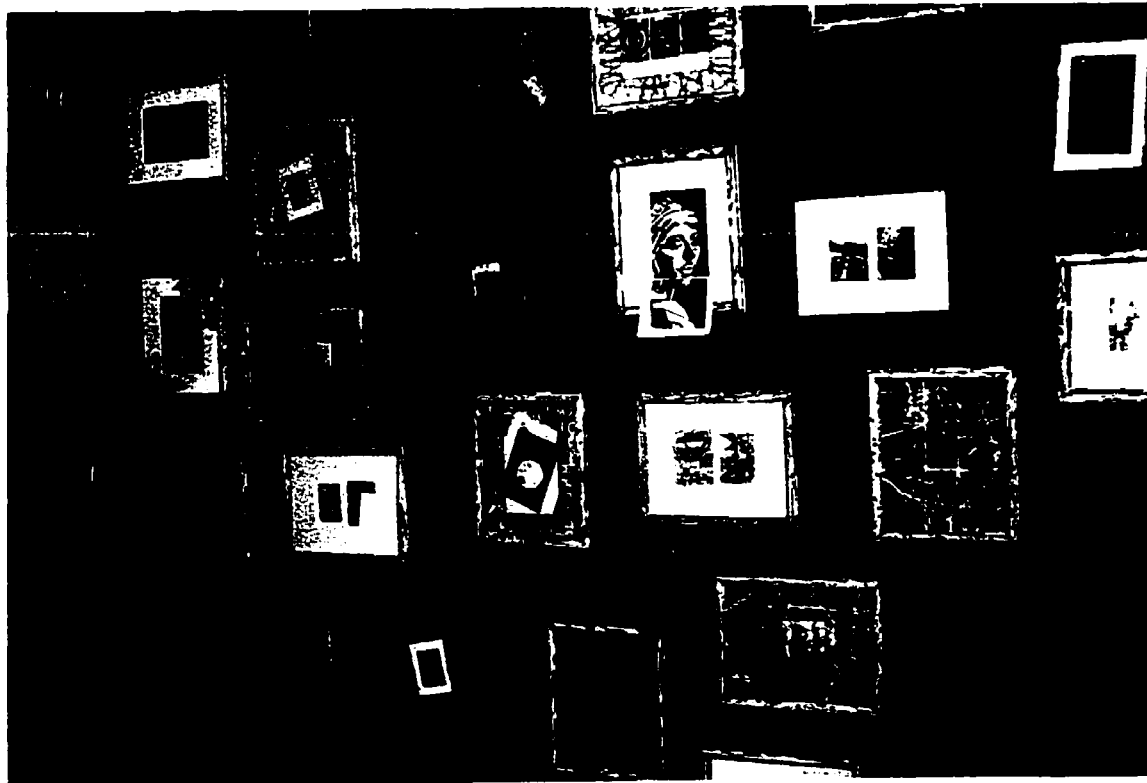
13. Detailed view of the table and its contents.

14. Installation view of the Chair and bookwork, *Collecting Memories*...
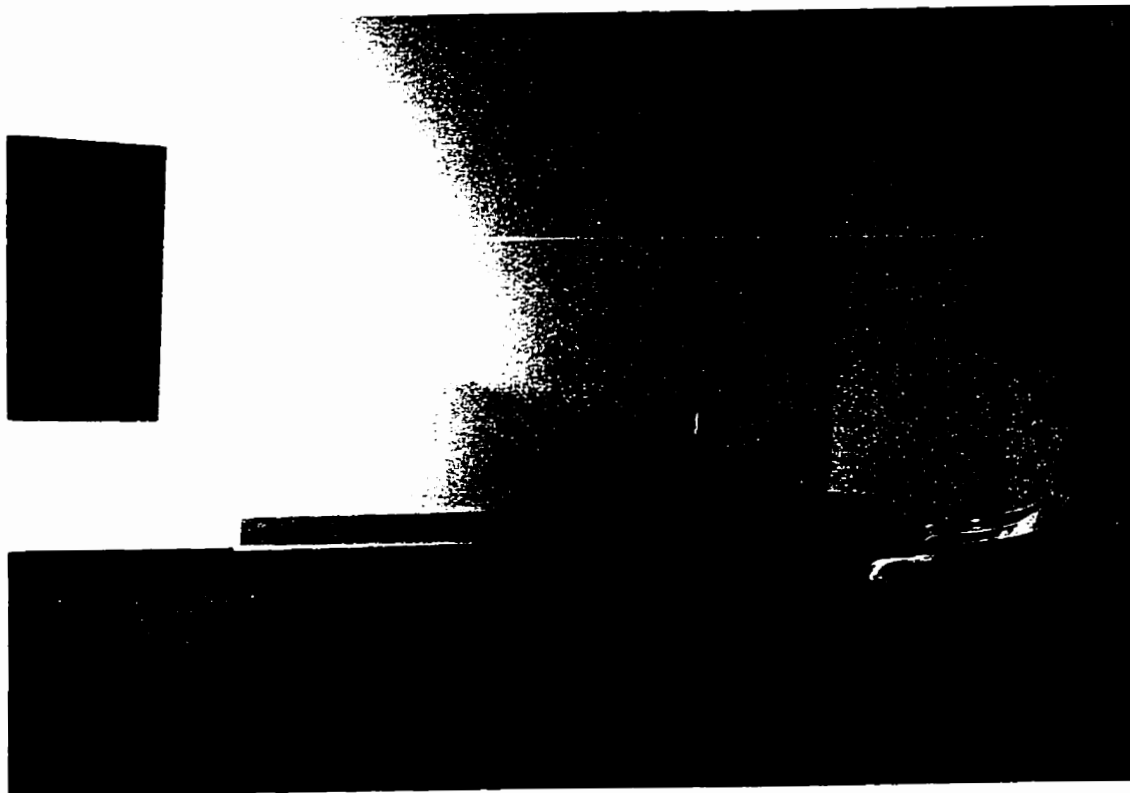
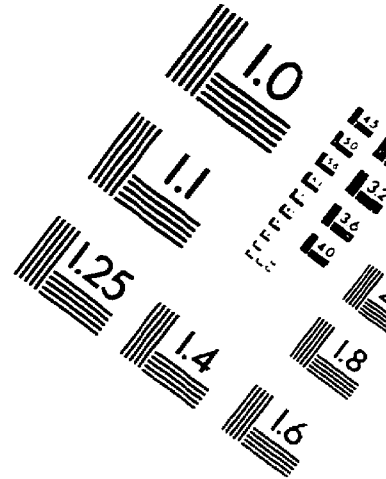15. Installation view of the table and its contents.
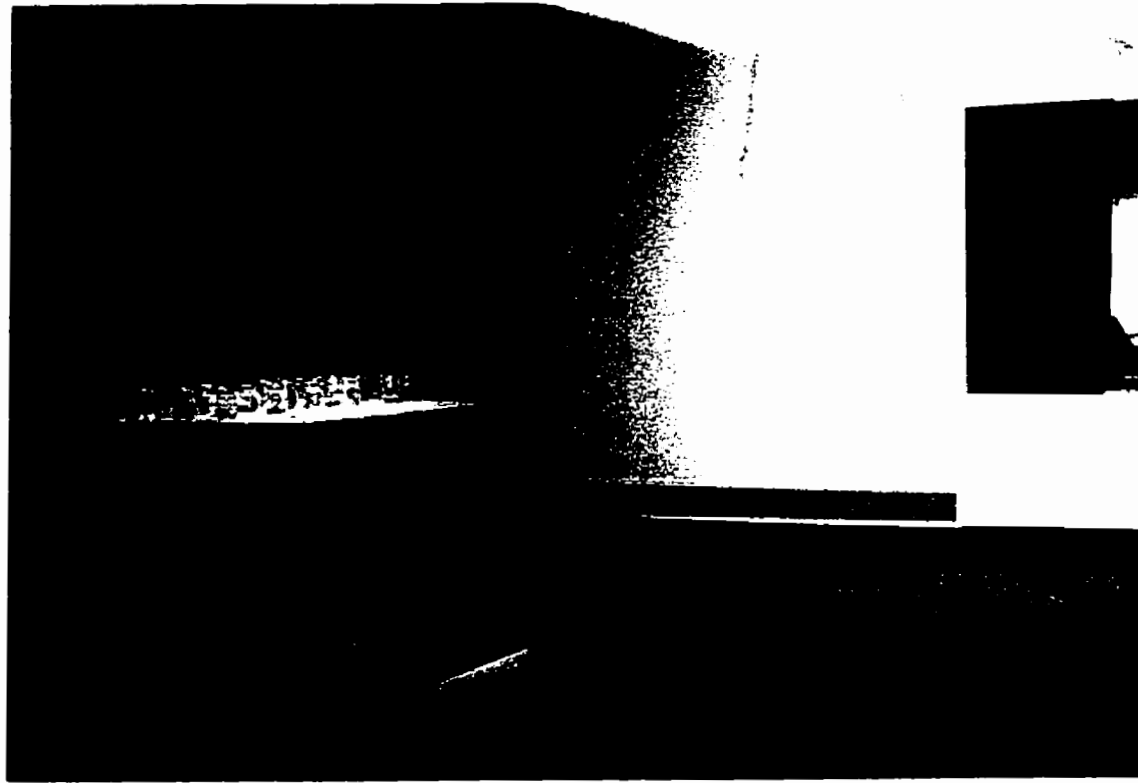
IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

150mm

6"